Walpole and the ‘Horrid Conspiracy’

Sunderland’s death

Sunderland and Walpole had fielded different candidates in many constituencies and Sunderland was annotating the returns as they came in, when a bombshell struck the political stage: Sunderland died suddenly on 19 April 1722. The next day Lord Carteret wrote to Dubois with the news and assured him that the close links with France would continue. Sunderland had been struck with pleurisy two days before, was bled six times, and died at 3 p.m. in the afternoon. Destouches thought there had been only three men in England on whom France could rely completely, Stanhope, Craggs and Sunderland. Now there was none. On the day of Sunderland’s death (before he could have received Carteret’s letter), Dubois sent advice by an express to Lord Carteret, through Sir Luke Schaub in Paris, that there was a plot against King George and that the Jacobites had asked the Regent for 4000 men. Dubois did not give the names of those involved, which had been withheld from him. While Sunderland was alive nothing whatsoever was done to put a stop to the Atterbury Plot. It is equally certain that Dubois said nothing about there being a plot while Sunderland was in office. Assuming that Dubois had been receiving a pension from Stanhope and Sunderland, as all the signs were, he would have been desperate to avoid exposure at the hands of Townshend and Walpole, who had the accounts of Secret Service money. The ‘great secret’, it seems, did not die with Stanhope or Sunderland and Dubois went out of his way to be helpful to the new English government. The official line in England was that the revelation had come from the Regent, presumably in order to protect Dubois, the real informer. James III was astonished to find that the English ministers would go as far as to
accuse their ally, the Regent, publicly, in order to protect their source. The foreign ministers in London were told that a ‘horrid conspiracy’ had been discovered, but were given no other information. Most believed, however, that Dubois, not the Regent, had revealed the existence of a plot. Walpole and Townshend tried to make the most of the discovery to discredit Sunderland and to consolidate their own power. It was put out that proof of the plot had been found in Sunderland’s papers.5

**Sunderland’s papers searched**

On 21 April the Duke of Newcastle sent one of Sunderland’s servants to inform the Duke of Marlborough (who was then senile) of Sunderland’s death and his papers were sealed with his coat of arms. Newcastle had wanted them to remain sealed until the return of the 4th Earl of Sunderland, who was then in Rome in the company of Lord Ryalton (the Duchess’s nephew). Notwithstanding, Carteret and Townshend as secretaries of state, the Duke of Kingston as Lord Privy Seal, and Lord Carleton as President of the Council, broke the seals and removed some papers from Sunderland’s desk, in the face of strong protests from the Duchess of Marlborough. Rumours began to circulate at once, repeated subsequently by Speaker Onslow, that a letter from the Pretender had been found in Sunderland’s papers which revealed the existence of a plot. The French envoy reported that though governments had been known to invent plots to get out of political difficulties, on this occasion the ministers seemed seriously alarmed, adding that Sunderland was capable of anything to maintain himself in power.6 Dr Freind wrote that ‘the beginning of the discovery was made from some of Lord Sunderland’s papers’ and that he knew that before he died Sunderland had said it was well for the Jacobites that Townshend and Walpole ‘had not in their hands what he had’.7 Walpole did find crucial evidence among Sunderland’s papers: James wrote to Lansdowne that ‘among Lord Sunderland’s papers there has been found the two letters of which I sent you copies, together with the private note [the military commissions for the rising] to Captain Urquhart which covered them and which to be sure, never came into Sunderland’s hands’.8 Meeting Urquhart in May 1722, Walpole remarked ‘he very well knew the confidence that was between him and Earl Sunderland’ and mentioned Mr Vincent (the code name for Urquhart in the Jacobite correspondence) and Mr Stone (the code name for James) ‘by which Mr. Urquhart well knew he meant what had