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JOSEPH H. PRESTON

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## Plot, Paranoia, and Popular Festivals<sup>1</sup>

In England during late autumn, preparations are underway for the celebration of a popular festival known as Guy Fawkes Day or, alternatively, as Bonfire Night. Although some Americans are dimly aware of this holiday, they rarely know of the “Gunpowder Plot” which not only provided the basis for these celebrations, but also powerfully strengthened religious paranoia and even made its contribution to Mother Goose.

The plot in question was initially formulated in 1603, early in the reign of James I, when two Catholics, Robert Catesby and Thomas Percy, concoted a plan to blow up the King and Parliament in a diabolical doomsday blast. Although their precise goals are unclear, they apparently hoped the resulting power vacuum would enable them to achieve a Catholic succession to the English throne. By 1605 Catesby and Percy had enlarged the circle of plotters to thirteen (an unlucky number as it turned out) and had succeeded in smuggling twenty barrels of gunpowder into the basement of Parliament. After placing iron bars on top of the gunpowder to heighten the force of the impact, they covered the whole with firewood to disguise their intentions. The conspirators planned to set off this charge at the beginning of Parliament, November 5th, when the King traditionally made an opening speech in the presence of the two Houses, the Privy Council and leading members of the judiciary.<sup>2</sup>

By enlarging the circle of plotters, however, they weakened their security arrangements; one of them, Francis Tresham, concerned with the number of Catholic peers who would perish, decided to warn his brother-in-law, Lord Mounteagle. The latter, in turn, provided a cryptic clue to Sir Robert Cecil, King James’ principal advisor. On the basis of this hint, Cecil ordered a search of the Parliament buildings on November 4th, and one of the conspirators, Guy Fawkes, was found in the cellar with the firewood. When asked to whom it belonged, Fawkes responded, “Thomas Percy” — a name strongly identified with the Catholic faith. When James was informed he ordered a more thorough search, and at about eleven o’clock of the same evening,

they discovered the gunpowder and arrested Fawkes.<sup>3</sup> It is a minor mystery why Guy Fawkes' name continues to be associated with the event, and the major conspirators are largely forgotten.

During the subsequent interrogations and investigation, the enormity of the plot was revealed and the principal conspirators identified and executed. The English people were horrified at the near success of the scheme but relieved and jubilant at its ultimate failure. Its principal immediate effect, however, was to strengthen the prevailing fear and hatred of Catholicism. Those emotions were already present in the country as a result of earlier Catholic plots, unsuccessfully directed against Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) with the express purpose of putting Mary, Queen of Scots, on the throne. These had included the Ridolfi Plot of 1571 and the Babington Plot of 1586. Following the execution of Mary, Philip II of Spain had sent the ill-fated Armada (1588) on its voyage, in an attempt to impose Catholicism on the English by force. These English experiences had been reinforced by the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (1572) in France, when some 6,000 Huguenots (Calvinists) had been killed. English Protestants were bound to view the Gunpowder Plot as simply one more example of endemic Catholic perfidy and treachery and one that had come alarmingly close to success.

This growing fear of Catholicism had a strong impact on English politics throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century. Henrietta Maria, the French Catholic consort of Charles I (1625-1649), was regarded with deep suspicion as a Papal agent and forced to dismiss most of her French Catholic retinue. One of the issues in the English Civil War (1642-1645) was the conviction of the more extreme Protestants that the religious policies of Charles I and Archbishop Laud represented a move in the direction of Catholic practice. In 1678, two rather disreputable Englishmen, Titus Oates and Israel Tonge, spread their story of a Catholic plot to spawn revolution in Ireland, set fire to the city of London, murder Protestants in their beds, and assassinate the King. Mass hysteria swept over the country. Innocent men, merely on the basis of Oates' accusation, were convicted and executed. The hysteria ultimately subsided, but by this time Charles II's brother James, the heir to the throne, had made public his conversion to Catholicism. A spirited albeit unsuccessful attempt was made to exclude James from the throne. The proponents of exclusion were known as the Whigs, while James' supporters were called Tories, thus providing early party labels. The controversy was also the occasion when John Dryden contributed support to the Tories with his poem "Absalom and Achitophel." When James II did come to the throne (1685), he used his power to remove restrictions on Catholics and to promote them to positions of importance throughout the realm. In the ensuing backlash, James was driven from the throne and replaced by the Protestant monarchs, William and Mary. Only with

the accession of the Protestant Hanoverian dynasty in 1714 did the hysterical fear of Catholicism begin to subside.

The Gunpowder Plot has also induced its share of historical controversy and on a predictably partisan basis. Catholic apologists have questioned the very existence of a genuine conspiracy. Instead they suggest that it was a hoax invented by Protestants and foisted off on the public with the explicit purpose of inflaming anti-Catholic feelings and providing a basis for persecution. In 1897 Fr. John Gerard gave scholarly expression to such views with a book titled, *WHAT WAS THE GUNPOWDER PLOT?*<sup>4</sup> Later the same year Samuel Rawson Gardiner replied — convincingly in the opinion of most scholars — with *WHAT THE GUNPOWDER PLOT WAS.*<sup>5</sup> The Catholic position received a further setback in 1978 when Nicholas Rodger found a receipt in the Public Record Office for the delivery to the Tower of London of 18,000 lbs. of gunpowder “for the blowing up of the said house, King, Nobles, and Commons”. The receipt is dated November 7, 1605. Another contemporary historian, Jenny Wormald, has recently argued that the conspirators were more concerned that James was a Scot than about his religious policies.<sup>6</sup> The present writer doubts, however, that Wormald will succeed in revising the traditional assessment of their motivation.

It is not exactly clear when Englishmen began observing Guy Fawkes Day as a celebration of Protestant survival, Parliamentary liberty and English nationalism. It appears that the first such celebration was planned in 1605 by Sir George Cornwallis, the English ambassador to Spain, but he called it off at the last moment because he was not sure the Spaniards were prepared to rejoice with him at the plot’s failure.<sup>7</sup> A painting at New College (Oxford) makes it clear that the event was being commemorated in 1625, but the painting is based on an earlier engraving of 1612.<sup>8</sup> It is safe to hazard, therefore, that Englishmen began to observe the day fairly soon after the event. In Parliament, itself, the day is observed annually by a PRO FORMA search of the parliamentary cellars — even though the present buildings are not on exactly the same site.

Another reminder of the survival of Guy Fawkes Day in collective memory comes from the pages of Mother Goose:

Please to remember the Fifth of November  
 Gunpowder, Treason, and Plot  
 I see no reason why gunpowder treason  
 Should ever be forgot.<sup>9</sup>

An alternate version of this childhood chant is supplied by Flora Thompson (1876-1947):  
 Remember, “remember the fifth of November,  
 Gunpowder, Treason, and Plot.

A stick or a stake for King James' sake.  
 Will you please give us a faggot?  
 If you won't give us one, we'll take two,  
 The better for us and the worse for you."<sup>10</sup>

This second version retrieved from Flora Thompson's childhood memories gives us two keys to the ways in which Guy Fawkes Day had been celebrated in the nineteenth century: the bonfire and an atmosphere of prank-playing that sometimes degenerated into hooliganism. Indeed the closing couplet evokes the American cry of "Trick or Treat" just six days earlier. In the towns and cities it was more common for children to solicit funds for the celebration with a chant of "Penny for the Guy." Malcolm Quick, of Brighton, remembers an expanded version of the chant:

Please put a penny in the old man's hat,  
 If you haven't got a penny then a ha'penny will do.  
 If you haven't got a ha'penny,  
 Then God bless you.<sup>11</sup>

While celebratory traditions varied widely from place to place, the centerpiece of the festivities was to create an effigy of Guy Fawkes, parade him through the streets, and incinerate the effigy in a bonfire.

Occasionally the trick playing aspect got out of hand and degenerated into theft and vandalism, as in Arundel, West Sussex in 1872. The local paper described the events as more riotous than usual but fairly conventional until 11 p.m. when "the drunken scum of the town" began rolling flaming tar barrels down the steeply pitched High Street. One broke up close to the Red Lion, and the crowd began throwing on fresh fuel. This led to an altercation between the crowd and the police with the crowd pelting the constables with stones and fireworks. The streets were not cleared until 1 a.m., and summonses were issued to the principal offenders. Later it was discovered that the participants stole the tar barrels from the construction site where the Duke of Norfolk (England's premier Catholic layman) was building a church for his co-religionists, thus doubly affronting the Duke.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent fines failed to curb rowdyism, however, because in 1879 the November 5th notation in the Arundel police records is a laconic "Bonfire night — very rough."<sup>13</sup> With that experience, however, the more orderly folk of the town had had enough, and they soon devised a means of continuing the celebration while diminishing the threat of vandalism; a group of citizens got together and organized the Arundel Bonfire Society. Each year they held a dinner at The General Abercrombie to plan for the November event and organize the necessary fund-raising activities.<sup>14</sup> Thus a responsible group of adults gained control of the celebration. Arundel was not unique in this; the same process was at

work in other towns and villages throughout the land.

Fireworks are a popular means of celebrating all kinds of holidays throughout the world, but they are especially appropriate for observing the failure of the Gunpowder Plot. The English were quick to see they were apposite. So today the conventional public celebration includes the manufacture of a "Guy" (traditionally dressed in black with three fuses in one hand and a lantern in the other), a torchlight parade, usually in costume (Indians, Vikings, and Zulus are popular), fireworks and the inevitable bonfire. Fireworks displays are frequently topical and have little or nothing to do with the event of 1605. In 1945 one tableau pictured the execution of Hermann Goering; in the late '50s Sputniks were popular, and in 1982 one could purchase an Elvis Presley display for a mere £300!<sup>15</sup> Sometimes additional effigies are burned to express contemporary disapproval. In Arundel in 1884, when Britain was embroiled in the Sudan, a figure representing the Mahdi was burned;<sup>16</sup> in 1886 it was a "Bulgarian Bear,"<sup>17</sup> and once an effigy of a local bigamist was consigned to the flames.<sup>18</sup> Some people, of course, prefer private, family celebrations. These frequently include fireworks on a smaller scale, a bonfire with a "Guy," and the roasting of chestnuts and "jacket" potatoes. Bellringing is also widespread throughout the country. November 5th is known as ringing day and November 4th as ringing night. Food and sweetmeats are popular but tend to vary from region to region. Yorkshire favors "Parkin," a combination of gingerbread, oatmeal and treacle, but also shares a liking for "Tharf" cake (unleavened) with Lancashire and Derbyshire.<sup>19</sup>

The holiday is celebrated with varying degrees of fervor and intensity, but nowhere is the event approached with the seriousness of purpose displayed in Lewes (East Sussex). There it retains a full measure of the anti-Catholic spirit that was so virulent in the seventeenth century. Some attribute this survival to the circumstance that seventeen Protestant martyrs were burned at the stake in Lewes just outside the Star Inn and to the fact that non-conforming Protestantism was especially strong there. But others insist that they are just trying to preserve historical tradition. By 1853 several bonfire societies had been formed at Lewes in an effort to reduce hooliganism. Today, not one but five bonfire societies are active. One of these, The Cliffe, boasts a president, vice-president, subscribers, life members, committee members and a list of fifteen additional officials.<sup>20</sup>

One aspect of the Lewes tradition that sets it apart from other parts of the country is the practice of burning Pope Paul V (1605-1621) in effigy as well as Guy Fawkes. Paul V is held by some to have been implicated in the plot. Since 1970 the Lewes town council has been asking the societies to abandon this practice because it is so offensive to Catholics, but The Cliffe and one other society have refused to do so.

The Cliffe prominently displays the banner of “NO POPERY” at the head of its procession, stuffs the effigy of the Pope with fireworks to ensure his dramatic demise and concludes with a recitation of “The Bonfire Prayer”:

Please to remember,  
 The fifth of November,  
 Gunpowder, Treason and Plot.  
 A furdan [farthing] loaf to feed old Pope,  
 A pen-worth of cheese to choke him,  
 A pint o’ beer to rene it down,  
 An a faggot of wood to burn him!  
 Burn him in a tub o’ tar,  
 Burn him like a blazing star,  
 Burn his body from his head,  
 Then we’ll say old Pope is dead.  
 Hip, Hip Hoo-r-r-ray!<sup>21</sup>

The Lewes festivities are at once the best and the worst of the Guy Fawkes Day celebrations.

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Daniel Bjork, Edward Cole, Brian Curry, and Malcolm Quick for their ideas and suggestions in revising the original draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> David H. Willson, *King James VI and I* (London, 1962), 223-24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-25.

<sup>4</sup> John Gerard, *What Was the Gunpowder Plot?* (London, 1897).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel R. Gardiner, *What the Gunpowder Plot Was* (London, 1897).

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Wormald, “Gunpowder, Treason, and Scots,” *Journal of British Studies*, XXIV(1985), 141-68.

<sup>7</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian Series, 1603-1607*, 299.

<sup>8</sup> John Langdon-Davies, ed., “Reproduction of a Painting Commemorating the Suppression of the Gunpowder Plot,” *The Gunpowder Plot* (London, 1964), Document 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (London, 1966), 368:13.

<sup>10</sup> Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise* (London, 1979), 227.

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Quick to Joseph Preston, 15 August 1986, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *West Sussex Gazette*, November 7, 1872, n.p.; 12 November, 1872, n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Arundel Police Duty Book, West Sussex Record Office, W/A/1, 5 November, 1879.

<sup>14</sup> *West Sussex Gazette*, 11 November 1880, n.p.; 10 November 1881, n.p.; 24 November 1881, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> *The Times, Saturday*, 30 October - 5 November 1982, 1-3.

<sup>16</sup> *West Sussex Gazette*, 13 November, 1884, n.p.

<sup>17</sup> *West Sussex Gazette*, 11 November 1885, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> *West Sussex Gazette*, 12 November, 1885, n.p.

<sup>19</sup> *The Times, Saturday*, 30 October - 5 November 1982, 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> *Cliffe Bonfire Society Souvenir Program*, Friday, 5th November 1982, n.p.

<sup>21</sup> *The Times, Saturday*, 30 October - 5 November 1982, 1.