

John Ehrman's Summer Reads

John Ehrman has been writing articles and reviewing books and film for Studies in Intelligence since 2000.

Dennis Sewell, ***Cromwell's Spy: From the American Colonies to the English Civil War, the Life of George Downing***. Pegasus, 2026. X + 380 pp. Notes, bibliography, index.

George Downing, says Dennis Sewell, was a “spy, a diplomat and a shameless turncoat,” as well as a “liar, blackmailer, seducer and thief, [a] shapeshifter [who] would betray both friends and principles without a moment’s misgiving.” (1, 7) In other words, the perfect subject for an intelligence biography.

We need to start, however, with a caveat for American readers. While most of us know that Oliver Cromwell and his army deposed and then executed King Charles I of England, few on this side of the Atlantic know the details of the years of civil war that had come before, English religious factions, let alone about Cromwell’s diplomacy, the restoration of Charles II, the Anglo-Dutch Wars, and other events that figure prominently in this book. Sewell, writing for an English audience, assumes that his readers will know the players and events, and so provides only brief explanations of who’s who and what’s going on. You may want to keep Google or a printed reference handy as you read, but that should not discourage you. Even though Downing is offstage for much of the book, Sewell’s descriptions of scheming, battles, and gruesome executions will hold your interest.

George Downing was born in Dublin in 1623 to an English barrister but spent most of his childhood in London. The family were well-connected Puritans (Massachusetts Governor John Winthrops was his uncle) and emigrated to Massachusetts in 1638. There, George went to Harvard, where he was in the class of 1642, the college’s first. He then spent the next several years teaching at Harvard and as a seaborne preacher in England’s Caribbean colonies before returning to England toward the end of 1645.

Upon his arrival, Downing became a chaplain in the New Model Army. The First English Civil War was ending but his connections ensured that Downing soon was moving

in the army’s leadership circles, where he remained in his chaplain role through the Second Civil War (1648). This was a time of education for Downing, when he observed high-level politics at close range; it appears likely, though Sewell cannot say for certain, that this is when Downing came to Cromwell’s attention. In any case, Charles was executed in January 1649 and, sometime in the late summer or fall of that year, Cromwell appointed Downing to be Scoutmaster General, as the chief of military intelligence was called. Downing was sent to Edinburgh—during his time as a chaplain, the army had operated in Scotland or the border areas—where he ran agents and used a system of enciphered letters and accommodation addresses to report on the exiled Charles II’s contacts with his Scottish allies.

The Scots in 1650 proclaimed Charles II to be their king and he returned to Edinburgh. Downing soon made the wise decision to depart and went south, where he linked up with the English army that was advancing on Scotland and continued in his intelligence role on Cromwell’s staff. Downing interrogated prisoners and sent reports back to London, though Sewell says he sometimes slanted or omitted important details to avoid making Cromwell look bad. Downing was not, however, simply a desk-bound officer. He was wounded in the Battle of Dunbar, where the Scots suffered a decisive defeat and after which Cromwell’s army took Edinburgh and laid siege to Edinburgh Castle. Unfortunately for the Scots, the commander of the castle’s manservant was an agent of Downing’s and supplied regular reports on the number of soldiers in the castle, ammunition stocks, and the location of the powder stores. Eventually, the castle surrendered without a fight. (A good thing, too—otherwise today Edinburgh would have one less major tourist attraction.)

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Civil war continued until September 1651, when the English again defeated Charles's Scottish army, this time at Worcester. The Royalist cause collapsed, Charles went off to exile in France and, with the need for spies reduced, Downing turned to additional pursuits. He married a much younger woman from a noble, rich, and connected family and his expanded network brought him into a high position in the new Commonwealth government, dealing with military procurements and various diplomatic issues. Downing also took the opportunity to begin making a fortune of his own. The properties of defeated Royalists were liable for confiscation or, alternatively, the owners could pay to avoid seizure. It was a system riddled with corruption and, Sewell notes, "as an intelligence officer, [Downing] would have been privy to knowledge that could be exploited for personal gain." (214) Even with all this going on, Downing still ran agents in Scotland—small rebellions continued to flare up—though by 1655, things were settled enough for him to be elected a Member of Parliament for Edinburgh.

Downing then moved on to the next phase of his career. In the fall of 1655, Cromwell sent him on a diplomatic mission to the Continent where, among other errands, he exchanged intelligence with Louis XIV's chief minister, Cardinal Mazarin. (The two conversed entirely in Latin, fluency in which Harvard had required in Downing's day but regrettably no longer does.) Downing then went on to Geneva, but Sewell is light on the details. His performance must have been satisfactory, however, as in January 1658 Downing was sent to The Hague as Britain's envoy. Once there, in addition to his overt duties, Downing began monitoring the local English Royalists and building networks to penetrate their organizations and plots.

After Cromwell's death in September 1658, England again fell into political turmoil as various factions competed for power. Downing, who Sewell says by now had "developed a carapace of cynicism," began calculating which side to support. (227) The details are sketchy and inconsistent, but it appears that by early 1660 he had thrown in his lot with Charles II, offering to tell what he knew of plots against him. Whatever the exact case, as Charles in May 1660 prepared to return to London from Holland, he bestowed a knighthood on Downing. "Most of the court was as astonished as the wider public," notes Sewell. (266)

No less astonishing was what came next. Several of Downing's Cromwell-era associates and patrons were

executed as regicides by the new regime, but he managed to get himself appointed as a commissioner on the Council of Trade. In April 1661, Downing was on his way back to The Hague for another turn as ambassador. There, says Sewell, Charles gave Downing "an allowance designated for 'intelligence and other private services'... [to be used] to monitor the 'disaffected' British expats." (275) He soon was hunting fugitive regicides in the Netherlands and oversaw the capture and rendition of several. Charles rewarded Downing with promotion to baronet, £1,000 in cash, and a lease on some land in Westminster. Flexible loyalty clearly had its rewards.

Downing continued this frenetic pace through the 1660s. Even as he continued to serve in Parliament and the Council of Trade, Downing was appointed as a Teller of the Exchequer and, later, Secretary to the Treasury. (Lifetime tenure in multiple appointed positions, which came with lucrative salaries, was not uncommon in this period.) In the latter position he advocated for fiscal reforms to place the government on a more stable financial footing (the job also enabled him to collect fees for himself). Downing also was involved in the planning for the British takeover of New Amsterdam in 1664; Downing Street in lower Manhattan, which today runs between 6th Avenue and Varick St., is named for him. Perhaps most important, Downing remained in his position in The Hague where, during the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-67), he played his customary role of running well-placed agents and collecting and sending to London timely intelligence on Dutch military and political plans. Downing stayed in The Hague after the war ended but resisted Charles's instructions to foment another conflict. When the Third Anglo-Dutch War nonetheless broke out in 1672, Downing fled to England, where an angry Charles had him locked in the Tower of London for six weeks.

Downing's political career was over and he was fabulously rich, but he had one more venture left before his death in 1684. In 1652, he had purchased a property in London near Green Park and, while he had had to wait 30 years for a tenant to die and Charles II to issue a new lease, Downing in 1682 was able to build a street of townhouses on the land. Today, two houses Downing built on the street he named for himself, Nos. 10 and 11, are the residences of the British prime minister and chancellor of the exchequer, respectively.

Cromwell's Spy is an intriguing book, but ultimately unsatisfactory. Downing certainly was an accomplished

intelligence officer who led a varied and eventful life but, as interesting as Sewell's account is, it often is confusing. He omits or buries many details—you need to look in the footnotes, for example, to learn that when Cromwell “put him on the payroll of military intelligence” it means that he was made Scoutmaster General—that make the narrative hard to follow. (83) More important, whether because Downing and others did not leave much of a written record of his activities, or his and other records have been lost, Sewell generally provides only high-level descriptions of Downing's work and its impact. The details that would be of greatest interest to intelligence readers—how did Downing recruit agents and build and run his networks? How was their intelligence communicated, evaluated, and used? What counterintelligence measures did he employ?—simply are not there. While Sewell gives extensive accounts of the wars and politics of Downing's times, his titular subject remains a cipher and the reader gains little sense of Downing the man, or what he thought about his work or what he believed.^a

Sewell ends by addressing the charges of Downing's contemporaries and earlier biographers that he was

“morally heinous, hypocritical, or cynical,” a turncoat who was “understandably excoriated for capturing reigicides and delivering them up for execution.” (310) He was all these things, Sewell acknowledges, but points out that so were a lot of other people in a time of shifting winds and regimes, when one did what one had to do to survive and exploiting high office was a legitimate road to riches. A better defense, however, might be to note that Downing resembles no one so much as Talleyrand, the great French diplomat of the revolutionary, Napoleonic, and Bourbon restoration eras who managed to survive multiple changes of regime (and the scale of whose corruption makes Downing look like a rank amateur). Talleyrand always viewed himself as serving France and its interests, regardless of who was at the top, and Downing may well have seen his actions in the same way.

Cromwell's Spy is a good reminder of the important role that intelligence collection played amid the political, military, and religious turmoil of 17th-century England. As a biography of George Downing, however, it unfortunately falls short and leaves the reader wishing for a much more complete account.



Alex Preston, *A Stranger in Corfu* (Canongate, 2026).

Oliver Harris, *The Shame Archive* (Abacus, 2024).

First it was Mick Herron's *Slow Horses* novels, then Tess Gerritsen's *The Spy Coast* (2023) and Mark Ezra's *A Sting in Her Tale* (2025). We seem to be getting more novels about spies who have retired or been put out to pasture—most of them British, for some reason—than about active spooks.

The latest in this new subgenre is Alex Preston's *A Stranger in Corfu*. It seems that Vidos, a small island just off the larger island of Corfu in the Ionian Sea, is something of a holding pen for MI-6 officers who have been shunted aside, whether for reasons of mental or physical health, internal politics, security problems, or operational failure. Known as “Spyland,” it's a combination retirement home, sanitarium, and prison for those “who because of chance or a single mistake had found their prospects irretrievably scuppered.” As one character

says, the “whole point of this island is that people are put here to be forgotten.”

The story is set in the mid-1990s, though some residents already have been there for decades. The newest arrival is Nina Woolf, who was wounded, captured, and repeatedly raped by the Serbs while she was operating in the former Yugoslavia during the civil wars a few years before. Though she's the daughter of a retired high-ranking MI-6 officer, it is unclear if she has been sent to Vidos to recuperate before returning to London—she sees the resident psychiatrist—or if her sentence is for life.

This being an espionage novel populated by former spies, the past is by no means in the past. Preston uses flashbacks to Oxford immediately after World War II to tell the backstories of several Spyland residents, how they

a. Jonathan Scott, “‘Good Night Amsterdam’. Sir George Downing and Anglo-Dutch Statebuilding,” *English Historical Review*, vol. 118, No. 476 (April 2003): 334-56, provides a good sense of how Downing viewed his work, as well as examples of the small clarifying details that Sewell omits.

are connected to one another, and how they wound up on the island. (Suffice it to say that Kim Philby is heavily involved.) Soon there is a murder, then another. Old plots, betrayals, and deceptions come home to roost and the bodies stack up.

Preston, a British journalist and novelist, is less interested in the nuts and bolts of a good spy story than he is in character exploration and atmospherics. That's actually for the good. Preston's Oxford spy ring doesn't have much credibility—forty-five years on, they're somehow about to take over the British government—even by the standards of espionage fiction. His prose, however, is beautiful and captivating and gives the reader a sense of the loneliness and loss that the exiles on Vidos live with. Nina, moreover, is an admirable character. She's perceptive, self-aware, and resilient; it is she, along with the questions of who's doing the killing and why, who maintains the reader's interest. Alas, despite Nina's best efforts, this is not a story where the good guys win, and the ending is downright depressing.

A Stranger in Corfu is a good espionage novel but not a great one, carried mostly by character insight and the quality of the prose. While it's not the kind of novel you can't put down, you'll likely keep turning the pages. ●

In contrast, *The Shame Archive*, by Oliver Harris, a British writer of crime and espionage novels, is one of those books that grabs you at the start and won't let you put it down.

It seems that MI-6 for decades has been collecting personal papers, phone and email intercepts, and video of hundreds of members of the UK elite—politicians, corporate executives, high-ranking military officers, and even some of its own. It's all stored at Vauxhall under the tightest security imaginable but now, somehow, has started to leak. Marriages and reputations are ruined, the government is collapsing, and suicides and murders are spreading. Elliot Kane, a former MI-6 officer who was involved in collecting the material, races amidst the mayhem to connect the dots and figure out who is behind the campaign.

The Shame Archive is tautly written, if nowhere near as elegantly as *A Stranger in Corfu*. It's a terrific read nonetheless, perfect for a vacation or evenings in a hotel room. As an extra bonus, Harris sprinkles the book with MI-6 terminology and a pretty good description of what it's like to come through the visitor's entrance at Vauxhall. This, along with his descriptions of London and compelling characters, gives the book a realistic sense of place and the stress of an unfolding disaster. ●