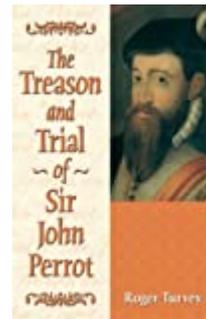




Roger Turvey. *The Treason and Trial of Sir John Perrot.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005. xii + 208 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7083-1912-3.



Reviewed by Pauline Croft (Department of History, Royal Holloway University of London)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2007)

A Great Elizabethan?

Dr. Roger Turvey wrote the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Sir John Perrot (1528-92), Lord Deputy of Ireland from 1584 to 1588, and his aim here is, as noted on the front cover, to “restore a great Elizabethan who hailed from Wales to his rightful place in history.” In February 1589, some months after his return from Ireland, Perrot was elevated to the English privy council, but then suffered a spectacular downfall, being charged with treason in 1590. He was tried in April 1592. Found guilty, he was not executed but died in the Tower seven months later, and his family was treated leniently. The first part of the book tells the story of Perrot’s life and end. The second prints the earliest surviving and most complete account of his trial, from BL Lansdowne MS 72. The manuscript formed the basis of T. B. Howell’s account in *State Trials* vol. 1 (London, 1809), now superseded by this valuable edition. Turvey usefully demolishes the notion that Perrot was an illegitimate son of Henry VIII, apparently an unfounded libel by Sir Robert Naunton, but follows Hiram Morgan in accusing Lord Burghley of masterminding a secretive, deadly attack on Perrot, in order to cover up the corrupt administration of Ireland after Perrot’s departure by Lord

Deputy Fitzwilliam, a second cousin of Burghley’s late wife.[1]

However, neither William Camden nor Sir James Perrot, Perrot’s bastard son and biographer, saw Burghley in this light, and in his will Perrot was “resolute in his belief that Burghley was to be accounted among his most loyal and steadfast friends” (p. 87). For Turvey this was “misplaced faith,” additional evidence of Burghley’s serpentine duplicity. It is always worrying when modern historians insist that they have uncovered mysterious plots unknown to Tudor contemporaries. Here, plenty of evidence is cited that undermines any conspiracy theory. Firstly, there is no denying that Perrot was a violent, brawling, and vituperative character, who had made many enemies in his native Wales before going on to make even more in Ireland, where the privy council in Dublin was already deeply divided. Perrot alienated influential Irishmen, including the powerful Thomas earl of Ormond, a personal friend of Queen Elizabeth, and also Adam Loftus, Archbishop of Dublin and Lord Chancellor of Ireland. Turvey notes that Lord Deputy Fitzwilliam was in many ways an unwitting instrument of Loftus’s

sustained malice against Perrot (p. 69). It was Loftus, not Burghley, whom Perrot blamed in his will. Back in England, with the added status of a privy councillor, Perrot lent his support to all those who were enemies of Fitzwilliam and Loftus: they in turn saw him as worryingly well placed to do them harm. Into this fraught situation came a very dubious priest, Denis O'Roughan. To get himself out of jail, O'Roughan produced a letter allegedly from Perrot to Philip II of Spain, offering to aid him in the conquest of Ireland in return for dominion in Wales. Fitzwilliam then wrote directly to Elizabeth, not Burghley and the English privy council, with this sensational allegation. That made it impossible to avoid an enquiry, particularly as Perrot wrote to Burghley insisting on being charged so that he could clear his name. On the queen's express order, he was placed under house arrest in Burghley's luxurious mansion in the Strand, and only later sent to the Tower.

Burghley clearly thought O'Roughan was a rogue, but the queen also commanded Sir Nicholas White, one of Perrot's supporters on the Irish privy council, to be placed in confinement at the house of the Dean of St Paul's. Other charges against Perrot emerged which seemed to have rather more substance. Apparently he had released, unpunished, certain rhymers who composed seditious songs and poems against Elizabeth, and he had been too lenient with the rebel Sir Brian O'Rourke, who ceremonially trashed an image of the queen. The final blow came with the revelation that Perrot had expressed his frustrations over what he saw as Elizabeth's inadequate support of him with phrases such as "God's wounds, this is to serve a base bastard piss kitchen woman," and "Ha, silly woman, ha, fiddling woman, now she shall not rule me, now she shall not curb me." Turvey views these as merely "indiscretions uttered in public" (all quotes, p. 114), but they immediately made Perrot vulnerable to the accusation of treasonous words, under the act of 1571. At the end of his trial, most unusually, Perrot was granted an interview with his judges, and judgment was delayed until the queen was consulted. However, the death sentence was finally pronounced in June 1592, although Perrot was simply left in jail.

There is little discussion here of wider Elizabethan politics. Instead we are offered the catch-all solution of "faction," with Lord Burghley as a paranoid factional leader. But it is noticeable how many other friends of Perrot fell away from him, including the influential Sir George Carew and Roger Manners, eminence grise of the dukes of Rutland. The young Robert earl of Essex, whose sister Dorothy was married to Perrot's son and

heir Thomas, stood back until after Perrot's condemnation, then asked Burghley for support in stopping sentence being pronounced. Significantly, Essex noted that it would be hard to move the queen, who seemed "very resolute in it" (p. 86). Concentrating on Wales and Ireland, Turvey largely ignores the whole sequence of plots in England, from Roberto di Ridolfi in 1571, which first convinced Elizabeth that Philip II was her enemy, through Francis Throckmorton and Parry to Anthony Babington in 1586, where Mary Queen of Scots explicitly consented to a plan to assassinate the English queen. These were to be followed by further plots in the 1590s, including that of the hapless Dr. Roderigo Lopez whose fate in many ways is reminiscent of Perrot. To the modern mind the plots may seem absurdly incoherent, but they were a powerful influence on Elizabethan thinking, not least that of the queen herself. The significance of Perrot's public description of Elizabeth as a "base bastard" is simply ignored in this book, but it was explosive, especially in wartime. If she was illegitimate (as all Catholics contended), then she had no right to the throne. So who was the rightful ruler? Was Perrot perhaps a secret supporter of the Infanta Isabella, proclaimed by her father Philip II as queen of England as soon as the Armada should remove Elizabeth? In the immediate aftermath of 1588, there were fears that Philip might think of attacking England afresh, perhaps by planting troops in Ireland, and the king was quick to start rebuilding his naval strength. The two proclamations against seminary priests, written by Lord Burghley in October 1591, bring home vividly the current atmosphere of paranoia in England. Perrot's many enemies in Dublin could raise just enough concern that he was a loose cannon, a man of poor judgment who despised his queen as a bastard and had no scruples over insulting her in public. Drunken old men on alehouse benches who cast similar aspersions on the queen's parentage were hauled before the assize judges as a warning; such slanders coming from a Lord Deputy of Ireland could not be tolerated. Against this tense, fearful background it seemed possible that Perrot might have been tempted into treacherous schemes with Spain. At the very least, if Elizabeth's public reputation had gone undefended (as with the seditious rhymers and O'Rourke's ceremony of ritual degradation), even more so if she personally took umbrage at Perrot's outrageous comments (as indicated by Essex), then Burghley and other privy councillors were unlikely to go out of their way to help him. But that was not the same as deliberately and elaborately plotting to bring Perrot down, in pursuit of unsubstantiated and rather tenuous factional advantage.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Perrot's career was his elevation as a privy councillor. With Robert earl of Leicester dead and Sir Francis Walsingham mortally ill, the council needed reinforcement, and the situation worsened with the unexpected demise of Sir Christopher Hatton in 1591. Yet thereafter the queen was increasingly reluctant to fill vacancies. It seems likely that she grew wary after the disastrous choice of Perrot. Sir James Perrot realized that his father had largely brought his troubles on himself. "If he had byn able to bridle that passion of choler, wherto he was by nature much adicted, and

to forbear over free speach when he was offended, his dayes might have byn longer and his ende more happie" (p. 184). Even to his son, it was obvious that Sir John Perrot was his own worst enemy.

Note

[1]. Hiram Morgan, "The Downfall of Sir John Perrot," in *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, ed. John Guy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 109-125.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Pauline Croft. Review of Turvey, Roger, *The Treason and Trial of Sir John Perrot*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13130>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.