



BOOK REVIEW

Andrea McKenzie. *Conspiracy Culture in Stuart England the Mysterious Death of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey*

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In 1903, Andrew Lang investigated the case of Edmund Berry Godfrey's mysterious death in October 1678, and remarked that "whosoever discusses historical mysteries pleases the public best by being quite sure and offering a definite and certain solution" (*The Valet's Tragedy and Other Studies* [1903], vii). Here we have just such a solution offered to us.

Certainly, when faced with an embarrassment of explanations to this historical mystery, there is a tendency to delve ever deeper into the minutiae of the case, which in turn inclines most authors to uncover ever more puzzles due to the very murky evidence. That said, Andrea McKenzie has made a very good attempt at resolving the mystery and engagingly leads the reader through the various combinations of evidence available, even adding some important new evidence of her own into the mix. However, since he was found dead in a ditch near Primrose Hill in October 1678, melancholic Edmund Godfrey still keeps many of his secrets and the actual quality of evidence remains tainted by the era's politics and prejudice. The early evidence should be the best but isn't. The later evidence was often deliberately misleading. Still, the mystery does allow for numerous theories and solutions, most of which are dealt with in some detail here. Some are convincing, others less so. McKenzie outlines the various theories put forward, and she deals with the many suspects, while ultimately suggesting one of her own as her solution.

However, McKenzie's book also adds to our understanding of the conspiratorial context and culture of the reign of Charles II. Although, one major question that emerges is just how important was the death of Edmund Godfrey? Was it the spark that lit the "Popish Plot" or merely a sinister side show to the bigger political questions already raised in court and in Parliament about a Catholic succession? Had in fact Titus Oates and the other informers' testimonies already escaped into the wider political world to wreak havoc on their own, even before Godfrey died? In a sense, the Godfrey mystery certainly fitted in quite well with the culture of the court and public, which by the late 1670s seem to have no illusions about heroes or providential justice coming to the rescue.

Yet, as is clear here, Godfrey's death was very much a political one. Once it had happened, it was quickly swept into the political world and fiercely fought over by the Whig and Tory parties, added to by a continual stream of dubious informers, and by numerous courtiers, both high and low. Even the King's brother, James, Duke of York, the real focus of the crises of the 1670s and 1680s, had his say on Godfrey's death. And Godfrey's death became part of a much wider Restoration political crisis over his succession and the relationship between monarch and Parliament. So, the case is most useful perhaps not just as a mystery to be solved but a means to explore some of the larger historical questions of the reign: how much should the people themselves trust their rulers? Could they trust the press and

conspiratorial pamphlet literature they read in the public sphere of the day? On one level, Godfrey's death and the Plot could be seen as a "court stratagem": an inflated political design for which ultimately no real resolution was needed as no one really wanted one for it was far too useful in the court and parliamentary conflicts to abandon.

Chapter one of McKenzie's book deals with the many anti-Catholic issues, solutions, and rumors swirling around in the reign. Chapter two examines the actions of the Earl of Danby (the King's first minister) and the "moral panic" which overwhelmed him. Chapter three then takes the reader through the important question of Godfrey's suicide or nonsuicide; does the case really support this solution? McKenzie thinks not but deals in detail with Godfrey's state of mind and (as much as is possible at this distance in time) with his actual movements on the day of his death. Certainly, the later activities and interviews of the many witnesses by Sir Roger L'Estrange, investigating the case in 1685, and his "interventions" into the evidence were a significant matter here. Chapter four then explores the Whigs' response to Godfrey's death and their use of it for their own purposes. Chapter five, on the other hand, examines some new evidence that McKenzie has unearthed from William Lloyd. As Godfrey's local curate and later Bishop of St Asaph, Lloyd evidently knew a lot more about his parishioner than he let on publicly, and he revealed this in a secretive shorthand to L'Estrange. Lastly, McKenzie's conclusion draws up her potential solution to the case: a moderate Godfrey gets into trouble by mediating between "great men," reading "secret papers," crossing George, Duke of Buckingham, who had been taking French money (although who wasn't in this period?), and was murdered for it by Colonel John Scott. While a satisfyingly written solution, much of this still has a somewhat circumstantial air to it.

Perhaps given that we can never really know how Godfrey met his death, the major question we now really need to ask is how an obviously intelligent monarch such as Charles II, who oversaw all of the lies and counter lies that made up the "Popish Plot" and its various side lines, did little to stop it all happening, even though he knew that it was all false. An understanding of the King's own motives in the period remains essential to a real understanding of the plot's politics for he set the tone for much that happened around him both at court and in the reign itself and so, if we need to blame anyone for what happened to Godfrey, then perhaps we already have our real culprit standing in plain sight.