

Review Article: Early Stuart Foreign Policy

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Early Stuart foreign policy remains a relatively neglected topic, despite mounting evidence for the importance of international religious conflicts in British political culture and the strains imposed by the demands of war on the British state. Jonathan Scott has recently called for a systematic rethinking of the period based on a recognition of the fundamental importance of the European context of the Thirty Years' War, but even he has relatively little to say about the Stuart monarchy's attempts to intervene in continental politics.⁽¹⁾ One reason for this neglect stems from the stubborn insularity of English historiography; another is that any serious student of international relations needs to master continental European, as well as English, archives. These two books attempt to overcome this challenge and, although one succeeds better than the other, both are to be welcomed for this reason.

Redworth's study offers the fullest account of the Spanish Match – the ill-fated effort to marry the future Charles I to the Infanta Maria of Spain – since Gardiner. It draws upon Spanish sources unavailable to that great Victorian scholar, while advancing a bold thesis certain to provoke controversy. Clearly written in often vigorous prose, it will be as accessible to students and general readers as to experts. Unfortunately it also glosses over complexities requiring fuller and more nuanced treatment, making this a book to be used with caution.

Redworth is at his best when illuminating the tangle of political, diplomatic and personal relationships at the heart of the marriage negotiations. He provides the fullest available discussion in English of Spain's famous ambassador Gondomar and his mission to England. A highly ambitious politician of minor noble stock, Gondomar was also a scholar and the owner of the largest private library in Spain, and his intellectual accomplishments helped him establish a close relationship with James I of England and English courtiers like Francis Bacon and the Earl of Arundel. Redworth argues that James's friendship with Gondomar also derived from their shared sense of being strangers in England and the enjoyment they took in exchanging views on the peculiar behaviour of the natives. Shortly after arriving in London on his first embassy of 1614, Gondomar reassured James that Spain would not interfere with his rule in Ireland if, in exchange, James restrained corsairs in American waters. He then proposed a marriage alliance, offering as bait a dowry of £500,000 (later enlarged to £600,000), which seemed especially attractive after the failure of the 1614 parliament. Redworth thinks that Gondomar's enthusiasm for this match, which he believed would advance his own career, and his superficial knowledge of Spanish court politics caused him to underestimate the difficulties that religious differences would pose in its negotiation in ways that ultimately misled James. Although deserving of serious consideration, this conclusion is not entirely supported by a recent Spanish study, which presents evidence that Gondomar and his superiors had considerable doubts as early as 1620 that the English would ever agree to religious conditions acceptable to Spain and Rome.⁽²⁾ Moreover, Gondomar's continued interest in the Match, despite the obstacles, appears to have stemmed from his view that the commercial and naval strength of the English and Dutch made it imperative for Spain to prevent these two powers from allying against her interests, at least as much as from purely personal ambition.

Redworth also provides a fresh account of events surrounding the 1621 parliament, uncovering new documentation of Buckingham's pro-Spanish views and providing an original interpretation of the genesis of the Commons' petition for war with Spain that precipitated the parliament's dissolution. More than most historians, he stresses James's fear and resentment of bellicose Protestantism as the main motivation for his desire to ally with Spain. Some historians may argue with the assertion that 'it is in...moments when James lashes out [to Gondomar] that we get closest to finding out who he felt his real enemies were' (p. 42), since the King had every reason to exaggerate his anti-puritan sentiments when talking to the Spanish ambassador. But the royal outbursts recorded in the Spanish documents Redworth has uncovered, such as James's boast that puritans were taking the place of recusants in English jails after the 1621 dissolution, are certainly revealing.

The book next proceeds to develop a fresh interpretation of the journey of Charles and Buckingham to Madrid, which has perplexed historians almost as much as it did contemporaries. The prince and duke had 'their own secret contacts with Madrid' (p. 51) and thought that they understood the situation there better than the King's diplomats. In May 1622 Charles told Gondomar he was willing to travel incognito to Spain. Wrongly concluding this meant that the prince was ready to convert to Catholicism, and seeing a chance to advance his own career, Gondomar encouraged the scheme. Unfortunately he never enjoyed the confidence of the inner circle around Philip IV, although his skill at self-promotion had disguised this fact from the English court. He therefore did not know that on his deathbed Philip III had implored his heir not to conclude the Match and that Olivares was already searching for a way to break it without driving England into a war. To dissimulate until he could perfect an alternative scheme, Olivares also deceived Charles's personal envoy, Endymion Porter, into thinking the Match was virtually concluded. The prince's trip thus took place amidst a tangle of false hopes and misunderstandings. His initial lavish welcome in Madrid – which Redworth describes well – inevitably gave way to friction and mounting suspicion, as the Spaniards slowly realised that he was not going to convert and demanded new religious concessions, including

parliament's ratification of freedom of worship for English Catholics, to stall the Infanta's marriage to a heretic prince. By early May 1623 Charles concluded that negotiations had reached an impasse and asked permission to return to London, which Olivares refused. 'The Prince of Wales was captive in a foreign land' (p. 111). In order to escape, on 7 July he suddenly agreed, in bad faith, to all Spanish demands. This astonished the Spanish court, which now felt that it had no choice but to proceed with the marriage; Redworth thinks Charles's deception fooled everyone except Olivares and possibly James.

Although it may require modification by further work on Spanish court politics, much of this narrative seems plausible. A more complete study would need to pay more attention to internal disagreements within the Spanish regime and events like the fall of Lerma and rise of Olivares during the period of Gondomar's residence in London. Gondomar had stronger contacts with Lerma's regime than with that of his successor, a fact that may have complicated his efforts to assess the changing directions of Spanish policy from his distant post in London. But even if Redworth oversimplifies, his argument that the Match became entangled in a web of misunderstandings appears essentially correct.

He will meet more resistance, on the other hand, in making his further claim that in pursuing the Match the English were prepared to sacrifice the interests of James's son-in-law, Frederick V Elector Palatine, whose principality had been conquered by Spanish and other Catholic armies. Previous accounts have mostly assumed that the Palatinate's restoration was a central objective of Stuart policy, and that a diplomatic solution tied to the Spanish Match provided an alternative to war. Redworth argues that, on the contrary, the return of the Palatinate was always a secondary concern in London. His evidence consists partly of letters by the English diplomat John Digby, telling his superiors that Spain was unwilling to provide more than diplomatic assistance in the recovery of the Palatinate, but even more of a document showing that James was prepared to conclude the Match without an explicit agreement over the Elector's restoration, after receiving Porter's optimistic report in 1623. Charles's and Buckingham's determination to make war on Spain after the Match collapsed must therefore have owed more to wounded pride and a petty desire for revenge than to concern for the Frederick of Bohemia. The larger strategic objectives used to justify attacking Spain – the defense of German Protestantism and the vindication of the dynastic rights of Charles's sister and her husband – were, Redworth argues, merely 'a twisted excuse for a war of vanity' (p. 5). These contentions not only challenge other accounts of late Jacobean foreign policy, they also implicitly undermine revisionist efforts at rehabilitating the reputations of England's first two Stuart monarchs.

Redworth's evidence is less conclusive than he appears to think, however. Even if James was willing to conclude a marriage alliance without a simultaneous agreement over the Palatinate, it does not necessarily follow that he intended to abandon his son-in-law. He might well have hoped that Spanish diplomatic assistance would still eventually achieve a satisfactory solution. Another English agent in Madrid, Walter Aston, remained optimistic on this score, while at the time of Porter's departure for Madrid an observer at the English court reported that the prince's secretary, Francis Cottington, had returned from Spain with 'great and plausible assurances *both* of the restitution of the Palatinate and of the accomplishment of the marriage.' The same observer also stated that while awaiting the outcome of Porter's mission a committee had begun to meet to consider preparations for war, 'wherein the Prince showeth himself a fervent and forward actor', who proclaimed that 'he would never harken to the marriage till the Palatinate were restored'.⁽³⁾ Although Charles *might* have been insincere in this claim, we cannot fully assess his attitude without deeper examination of the full range of military and diplomatic options under consideration at the time, including attempts to provide limited military assistance to the Elector's cause without a formal rupture with Spain, for example by encouraging English volunteers to enlist for military service in Germany.

Moreover, even if Redworth is right in thinking that the Stuarts would have abandoned the Palatinate in return for a Spanish marriage alliance, it need not follow that their policy was motivated by a myopic desire for peace at any price and subsequently by petty vanity. This study's greatest weakness lies in its failure to provide a more complex and nuanced analysis of the wider political, diplomatic and military contexts surrounding the marriage negotiations. The problem is exemplified at the start of chapter 3, dealing with the Central European background, where Redworth sweepingly asserts that Princess 'Elizabeth's marriage to Frederick, instead of enhancing her father's reputation as a peacemaker, was to have devastating

consequences for the reputation of James and his son for sound judgment' (p. 19). He does not support this statement with any sustained discussion of reactions in Madrid or other European capitals to Britain's German alliance, and what little evidence he does provide comes almost entirely from the period following the outbreak of war in the Empire in 1619, *six years* after the Palatine marriage took place. While there is no doubt that Frederick's decision to accept the Bohemian crown and the crushing Habsburg military response it provoked placed James in a very awkward position, these events could not have been foreseen in 1613 and James had no direct control over them. By jumping from 1613 to 1619 Redworth evades the problem of discussing what James originally hoped to achieve by the Palatine match and whether he had any responsibility for Frederick's disastrous challenge to Habsburg rule in Bohemia. There is no attempt here to present a balanced account of the evolution of James's policies, the internal debates over Germany within his Council and the extremely difficult diplomatic, strategic and military problems that the Stuarts faced as they contemplated the prospects of war. Instead we are presented with a narrative dominated by shallow personalities and simplistic choices between starkly opposed policy options, lacking any sense of nuance or complexity.

Although Pursell is more concerned with Frederick than with James and Charles, and with Germany than with England, he still manages to provide a useful corrective to Redworth's simplifications. He is particularly convincing in showing the contingent nature of the circumstances leading up to Frederick's disastrous defeat at the Battle of White Mountain and the subsequent loss of the Palatinate. In 1618 The Empire did not appear poised on the brink of full-scale religious war. There were certainly tensions, including those produced by the attempts of Catholic princes to chip away at the privileges and property enjoyed by Protestants within their territories. Like some other Protestant leaders, Frederick saw the Habsburgs as a dynasty intent on subverting the Empire's constitution by establishing a hereditary claim to the imperial title and extending imperial power at the expense of the liberties and privileges of the electoral college and other German institutions. The role of Spanish diplomacy and the occasional participation of Spanish troops in German affairs also aroused fear and resentment. But there was a deep commitment, by Catholic as well as Protestant rulers, to settling disputes by peaceful means and without the intervention of foreign states. Thus, when the Bohemian estates rebelled, both they and their Habsburg adversary, Ferdinand, had considerable difficulty in gaining military support. The governments of Denmark, France, Spain and Britain all wanted a mediated settlement, while even Frederick hesitated before accepting the Bohemian crown, hoping to promote the candidacy of the Catholic but anti-Habsburg Duke of Savoy instead. As the local crisis escalated, with relatively small Bohemian armies invading Austria to besiege Vienna, a hardline faction in Madrid eventually prevailed in obtaining limited military assistance for the Emperor. But even after a string of decisive Catholic victories in 1620–21, the Spanish Crown wanted to avoid an open-ended engagement in Germany, while all the major Protestant powers except the Dutch hesitated to commit themselves. It is therefore clear that James was not obtuse in hoping to achieve a diplomatic settlement; moreover his reluctance to break with Spain closely resembled the attitude of other Protestant princes.

Pursell makes a good case that Frederick's refusal to relinquish his claims to Bohemia and to compromise on other issues did more than anything else to obstruct a settlement and enlarge the war. Believing in the righteousness of his cause and the support of God, he continued to pursue unrealistic objectives, bringing added military disasters upon himself, his allies and his subjects, while further angering the Habsburgs and exasperating his own allies, especially James I. Relations between James and his son-in-law grew increasingly tense and querulous, as the latter's provocative behaviour undercut efforts to negotiate a settlement on his behalf. Frederick believed that the Habsburgs would never negotiate away their gains, so that the only hope lay in inciting a larger war. He therefore disapproved strongly of the Spanish Match and declined to refrain from new military initiatives during its negotiation, until the army of his ally Halberstadt was destroyed by Tilly on 6 August 1623.

Despite devoting only a few pages to the Spanish Match, Pursell offers a very different interpretation from Redworth, arguing that while in Madrid Charles continued to press for Frederick's restoration until he met with an outright refusal from Olivares. 'This exchange may have been the moment in which he decided to

leave Spain and forsake negotiations' (p. 204). Even after Charles's return to London, Pursell argues, he, and especially James, had not given up on negotiations but continued to canvas alternative schemes, such as a marriage between Frederick's heir and a daughter of the Emperor or the Duke of Bavaria. But these diplomatic efforts faltered, in part because Frederick refused to countenance them, while alternative plans for contracting alliances with the Dutch, French and other powers hostile to Spain and the Emperor moved forward.

James's death in March 1625 came as a relief to Frederick and also unleashed a flurry of Palatine lobbying among English politicians, urging a resort to war. The ultimate goal was to contract an alliance centering around Protestant states (Britain, Denmark, the Dutch and Sweden) but perhaps also including the French, Savoy and the Republic of Venice 'to wage a dynastic, not a religious war for a constitutional end', i.e. Frederick's unconditional restoration. But since these powers had their own disparate goals and interests, the full coalition never materialised, and the governments that did come to Frederick's aid often failed to cooperate fully with each other. Moreover, as the war spread into northern Germany, pulling in previously neutral states, the Palatinate ceased to be the central issue. The elector had got the wider conflict he wanted, but the defeat of Denmark in 1626 and disengagement of Britain in 1629, after a series of military and political debacles, left him no closer to achieving his objectives. Gustavus Adolphus's intervention in Germany provided renewed hope, since the Swedish king 'saw that no peace in Germany was secure or feasible without Frederick's restoration' (p. 270). But Gustavus was more interested in using Frederick to extract support for his campaign from Charles I and other Palatine allies than in the constitutional and religious principles underlying the Palatine cause. Although Frederick joined the Swedish army he had grown disillusioned some time before his death from fever on 30 November 1632, some thirteen days after that of Gustavus himself. The issue of the Palatinate was only finally settled in 1648 through a compromise very similar to the one James had suggested a quarter of a century before. By then the principality's population had been reduced by 75 per cent.

Pursell's book raises a few issues on which more discussion is needed. He presents Frederick as a figure primarily motivated by constitutional rather than religious concerns, who was perfectly happy to tolerate Lutherans and Catholics, and even to ally with Catholic states, to defeat what he perceived as Habsburg tyranny. Since Ferdinand was also motivated by his conviction that Frederick threatened the imperial constitution, more than by religious zeal, Pursell argues that it is misleading to call the Thirty Years' War a war of religion. This is convincing on one level and Pursell has certainly provided a corrective to stereotyped images of Frederick and Ferdinand as dogmatic confessional rivals. But his own evidence also demonstrates how frequently religious and constitutional issues became thoroughly intertwined, making a clear distinction between them impossible to sustain. Protestants were so touchy about constitutional issues partly because they had reason to believe that wherever Catholic princes had enlarged their power – in France and the Spanish Netherlands as well as parts of Germany – they were using it to undermine reformed churches. The dilemma of how to respond to this challenge – whether through peaceful political and judicial protests or violent resistance – separated moderate Huguenot leaders from more intransigent figures like the Duke of Rohan, in much the same way it that it separated Frederick from a Lutheran prince like the Duke of Saxony, or from James I.⁽⁴⁾ It also divided English Protestant politicians as they looked across the Channel at the European situation.

It is therefore worth thinking more carefully about how worries over the *long term* survival of Protestantism entered into political calculations and policy debates, even over seemingly secular issues. To what extent did disagreement or confusion over this issue undermine the cohesion of Protestant alliances, while also producing internal fissures within Protestant governments? In a telling discussion Pursell explains that while contemplating whether to accept the Bohemian crown Frederick sent letters to London soliciting advice. James failed to respond but the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, did, urging Frederick to accept. Pursell believes that Princess Elizabeth may also have encouraged her husband to believe that he would have her father's support. Frederick's disastrous decision to accept the crown therefore stemmed not just from his own rashness but from the confusing signals he received from an internally divided English regime. One possible explanation is that James failed both to discipline his own council and to make his own views clear

until it was too late. But García Oro's study of Gondomar has turned up intriguing evidence that the Spanish authorities believed James to be acting in bad faith, by pretending to support Habsburg interests and peace while he secretly intrigued with the Dutch and other Protestant powers to foment trouble.⁽⁵⁾ Although it runs counter to almost everything English historians have written about James's policies and may well be wrong, this contemporary view at least merits careful consideration. Did James miscalculate not by seeking peace at any price, as some contemporaries and many later historians have claimed, but by duplicitously encouraging Frederick's Bohemian venture in the belief that, if it succeeded, it would serve Stuart interests and, if it failed, his diplomacy could negotiate a line of retreat?

By concentrating on Frederick and portraying him as the central cause of the escalation of the Bohemian crisis into the Thirty Years' War, Pursell may at times obscure the role of other dimensions of the conflict. But his book is a thoroughly researched and intelligent study that unquestionably breaks new ground. Although less satisfying, Redworth's study also reopens old questions by using fresh evidence from European archives. One hopes that these books herald the start of a trend toward a more cosmopolitan approach to Stuart politics that will at last allow us to situate early modern Britain more adequately within its European context.

Notes

1. Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Instability in European Context* (Cambridge, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. José García Oro, *Don Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, Conde de Gondomar y Embajador de España (1567–1627): Estudio Biográfico* (Xunta de Galicia, 1997), chapter 12.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Trumbull manuscripts, v. 7, pieces 81 and 82 (old numeration), William Beaulieu to William Trumbull, 11 October 1622, italics added. For Aston see *ibid* v. 2, 143, 148, 182. For these documents I have used Library of Congress microfilms LCM041/Camb/194 and 196; the Trumbull manuscripts are now in the British Library.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Pierre and Solange Deyon, *Henri de Rohan* (Paris, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. García Oro, 307–8.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Dr Pursell wishes to thank Professor Smuts for his sympathetic and balanced review. If readers are interested, they can find a fuller statement of my views on the Spanish Match in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 45, 4 (2002).

Other reviews:

[3]

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