1
Restoration Ireland

Structural Problems and Structural Prejudice

To understand the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis in relation to Ireland, it is necessary to first explain these events, the beliefs that underpinned them, and the structural faults within Irish society that ensured they would have an impact there. This chapter is intended to provide an introduction to the Popish Plot in England, and an interpretive introduction to the unsettled condition of Restoration Ireland.

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The London cleric Israel Tonge first met Titus Oates in 1677. Tonge's fanatical anti-Catholicism was unquestionable, and in Oates he seemed to find confirmation to match his conviction. For Oates himself, a pivotal moment in a dubious career came after his expulsion from the Catholic seminary of St Omer in June 1678, for when he returned to London in July, he furnished Tonge with an elaborate account of a Catholic conspiracy against Protestant England that both men recounted to Charles II and the Privy Council in the autumn of 1678. This was the genesis of the Popish Plot.

It came at a particular juncture in English affairs. The 1670s had been characterized by emerging fears that the Stuart regime was drifting towards Catholicism and authoritarian government. Of particular concern was the fact that thanks to Charles II’s habit of fathering children only with his mistresses, the legitimate heir to the throne was his younger brother James, duke of York, and it was an open secret that he had converted to Catholicism in 1673. The prospect
of a Catholic king in the near future was therefore very real. Nor had the reality of events helped matters. After negotiating a treaty with the French in 1670 containing a secret (though ultimately unfulfilled) commitment by Charles II to publicly convert to Catholicism, Charles joined Louis XIV in embarking upon a disastrous war with the Dutch in 1672. A succession of failures combined with public discontent forced Charles to abandon the French and negotiate peace with the Dutch in February 1674. But there could be no avoiding the fact that the king of Protestant England had allied himself with Catholic France to make war on the even more Protestant Dutch.

However, by 1678 the rift with the Dutch had been healed (in part by the marriage of York’s daughter Mary to William of Orange), and England prepared itself to re-enter the conflict, this time on the side of the Dutch. Against this backdrop, the possibility that the French were conspiring to subvert Protestant England (not to mention Ireland and Scotland) was bound to assume a greater significance. While some credence was given to Oates’ claims, the authorities became increasingly sceptical in the absence of concrete evidence. Then, on 17 October 1678, the body of Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey was found in London. He was the magistrate before whom Titus Oates had sworn his original claims; he had now been murdered. Arguably, he was a man who knew too much, and the obvious conclusion to draw was that he met his death at Catholic hands. Oates had also implicated Edward Coleman, York’s former secretary, who in the early 1670s had embarked on a tentative and unofficial correspondence with the French that even they had disregarded. After he was implicated by Oates, evidence of these negotiations fortuitously came to light. Irrespective of what they had actually consisted of, between Coleman’s machinations and Godfrey’s murder the Popish Plot had received enough credibility to be sustained.

Oates’ claims were presented to the English House of Lords on 31 October 1678. The subsequent development of the plot was intimately linked to proceedings in the English parliament, as it became both the venue for Oates’ testimony and the forum for the investigation of what he had alleged. While this would not be fully publicized until April 1679, in the meantime rumours and fragments of information contributed to a growing climate of public fear and paranoia. Parliament demanded that the king take measures against Catholics, and by December the succession of trials that would characterize the