

Sir Walter Raleigh and the Babington Plot

by Mathew Lyons

On Tuesday 20th of September 1586, seven Catholic men were bound to hurdles in the Tower of London – one of them, a priest named John Ballard, on a single sled, the others two-a-piece – and were dragged westward on their final slow journey through the city's autumnal streets to a hastily erected scaffold in the open fields 'at the upper end of Holborn, hard by the highway-side to St Giles', probably somewhere a little to the north west of what is now Lincoln's Inn Fields, then known as Cup Field. The crowd gathered at the scaffold numbered in thousands. The authorities had fenced off the site to stop horsemen blocking the view, and had also raised the gallows 'mighty high', so that everyone could see justice being done.

The names of the men were – Ballard aside – Anthony Babington, John Savage, Robert Barnwell, Chidioc Tichbourne, Charles Tilney, and Edward Abingdon. (Seven more conspirators and their accomplices would die the following day: Edward Jones, Thomas Salisbury, John Charnock, Robert Gage, John Travers, Jerome Bellamy and Henry Donne, elder brother of the poet.) Most of them were minor courtiers, well-connected, wealthy; it was said they wore fine silks on this, their last day. Just a week before they had been tried at Westminster and found guilty of treason; six weeks before that, they had still been free men. But then had come intimations of arrest – one story is that Babington was alerted by catching sight of a message delivered to a dining companion named Scudamore and realising that Scudamore was, in fact, one of Walsingham's men – followed by dispersal and desperate flight, Babington and four others taking to what was then still wild woodland beyond the city at St John's Wood.

The authorities searched the houses of some thirty known recusants around London. Almost all were outside the city walls in places such as Hoxton, Clerkenwell, Highgate, Enfield, Islington, Newington and Westminster. One conspirator, John Charnock, was captured on the road from Willesden, where he too had slept in the woods. Babington and his companions, hungry and fearful, disguised their clothing and cut their hair, smeared their faces with green walnut shells, and then – with watches guarding every road out of London – made their way cross-country to what they hoped would be a safe house near Harrow-on-the-Hill. Servants there noticed the strangers' arrival, their oddness; furtive conversations and the gold lacework of a fine cloak over coarse yellow fustian doublets. The five were finally taken, hiding in the barn. Bells rang out across the city as news of their arrest spread; fires were lit and psalms sung, song and smoke rising together in the late summer air.

And now the men were to be hanged, drawn and quartered.

Although the exact site of the gallows is unknown, we do know that it was chosen for symbolic purposes: the men had used these fields for secret meetings as they plotted to assassinate Elizabeth I



Illustration of Babington and his fellow conspirators.

and replace her on the throne with Mary, Queen of Scots. Indeed, much of their conspiracy seems local to this area, just beyond the city's western edge where streets and houses seeped into pasture, and where, on warm spring days, women dried their washing out in the fields, weighting down the sheets with rocks and stones. If in some senses the locale emphasises the marginality of their deadly enterprise, it also perhaps hints at a fatal detachment from reality.

Two of the conspirators' favoured inns were nearby: The Plough, which seems to have been close to Fickett's Field, between Cup Field and The Strand, and The Rose Tavern, which was on the south side of the Strand itself, just without Temple Bar on the corner of Thanet Place, and well-known for its garden. (A character in Middleton's *Roaring Girls* claims to 'have caught a cold in my head... by sitting up late in the Rose Tavern'.) Savage, Charnock and Babington had rooms in Holborn, the latter at a place called Hern's Rents, an address he shared – coincidentally or otherwise – with another would-be Catholic regicide, Edmund Neville, who also used to walk in the fields with his co-conspirator, William Parry. Just eighteen months earlier, Neville had betrayed Parry to Walsingham – and to the fate that now awaited Babington and his friends.

It was customary for a traitor's death to come by hanging, and for the blood rituals to be enacted on his corpse. This day, however, was different. One after another, the men were left to swing briefly by the neck – until they were half-dead, an onlooker wrote – and then cut down from the gallows, still alive and conscious, and made to watch as the executioner hacked off their genitals and dug out their guts – and then eventually their hearts – with his knife. As their insides were cast into a burning brazier, each man's body was then dismembered, and the severed head set above the gallows.

As the historian William Camden – a likely an eye-witness – noted, the day's events were 'not without some note of cruelty'.

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Sir Walter Raleigh and the Babington Plot (cont.)



Sir Walter Raleigh by 'H'. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Elizabeth's spy-master, Sir Francis Walsingham by John De Critz the Elder. National Portrait Gallery, London.

The first man to die, was Ballard, arguably the plot's ringleader. The second, its lynchpin, was Babington. He alone of the men standing beside the scaffold awaiting their fate watched Ballard's agony's unflinchingly, coolly, not even deigning to remove his hat; the others turned away, fell to their knees and bared their heads in prayer. But when it was his turn to suffer, and he was pulled down breathing from the gallows to face the executioner's knife, he cried again and again *Parce mihi Domine Iesu, Spare me Lord Jesus*.

The one man who could have spared him – that is, persuaded Elizabeth to mitigate his sentence or perhaps even negotiated his pardon, so great was his influence with Elizabeth – was not present. Babington had pleaded for his intercession on his behalf only the day before, offering him the vast sum of £1,000 to do so. That man was the queen's favourite, Sir Walter Raleigh.

I was not, truth be told, expecting to write much, if at all, about the world of espionage when I first set out to research *The Favourite*, my recent book about the relationship between Elizabeth I and Raleigh. After all, Raleigh's protestant credentials in the fight against imperial Spain would appear, at first sight, unimpeachable. What could possibly connect his world with that of Babington?

As it happens, quite a lot. As I have tried to show in *The Favourite*, the young Raleigh was a much more ambivalent figure than traditional histories suggest. In particular, during his first years in London at Middle Temple in the mid-to-late 1570s, when he was scratching around half-heartedly on the far margins of the court along with many contemporaries, necessity demanding they pretend to a status they could barely afford, ever threatened by poverty and debt, his reputation extended little further than drunkenness: louche, reckless and wanton.

And many of Raleigh's companions were, largely, Catholics and their fellow travellers, since he quickly became part of the circle around the Earl of Oxford, a group largely defined by a sour, sullen and reactionary opposition to the Elizabethan settlement. In one sense, this suggests a personal indifference on Raleigh's part – which I suspect was also widespread – to the schism that separated the faiths, enjoying with his friends a fellowship defined by circumstance far more than ideology, and sharing a voluble, almost fashionable, disaffection rooted more in youth and under-employment than in the practical matters of revolt. He sounds to me one with some of Babington's ale-house seditious, such as Chidiock Tichbourne, who said sorrowfully on the scaffold, 'Before this thing chanced, we lived together in most flourishing estate: of whom went report in the Strand, Fleet Street, and elsewhere about London but of Babington and Tichbourne? No threshold was of force to brave our entry. Thus we lived, and wanted nothing we could wish for: and God knows, what less in my head than matters of state?'

When the Oxford circle broke apart at the turn of the decade, Raleigh was propelled towards favour and reward at Elizabeth's side. Other of his erstwhile friends – most notably Charles Arundell, the principal author of the brilliant extended libel against the Earl of Leicester known as *Leicester's Commonwealth*, and Thomas Paget – were not so lucky, and ultimately fled England for Paris, where they gravitated to the expatriates there loyal to Mary, Queen of Scots.

Which leads us to the most interesting, if elusive, aspect of Raleigh's relationship to the Babington conspiracy: the fact that Raleigh's name crops up again as an accomplice and again as the plot was uncovered, whether directly or through the apparent complicity of his servants. And yet there is no evidence of any interrogations or other investigation into his possible involvement, whereas

Sir Walter Raleigh and the Babington Plot (cont.)

Walsingham's man Poley, for one, found himself in the Tower, albeit temporarily.

So, for instance, towards the end of July 1586, Babington told Poley – in the latter's rooms in Temple Gardens – 'that one of Sir Walter Raleigh's men had received money and undertaken to kill her majesty within five weeks from that time'. Henry Donne, meanwhile, confessed that around the weekend before his capture, Ballard had lost faith in Babington and had 'that afternoon sworn unto him two of Sir Walter Raleigh's men to execute the act whensoever he would have them.' There are a number of ways of looking at such evidence, but what seems certain is that Walsingham was not the only figure at court whose men were actively nursing the conspiracy into life, and that some in Raleigh's employment were also ensuring that it did not dissolve into nothing before Mary could be ensnared.

Even after the principals were arrested, Raleigh's name continued to circulate with regard to the plot. On 10 September, the Spanish

ambassador Mendoza, resident in Paris since his expulsion from England in the wake of the Throckmorton conspiracy, wrote to his master Philip of Spain, naming Raleigh himself as having sworn to kill Elizabeth. Perhaps that was wishful thinking on Mendoza's part, but although he does not appear to have known Raleigh personally, he did know Raleigh's sometime drinking companions Paget and Arundell very well. Towards the end of the year, after Mary had been tried and condemned, Paget was overheard comforting a friend, 'Well, and Sir Walter Raleigh's man scape I care not, he will pay her for all the rest . . . By God's blood, there be yet they that will kill her.'

Thus Babington's approach to Raleigh on September 19 in an attempt to sue for his life was less desperate than it might first seem, and Babington must have had good reason to think that he had some claim on Raleigh's loyalty – and perhaps reason too to feel a keen sense of bitterness and betrayal when that suit, and with it his last good hope, was rejected.



About Mathew Lyons

Mathew Lyons is the author of the critically acclaimed Impossible Journeys, described by the Guardian as 'a non-fiction companion to the tall tales of Italo Calvino's Marco Polo'. It was the Folio Society's bestselling title through 2010. His latest book is The Favourite, published by Constable & Robinson in March 2011. (www.mathewlyons.co.uk)