

## HALF TRUTHS

ON the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles II there appeared in *The Times* a most interesting article on that monarch and his time by Keith Feiling. The typically English attitude of mind towards the history of that reign expressed in its lines must, however, have roused the attention of Catholic readers, especially his allusion to 'the half truths of which Oates got hold.'

It is matter for conjecture how many of his non-Catholic readers were aware of the whole truth where it touches Titus Oates and the malignant story of his career. To be sure, no historian defends the man who, according to Macaulay, was 'the founder of the school of false witnesses.' Every Englishman has learned at school that Titus Oates was a miscreant of the most evil and mischievous genius; that the men who were condemned to death on the strength of his false accusation were innocent victims of a politically engineered plot which had as its background the end of frustrating the Catholic succession to the throne. The end, in the mind of the average protestant Englishman, was laudable, although it did not justify the means adopted by the Government in this case.

That whole truth is indeed an answer to those inside and out of the British Parliament, who protested that the Catholic Relief Act of recent years, which removed the last of the penal laws from the Statute Book, was unnecessary and irrelevant to the times in which we live. For while education has become universal since the days of the Stuarts, and makes daily advances undreamt of by men of that time, it must be a matter of unabated wonder to Catholics that our protestant neighbours remain to this hour in an

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ignorance with regard to the truths governing our lives, almost as dark as that cloud which blinded the judges of Titus Oates's victims. Thus a very far from negligible number of people who pass in society as 'educated' are ready to believe that the Pope personally sends money to anyone responsible for bringing a convert into the Church; that the walls behind which monks and nuns seek seclusion literally 'wall them in'; that the novices, having been lured within them by unfair manipulation of their spiritual aspirations, are locked in without hope of escape; that the Jesuit noviciate consists in an inauguration into a system of cunning unguessed at by the ordinary public. Undoubtedly, there are more men and women in our midst who credit these and far wilder fables than there are persons who have arrived at the narrowest approximation of a true estimate of our religion. In spite of the inseparability with which the history of our country is bound up with that of the Catholic Church, popular ignorance in matters belonging to the Catholic Faith remains an outstanding anomaly when compared with the general enlightenment of the times.

Where ignorance remains, the superstition bred of it is not wholly conquered. Although we of the twentieth century had no reason to fear a sentence under the law of Elizabeth for possessing our crucifixes and prayer-books before the passage of the Catholic Relief Bill, yet the police ban exercised by authority of one of the penal laws on the Carfin Catholic procession in 1924 revealed a public attitude of mind which would be capable of opposing a barrier of unfair discrimination and ruthless bigotry against the activities of the Church if appealed to by an intolerantly-minded government.

Mr. Keith Feiling stated in his article that Charles II 'fought the whole Popish Plot,' but

omitted to mention the means by which his Majesty's Government 'fought' a plot in which his Majesty himself made no pretence of believing.

The story of one of Titus Oates's lay victims affords an illustration of those means, and of the mind of King and subjects.

Prior to the year 1678, Richard Langhorne was an ordinary citizen of London, a member of the Inner Temple, busy with the affairs of his clients. As a Catholic he could practise his legal profession only by the authority of a special license; he was obliged to send his sons abroad to be educated; he paid in taxes double the amount demanded of his protestant fellow-countrymen; but such disabilities were light compared with the persecution suffered by the generation immediately preceding his.

Protestants, including his own direct or collateral descendants, who have heard of Richard Langhorne at all, know that he was arrested and executed on a charge of High Treason brought against him by Titus Oates. Let us pursue the half-truths generally connected with his story and confront them with the whole truths clearly established by the proceedings at his trial. The report of this, taken at the time, and to be found in Vol. VII of *Cobbett's State Trials*, clearly establishes his innocence, yet he was condemned and executed upon the strength of the worthless evidence set forth therein. His own Memoir, written in prison, together with the devotions compiled by him as a preparation for death, are to be found in the same volume, following the account of the trial.

On October 7th, 1678, he was arrested by order of a warrant issued by the Council against *John Langhorne*.

He had gone about his business as usual during the week when the town had already been ringing with the cry that a great popish plot was afoot to murder

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the King, place his Catholic brother on the throne, and re-establish Catholic worship throughout the land by force of French arms, the aid of French money, and the treachery of English Catholics.

‘From hence,’ he writes in his memoir, ‘it must in all reason be agreed that I must be a perfect madman to appear publicly and not to fly or conceal myself if I were conscious of the least imaginable guilt.’

His protests to the governor of Newgate that it was illegal to detain him on the authority of a warrant which did not name him were unavailing. Without being accused, or brought before a magistrate, he was placed in solitary confinement, and for two months was kept in ignorance of what the charge against him was. At the end of that time, as he relates in his memoir, he was interviewed by ‘three noble lords of parliament,’ who informed him that he was to be indicted for high treason, but that he might save his life by declaring all he knew about the plot.

‘I was amazed,’ he writes, ‘to hear of such a charge against me when my conscience cleared me of all guilt of that nature so much as in thought. I therefore asked of their lordships whether, from the character they had received of me in the world, they believed me to be an honest man? To which it was answered by one of their lordships that their answer to that question of mine was to be distinguishing—namely, that I had so good and unblemished a reputation in the world that if I were to give evidence in any concern of ten or twenty thousand pounds he should value my evidence as highly as any man’s evidence whatsoever. But that in this present case, if I should swear my innocence, or that I knew nothing of the plot or treason with which I was charged, his lordship would not believe one word that I should swear.’

Catholics will recognise here a spirit which is still keenly alive to-day, and there are Protestants who will

still find excuses for the complete absence of logic it reveals.

Though the establishment of Richard Langhorne's innocence does not depend upon the testimony of his own memoir, the directness and simplicity of the account he gives of his imprisonment can leave no doubt of its truth.

His solitary confinement continued until March, 1679, when a friend was allowed to visit him, 'to exhort me,' he says, 'to confess my knowledge of the plot, to represent unto me my danger if I refused, and to give me hopes of a free pardon if I complied therein. In short, he both told me I was to expect no mercy without a discovery made by me of the plot, and that there were two or three express witnesses against me who had been believed already by several juries, and that it was unreasonable in me to expect that other juries would not believe what former juries had believed. He added that the whole people were possessed of a full belief of the plot from the testimony of those witnesses, and of such strange an abhorrence against all of my religion, that whatever could be said against me would be believed by any jury, and whatever I should pretend to give in evidence for my defence would be disbelieved and rejected, though an angel should come from Heaven to confirm it.'

Non-Catholic sources provide ample contemporary evidence to corroborate this description of the public attitude of mind at the time, and to show that educated Protestants who did not believe in the existence of a plot looked cynically on while their Catholic fellow-subjects were falsely accused and executed as participators in the imaginary treason.

Without quoting further from Richard Langhorne's own memoir, we will turn to the report of his trial,

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which took place eight months after he had been thrown into prison, on June 14th, 1679.

He was arraigned before Chief Justice Scroggs, who the day before had tried the five Jesuit martyrs, Blessed Thomas Whitebread, William Waring, Anthony Turner, John Fenwick, and John Gavan, and, of course, upon the false evidence of Titus Oates and his confederate Bedloe, had found them guilty of high treason.

The accusation brought by Oates against Richard Langhorne was that he had received and transmitted to others commissions signed on behalf of the Pope by the General of the Jesuit Order, by which the highest offices in the State were conferred upon Catholics in the event of the success of the conspiracy.

The prisoner had never been formally charged or acquainted with the grounds upon which he was to be tried; he had no counsel, and no means was allowed him of preparing his defence other than what information he could gather from reports of the trials of Mr. Coleman, the Duchess of York's Secretary, and of Blessed William Ireland and Blessed John Greve, who had already suffered martyrdom. He discovered by these that 'the King's Evidence' Oates and Bedloe had already been pronounced by one jury to be 'very ill men'; that Oates had at the trial of Blessed William Ireland contradicted his own statements made at Edward Coleman's trial; that he had alluded to himself (Richard Langhorne) at Coleman's trial, and had stated that he had not seen him since the month of April, 1678.

'He had locked himself up as to a time,' wrote Richard Langhorne in his memoir, 'and could not without perjury charge anything against me as done after that time.'<sup>2</sup>

Father Nicholas Blundell, S.J., who was present in disguise at the trial, in a letter quoted by Foley, describes the continual uproar of the hostile crowd. In the report of the trial we read how Lord Castlemaine came in person to protest that witnesses for the defence were in fear of their lives and dared not appear for the prisoner.

No present-day reader of Oates's general indictment of the Catholic community (which will be found in Vol. VI of *Cobbett's State Trials*) could be deceived for a moment as to the utter incredibility of his story, nor, as has already been said, did prominent contemporaries believe it. Yet a garbled version of the whole hideous page of history is presumably accepted by the majority in this country, since a writer in *The Times* can to this day allude to 'the half truths of which Titus Oates got hold.'

As Richard Langhorne had not been informed in what his treason was supposed to have consisted, his only defence lay in seeking to prove the worthlessness of the testimony brought against him by 'The King's Evidence,' as Oates and his confederate Bedloe were called.

The infamous characters borne by both these criminals can be discovered in the reports of the trials of all the prisoners convicted of complicity in the plot which Oates invented. No written evidence against Langhorne could be produced, although his alleged crime had been the transcribing of treasonable documents, and while he had been for eight months in solitary confinement, his chambers and papers could be ransacked by emissaries of the Government.

A letter from Father Oliva, the General of the Jesuits, conferring an office within the order upon one of the English Fathers, was produced in court, and Bedloe declared it to be in the same handwriting as

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the treasonable letters he had seen in Mr. Langhorne's office.

Such was the evidence upon which Blessed Richard Langhorne was condemned to death for high treason.

Even at that date the true characters of his accusers were well known. Oates, after pretending to be converted to the Catholic Faith and so gaining admission to the Jesuit colleges abroad as a student, had declared himself to be once more a protestant. Only after he had freely contradicted his own statements made at the several trials was he finally dismissed as a worthless witness at the trial of Sir George Wakeman, two days after the execution of Richard Langhorne.

Bedloe was a criminal, newly released from gaol, when the reward of £500 offered to anyone who should discover the murderers of Sir Edmundbury Godfrey attracted him to London. On his first arrival there he stated under cross-examination that he knew nothing of the plot, but subsequently he contrived to 'remember' so much that he became one of the two chief witnesses for the Crown against those falsely accused by Oates. Both men were lavishly paid for their services, granted royal pardons for past crimes, lodged and fed at the expense of the Government, and fêted by the mob, while those whom Oates indicated as conspirators were arbitrarily arrested upon his word alone.

Some of the witnesses for the defence of Richard Langhorne were prevented by mob hostility from obtaining a hearing, but the sixteen youths and men who had been brought from the Jesuit College of St. Omers in Flanders as witnesses for the defence of the five Jesuit fathers were recalled and examined in his case. And when Chief Justice Scroggs summed up he instructed the jury *that if these witnesses could have been believed, their evidence would have proved Oates*



## Half Truths

*to be a perjurer; but because they were Catholics, their word could not be believed.*

Catholic readers of Mr. Keith Feiling's article are left to wonder why the average Englishman is content to accept as a 'half-truth' a lie which the whole truth so easily exposes. How can an historian state that the King 'fought the whole Popish Plot,' while history admits that there was no plot? And perhaps to conclude that it is because, if our protestant fellow countryman acknowledged the whole truth in this instance, logic would confront him with very many questions as to the characters of the men who were responsible for imposing the now established religion upon England and maintaining its form of worship, and the means they used—questions that it would be less easy to answer than it is to paint black grey.

MARGARET BLUNDELL.