Memories remained. At least one tract was later written to reassert Plunkett’s guilt and validate the witnesses against him. While Plunkett was dead, his accusers were not, and the pamphlet could be seen as a defence of their own position in what was likely to prove a vulnerable time for some of them. There would also be attempts to suggest an Irish link with the so-called ‘sham-plot’: the circuitous allegations that claimed that part of the Catholic plan in the Popish Plot was to mask it as a form of Presbyterian unrest. Indeed, in 1682 William Hetherington published a tract refuting the claims that he had manipulated witnesses, and reproducing once again the testimonies of some of the informers with whom he had been involved; he also sought to link these to allegations of a ‘sham-plot’. Hetherington remained loyal to Shaftesbury, but his fortunes eventually declined with those of his patron: in November 1681 he was arrested on a charge of scandalum magnatum brought by Ormond and was ordered to pay £10,000 damages. His inability to pay saw him imprisoned again, and in March 1682 he was accused of involvement in a plot to assassinate the king. His personal circumstances had changed for the worse, and the pamphlet may have been an attempt to salvage something from his previous activities.

As for Shaftesbury, who had been accused of high treason, the case against him was politically motivated and flimsy, and was eventually dropped. Ironically, he later became embroiled in a plan to orchestrate a rising and assassinate both Charles and York before absconding to Amsterdam where he died in January 1683. Essex would follow Shaftesbury’s lead and also became involved in this new Whig
conspiracy – the so-called ‘Rye House Plot’ – but he was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he was found with his throat cut in July 1683. It remains unclear whether this was suicide or murder, but the latter seems the more likely. Ironically Titus Oates outlived virtually everybody else involved in the Popish Plot, dying in 1705 after a life best described as shady.

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But Ireland’s role in the crisis ended with Plunkett’s death. The Irish witnesses and their allegations were of little further value in England, and slowly began to trickle back to Ireland. In July 1681 Owen Murphy was reimbursed for his expenses and was permitted to return to Ireland, whilst Eustace Comyn was granted a full pardon on the same day.\(^4\) Not all were so lucky: in October 1681 Ormond was authorized by the English Privy Council to prosecute anyone who had sought to suborn witnesses to testify against himself, Boyle, and Davys.\(^5\)

In October 1681 the Privy Council ordered the release of Marcus Forristal, the Catholic bishop of Kildare, who was to have his possessions and money restored to him (if practicable). He was not to be charged with involvement in any plot: only with remaining in Ireland beyond the period specified for Catholic clerics.\(^6\) There were, of course, lingering suspicions: in June 1681 Massareene expressed his conviction that ‘I really believe the Popish Plot goes still on with the Romish clergy, who, you see, are still amongst us, yet will neither be taken nor appear.’\(^7\) But Forristal’s release hardly suggested that such suspicions applied to him. Some witnesses remained active. In October the Privy Council considered the petitions of eight persons incriminated by the informers Murtagh Downey, Maurice Fitzgerald, and Owen O’Callaghan. In November 1681 the council ordered that these three were to be sent back to Ireland to give evidence ‘upon the petition of divers gentlemen in prison in Ireland’, for ‘their evidence would be of no use here’.\(^8\) John and Dennis MacNamara, Edward Ivie, and Bernard Dennis testified against Shaftesbury at his trial in November 1681.\(^9\) Tyrone himself was released in December 1681 on condition that he give himself up if required, and his accusers were to be prosecuted in Ireland.\(^10\) Soon afterwards, John Fitzgerald readily undermined his own allegations by stating that