

Notes and Queries  
new series, pp. 427-31  
October 1978

### **RALEIGH, SIDNEY, OXFORD, AND THE CATHOLICS, 1579**

NEW information has come to light which bears upon the early career of Sir Walter Raleigh at the Court of Queen Elizabeth. The first occurrence of his name which may be mentioned is found in an anecdote concerning Sir Philip Sidney and Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, which is quite interesting in its own right.

Chiefly by way of Fulke Greville's sympathetic account, the story of the tennis-court quarrel between Sidney and the Earl of Oxford is well known, though apart from Greville's tale there has been little confirmation. In late August 1579, the young Earl appeared upon the court while Sidney was at play and commanded him to leave. Sidney answered provokingly, Greville says, whereupon Oxford grew angry and, before the onlooking French marriage-commissioners, denounced him "by the name of Puppy". Sidney asked him to repeat it, and he did, this time more loudly, upon which Sidney gave him the lie direct. Then, after a moment's silence, Sidney and his friends strode from the court. Having waited a day in vain for Oxford's challenge, Sidney sent the Earl a reminder of honour's obligations, and Oxford, thus jostled, responded in honour. The Council, however, had caught wind of the matter and informed the Queen of it. Elizabeth in turn took young Sidney aside and explained to him "how the gentleman's neglect of the nobility taught the peasant to insult upon both". So the duel was taken up; Oxford, Greville says, was only too glad to have it settled without him.<sup>1</sup>

So far, Greville. There is also a letter extant from Sidney to Vice-Chamberlain Hatton, 28 August 1579, in which he refused, for his part, to yield an inch: "lett him therefore, as hee will, digest itt".<sup>2</sup> These are the rough lines of the incident, at least as heard from Sidney and his friend. There is, however, still another account of the affair, this one from Oxford's friends, which though alluded to in the Calendar of State Papers<sup>3</sup> does not appear in the biographies. Throughout the late 1570s, Oxford, though he was Lord Burghley's son-in-law, was secretly a Catholic. His friends were found among the rather dangerous group of Catholic courtiers led by himself, Lord Henry Howard, and Charles Arundell, the conservative Howard circle which had survived and regrouped after the Duke of Norfolk's execution in 1572. The August quarrel itself was symptomatic of the factional tension between these Catholics, who were solidly allied to Burghley's and the Earl of Sussex's support of the Duke of Anjou's marriage suit to the Queen, and the Leicester-Walsingham party (that is, Sidney's party), which was solidly opposed to the marriage but which for various reasons was in eclipse during that summer.<sup>4</sup> Over Christmas 1580, however, Oxford fell out with his colleagues and was induced to join the Earl of Leicester, who saw in this defection a chance to undermine Sussex's support; for to have several advocates of marriage exposed as practising Catholics, or worse, would do much to compromise the cause and would seem to vindicate the fears of a Papist king-consort voiced by Leicester's own followers. Accordingly, at Leicester's instance, Oxford presented allegations to the Queen charging his kinsmen with various treasons, and Howard, Arundell, and Francis Southwell were

promptly arrested. Oxford was also detained, and altogether the business which dragged on for some time, became a sordid round of wild accusations in all directions.<sup>5</sup>

Among these papers, in which Oxford and his quondam friends attributed to one another the most bizarre crimes and indecencies, are found the following allusions to the tennis-court quarrel. In the circumstances they can hardly be called reliable, but, coming as they do from men who were with Oxford at the time, they are of considerable interest. The first occurs in a long essay on Oxford's enormities from spring 1581, which is in Arundell's hand:

At what time the quarell fell owte betwene this monstrous villayne and Mr. Sidneye, he imployes Rawlie and my selfe with a message, to this effect, that the question myght be honorablie endid [by a duel]. Mr. Sidnie accepted gladlie therof, and desirid muche it might not be deferrid, whiche when he hard, never meaninge any thinge lesse, as after it appered, told us playnelie he was not to hazard him selfe havinge receavid suche an injurie, and therefore he had a nother cowrse, and that was to have him murtherid in his logeing. The manner howe he wold have done it, and what wordes I gave him and howe I withstode it, lett my Lord Harrye [Howard], who delte verye honorablie, and Rawlie as honestlie reporte, with whom he delt in as vile a practice against the Earell of Lester, and that will Rawlie avowe uppon him, whose testemonye will serve, and [i.e., if] I want it, in other matters as fowle as this. (State Papers, 12/151/45, f. 115v)

Another mention appears in a list of charges to be made against Oxford, found in Lord Henry's hand. He cites:

His practise to murder Sidney in his bedde and to scape by barge, with calivers ready for the purpose. (S.P. 12/151/57)

And again, from Arundell:

His savage and inhumayn practice at Grenewidge to make away Phillipe Sidneye. (S.P. 12/151/46, f. 117v)

Even if we do not accept Oxford's murderous intention, though at least as heated talk it is plausible enough, these passages do provide some confirmation of Greville's sequence of events, and the last one supplies the name of the palace at which the quarrel may be presumed to have taken place.

But one's eye is caught by the appearance of Raleigh's name in Arundell's story. Little is known about the early years of this great man; his biographers largely confine themselves to mentioning his Protestant upbringing, his service with the Huguenots in France in the early 1570s, his brief stay at Oriel College, and his eventual departure for the Irish wars in the summer of 1580, from which time his history is more complete. It is known that he did frequent the Court: he was a member of the Middle Temple in 1575; in 1577 he signed himself "Esq. de Curia" in a Middlesex register; in 1580 he fought two quarrels of his own. And he is known to have sailed with Humphrey Gilbert's Atlantic expedition in winter 1578-79.<sup>6</sup> Little else is forthcoming, certainly very little of his friends and associations. But buried among these Oxford squabbles of

1581 is ample and probably quite reliable evidence that, surprisingly, in the late 1570s Raleigh moved in the circles of the Catholic courtiers, a group which included, besides the three already mentioned, the Lords Windsor and Compton, the Lords Charles and Thomas Howard, George Gifford, Francis Southwell, Henry Noel, Arthur Gorges, William Tresham, and William Cornwallis, among others, most of them practising Roman Catholics, as well as others who came less often to Court, like the Earls of Northumberland and Southampton, Thomas Lord Paget, and Philip Howard, the Duke of Norfolk's son and heir.

In Arundell's "Declaration of the Earell of Oxfordes detestable vices, and unpure life" (S.P. 12/151/45), Raleigh is listed along with many of these men as able to confirm having heard Oxford's gross self-gratulant lying, "with divers other Ientillmen that hathe accompanid him" (f. 114v) – they were often "driven to rise from his table laugheinge". Henry Howard, Arundell, Southwell, and Raleigh were dining in Oxford's chambers at Greenwich Palace when the Earl drunkenly insisted that the French had a tradition of "crownenge none but cockscomes" (f. 115). These four and Lord Windsor were present when Oxford asserted that Joseph was a wittol and the Blessed Virgin a whore, "and Mr. Harrye Noell will saye that Rawlie told it him" (f. 116); and again, Raleigh was present at Richmond when Oxford recited a whole catalogue of blasphemies (S.P. 12/151/46, f. 117). Though his first name is never mentioned, Raleigh appears in another list of the same charges with the same witnesses indicated by initials only, in his case "W. R." (*ibid.*).

Oxford is also alleged to have sought to kill Raleigh himself:

Lastlie yf him selfe lie not, he hathe practisid with a man of his one that nowe serves in Ireland to kill Rawlie when ever he goes[?] to any skirmishe, and this he termes a brave vendetta, and of this intent of his I have advertised Rawlie. (S.P. 12/151/45, f. 115v)

Another document in Arundell's hand elaborates further by citing Oxford's "practice with certayne soldiers to kill Denny, Rawlie, and [John] Cheke in Ireland" and "his laying wayte for Rawlies life before his goinge into Ireland" (S.P. 12/151/46, f. 118). When accused by Oxford of having had intelligence from the Irish rebels, Arundell replied that he had received thence no letters save "in causes of frinshippe" from the Earl of Ormonde (another great friend of the Howard circle whenever he was in England) and from Raleigh (S.P. 12/151/48, f. 121). Arundell admitted to having heard of Oxford's silly boast that Anjou had offered him ten thousand crowns a year to come to France; "other knoledge have I none but that Rawlie told me, and what my answer was Rawlie [can] testefie" (S.P. 12/151/48, f. 121v). From these documents and others like them emerges a picture of a set of boon companions who had passed whole days in conversation at Richmond and Hampton Court, in Oxford's chambers at Greenwich and Whitehall, in his house in Bread Street, and in the Horsehead in Cheapside, but had now fallen to recriminations, and in the cited instances Raleigh appears among them all as an equal member.

It is worth noticing, too, that Raleigh was similarly cited to witness in *Leicester's Commonwealth*, the libellous tract written in spring 1584 by the exiled Catholic courtiers in Paris, principally by Charles Arundell. Having recounted the Earl of Leicester's alleged attempt to assassinate Jean de Simier, the Duke of Anjou's marriage negotiator, in the garden at Greenwich Palace, Arundell goes on to say that Leicester delt wyth certayne Flussshyners and

other Pyrates to sinke [Simier] at sea wyth the Englishe Gentlemen his favourers that accompanied him at his returne into Fraunce. And though they missed of this practize also (as not daring to set upon him for feare of some of her Majesty's shippes who to break of this designment attended by special commaundement to waite him over in safitie), yet the foresaid English Gentlemen were holden fower howers in chace at their comming back: as M. Rawley wel knoweth, being then present, and two of the Chacers named Clark and Harris confessed afterward the whole designement.<sup>7</sup>

That Leicester commissioned the pirates' attack is most unlikely, but there is no good reason to doubt that it took place. Simier made one journey in early 1582, but this incident must have occurred on his voyage of 24 November 1579, since the other attempts alleged in the tract date from that time and since "Clark", Captain Augustine Clerk of Gravelines, took his ship over to the Spanish service in spring 1580 and was arrested as a suspected spy from Secretary Walsingham.<sup>8</sup> Nothing is otherwise known of Raleigh's activities between his return from the Azores in May 1579 and his fight with Thomas Perrot in February 1580, but it now seems very likely that he journeyed briefly to France in November 1579, attending the English Catholics' good friend Simier, and was attacked by pirates upon his return.

The Oxford-Howard circle of Catholic courtiers in the late 1570s has never been adequately studied,<sup>9</sup> largely for lack of evidence, though this mass of diatribes and interrogatories, from 1581, hitherto largely overlooked, will eventually help to fill out the picture. The group reached an apogee of sorts in the summer of 1579, when Simier had so won the Queen, Anjou was making his first visit into the realm, and the Earl of Leicester was in disgrace following the revelation of his secret marriage to Lady Essex a year earlier. When the French marriage negotiations finally fell apart, however, upon which both its hopes and to some extent its political survival had been founded, the Catholic group at Court became a sinking ship. Deserted by the French, of no more use to Lord Burghley, compromised by Oxford's charges and by the general intensification of anti-Catholic activity throughout the realm, the courtiers, perhaps because of their very isolation and vulnerability, drifted into more and more questionable intrigues, chiefly in aid of the Queen of Scots but involving also the Spanish ambassador, Bernardino de Mendoza. Very little evidence exists to connect Raleigh with the Catholic courtiers after his departure for Ireland in 1580. In March 1583, he helped Lord Burghley in straightening out with the Queen a recurrence of the Oxford-Arundell differences,<sup>10</sup> but really, from the time of his return from Ireland in late 1581, he was on his own, soon to become Sir Walter, Lord Warden of the Stanneries, and the Queen's own "Water", widely identified with the anti-Spanish foreign policies of Leicester and Walsingham. The Catholic courtiers, on the other hand, would nearly all be in prison or exile within five years' time, victims (as they believed) of the Earl of Leicester's cunning.<sup>11</sup>

In these documents, Raleigh appears as an intimate associate of the Catholic circle at Court, cited to witness in terms that would have been easily verifiable by the authorities. This does not prove by any means that he was ever a Roman Catholic himself, but it does say a great deal about the kind of associations he had made for himself. That he had been part of this group may aid in explaining several enigmatic features of his history, such as why in 1581 the Earl of Ormonde seemed so impressed by Raleigh's Irish service that he appointed him to administer Munster while he was in England (Wallace, *Raleigh*, 18); they may formerly have moved in the same

circle at Court. It may explain Ambassador Mendoza's odd conviction that Raleigh was secretly a friend of Spanish interests, for many other members of the group had drifted in that direction over time, and it may suggest a colour of reason for the condemned plotter Anthony Babington's appeal to Raleigh in 1586 (Wallace, 43-46). His desertion of the group, his failure to aid the Catholic courtiers in their troubled state after he himself had risen so remarkably into favour, may render more intelligible Lord Henry Howard's furious animus against him late in the Queen's reign and early in the next one.<sup>12</sup> And finally, this evidence may permit a confident dating of Raleigh's poem "Many desire, but few or none deserve", which is addressed to Anne Vavasour in both of its manuscripts.<sup>13</sup> Anne had also been a member of the group, one whose virtue while at Court had been entrusted to her kinsmen Arundell, Howard, Lord Paget, and the Knyvets, so that her seduction by Oxford in summer 1580 was a major grievance of the others against him; her delivery of the Earl's baby in March 1581 was the occasion of his commitment to the Tower.<sup>14</sup> The brotherly advice on chastity embodied in the poem would fit the situation of about June 1580 (just before Raleigh's departure for the Irish wars), when Oxford's pursuit of the girl was creating some distress among her friends, and it may have brought about Oxford's murderous attacks against Raleigh – or whatever bad feeling lay behind the imputation – which, as we have seen, Arundell claims occurred at just that time.

How Raleigh fell in with the Catholic courtiers and how far he participated in their schemes and communions we can only guess. There is no evidence that he had any direct part in their suggestive dealings with the French ambassador in 1577-78 or in their later resort to Mendoza, nor can he be connected by name (as most of the others can) with the hearing of mass and harbouring of priests. Perhaps he was introduced to the Howard circle by his cousin Arthur Gorges, who was also Charles Arundell's cousin.<sup>15</sup> But for Raleigh, an ambitious young man newly come to Court, the Earl of Oxford himself, the Lord Treasurer's son-in-law and a brilliant courtier who enjoyed the favour of the Queen, must have seemed an attractive star to hitch upon, and there was a time when all of the Catholic courtiers, with Burghley and Sussex behind them in the marriage cause and their French ally thought soon to be married to the Queen, seemed bound for brighter days. But later, when the Catholic circle was being smashed and dispersed, largely by its members' own folly, Raleigh struck off towards his own eventual tragic destiny independently of theirs.

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1. *The Works of Fulke Greville*, ed. A. R. Grosart (1870; rpt. 1966), iv, 65-70; James M. Osborn, *Young Philip Sidney* (New Haven, 1972), 504.

2. *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillerat (1912; rpt. 1962), iii, 128.

3. *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, Elizabeth, 1581-1590*, 38: "quarrel with and intention to murder Mr. Philip Sidney".

4. The party lines on the marriage and other issues at this time are described most clearly in Conyers Read, "Walsingham and Burghley in Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council", *English Historical Review*, xxviii (1913), 34-58, esp. 43-44.
5. The outlines of this incident can be found in Josephine Waters Bennett, "Oxford and *Endimion*", *P.M.L.A.*, lvii (1942), 354-69.
6. Willard M. Wallace, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (Princeton, 1959), 9-14; A. L. Rowse, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (1962), 132-35.
7. *The Copy of a Letter Written by a Master of Art of Cambridge* (Rouen?, 1584), STC 19399, sig. C7v (p.44).
8. *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish, 1580-1586*, 29, 36, 49
9. A beginning was made by John Bossy, "English Catholics and the French Marriage, 1577-1581", *Recusant History*, v (1959), 2-16, in which some of the group's activities merely characterized here are more fully discussed.
10. Edward Edwards, *The Life and Letters of Raleigh* (1868), ii, 21-22.
11. Southampton had died in Oct. 1581. Upon Francis Throgmorton's arrest in Nov. 1583, Arundell and Lord Paget fled to Paris, joining there William Tresham (who had fled in Jan. 1582), where they produced *Leicester Commonwealth*. Lord Henry Howard, William Shelley, and the Earl of Northumberland were arrested then as well; the Earl died in the Tower in 1585, Shelley was there when last heard of, Howard remained under a heavy cloud until he came into his own after James's accession in 1603. Philip Howard, the Earl of Arundel, was detained and then released, but was rearrested when he tried to flee the realm in April 1585, and died in the Tower a decade later. Some of the courtier group, however, like young Arthur Gorges and Oxford himself, managed to come free of their early associations and make respectable careers in conformity with the Elizabethan religious laws. Many of the Babington Plotters were courtiers too; but seem to have been too young to have been part of the group in the 1570s.
12. Wallace, *Raleigh*, 182-88: "precisely why [Howard] fixed upon Raleigh for his abuse remains something of a mystery, other than that he was consumed by jealousy all his life" (183).
13. *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed Agnes Latham (Cambridge, Mass., 1951; rpt. 1962), 14-15, 110; Neville L. Williams, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (1962), 21-22.
14. Howard's charges, S.P. 12/151/57, f. 132; see E. K. Chambers, *Sir Henry Lee* (Oxford, 1936), 150-62, and the essay by Bennett cited earlier (note 5). In *Leicester's Commonwealth* Arundell, angry that Anne too had defected from the group by subsequently becoming the mistress of Sir Henry Lee, a Leicestrian, dismissed her contemptuously as "but the leavings of another man", i.e., Oxford (sig. C4v, p.38).
15. For Raleigh's connection to the Howards through Gorges, Helen E. Sandison, "Sir Arthur

Gorges: Spenser's Alcyon", *P.M.L.A.*, xliii (1928), 646. Arundell considered Gorges "my Cosine" (S.P. 12/151/45, f. 115v) and claimed Oxford had tried to have Gorges murdered, too, on the Richmond green (*ibid.*, no.46, f. 118).