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The Decline of the Irish Plot and the Road to the ‘Tory Revenge’, November 1680–July 1681

At least some of the witnesses made a positive impression on the Lords. On 8 November they ordered the arrest of unspecified ‘Irish ruffians’ (presumably the would-be assassins of the king), and requested that Charles order some of the individuals named in the testimonies to be brought from Ireland. Irish business was to be the second item on the agenda (after the ‘bill against Popery’) when the house reconvened on the following Monday, and the lords requested a conference ‘in the painted chamber, concerning some informations relating to the discovery of a horrid popish plot in Ireland’.¹

On the same day Plunkett petitioned the lords for access to his servant, James McKenna (who had also implicated him), and to be incarcerated at the crowns expense: he had used up his own money while imprisoned in Dundalk, and the Catholic laity were unwilling or unable to provide money in such a repressive climate.² The petition naturally prompted consideration of his case, as Bourke, Hetherington, Murphy, MacNamara, and David Fitzgerald had all implicated him. On 10 November the governor of Newgate claimed that Plunkett ‘believes there is some kind of plot against the English in Ireland’, and that while he denied having any dealings with France, he had admitted to a correspondence with Spain. This may not have been especially sinister in itself: Catholic jurisdiction over Ireland was exercised via Brussels, which remained under Spanish control. But Plunkett’s correspondence with the continent had already been painted in a sinister light by the informers.

Plunkett was summoned before the lords, where he denied and denounced the allegations against him. He claimed to be aware of
unspecifed threats against his person by (or on behalf of) Tories: ‘that his life was being aimed at, he mistrusted that there was a plot against the English’. However, more allegations were provided to the lords, including one ‘about bringing over a French army to Ireland to settle the Catholic religion’: once again, Plunkett was alleged to be involved. The lords resolved to pardon the informer, James Crew, and to arrest the priests cited in his evidence. In his testimony Hetherington had disparaged the Irish administration, and especially Ormond, whom he claimed to be ‘the centre of all the conspirators’. While Murphy apparently gave a similarly critical account, David Fitzgerald gave a good account of both Ormond and his government. There was certainly a degree of credence, and perhaps even gratitude, shown to the informers by parliament. They made a definite impression on George Vernon, MP for Derby Town, who implored the house on 11 November to consider the exclusion bill. The bill passed the commons on the same day.

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The ‘Irish Plot’ came to prominence at a particular juncture. ‘Exclusion’, as it had emerged, became for a relatively brief period the most obvious means of tackling the vexing question of a Catholic succession. The broader significance of the Exclusion Crisis arises from the fact that the dispute over the succession prompted the emergence of distinct (if inchoate) political blocs in the English parliament, with supporters of exclusion eventually labelled ‘Whig’ (a term for Scottish Presbyterian bandits, used to highlight their perceived subversive tendencies), while the supporters of the court and an unaltered succession were labelled ‘Tory’ (the term for an Irish Catholic bandit, deployed as a term of abuse at the ostensibly pro-Catholic court: it stuck). These were by no means parties in a modern sense, but the English parliament of autumn 1680 witnessed the polarizing of existing attitudes towards the succession. The term ‘Exclusion Crisis’ is arguably ‘best reserved for the brief period between the rejection of the bill in the House of Lords in November 1680 and the dissolution of the Oxford parliament in March 1681’. This was also the period in which the promotion of the ‘Irish Plot’ was at its most prominent, for it was inextricably linked to the ongoing exclusion proceedings in parliament. To cultivate a fear of Irish