

English Mission

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Clandestine methods of the Jesuits in Elizabethan England as illustrated in an operatives own classic account.

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It is generally realized that the Jesuits of the renaissance were adept in the conduct of affairs requiring secrecy. But knowledge of the clandestine methods they used is not general, even among intelligence officers whose experience would give them a special appreciation of the subject. Considerable insight into these methods is offered in a priest's own narrative of his experiences operating underground in Elizabethan England. Written in Latin after his mission was completed, the book was made accessible to modern English readers ten years ago.¹ Its highlights can be quickly summarized.

In early November 1588, John Gerard, S. J., aged 24, acting under the direction of the Rome headquarters of the Society of Jesus, made with three other priests of the Society a clandestine entry into his native country. It was only a few months after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the Queen's security agents were alert for strangers even in remote provinces. Landed near Norfolk in the dark of night, they found that every path they tried led to a farm house where dogs set up an alarm. They had to hide in a clump of trees and wait in the rain for daylight. At dawn each went his own way, according to immemorial usage in such circumstances.

Gerard's story describes, step by step, how he found Catholics to shelter

him and enable him to reach London, where he reported to Fr. Garnet, the Superior on the English Mission, to begin his 18 years of undercover duty in England. Captured in 1594 and imprisoned for four years, he made a famous escape from the Tower of London and successfully resumed his clandestine activity. It was not until the exposure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, which brought down upon the Jesuits the full crushing force of an aroused State and made the extermination of priests seem inevitable, that he was exfiltrated under diplomatic cover in the entourage of the Spanish Ambassador.

Gerard apparently put his story into writing for the guidance and benefit of trainees at a training and staging area in Belgium. Later he became Confessor to the English College in Rome, where he died at the age of 73. A study of his experiences, even at this remove in time, shows the primal and inevitable nature of certain methods required for successful clandestine action. Above all, it shows the ruling power of motivation. To see these fundamentals demonstrated in an unfamiliar cultural context renews one's sense of their force.

Tradecraft

Organization and line of authority in the Society were not complicated. The commanding officer was the General of the Society of Jesus, at Rome. Staff-wise, English affairs were taken care of on behalf of the General by Father Persons, an English Jesuit at headquarters. In the English College at Rome English recruits were trained for duty in their native country. The Superior on the English Mission resided under cover in England and reported directly to the General. Communications were maintained by means of couriers over whom a high degree of control was exercised through religious sanctions.

Although Gerard's book is not in any modern sense a tradecraft manual, it is possible to derive from it a confident sense of how he and his Superior made expert use of the standard paraphernalia of covert action -- cover, aliases, safe houses, secret printing presses, invisible ink.

Gerard, having been brought up a member of the upper class, was able to maintain successfully the cover of a gentleman at leisure. He was the object of the candid envy of other priests because he was familiar with

the technical language of falconry -- a useful resource in idle conversation with laymen. He was a tall, dark man, "very gallant in apparel, and being attended with two men and footboy is exceedingly well horsed." When visiting the sick, he amended his cover to that of a doctor.

The construction of hiding places, or what the security police called "priest holes," became a matter for experts. The skill of these "hides" specialists is shown in the fact that after a raid on a safe house or on a large manor house, followed by a close search lasting over a week, priests sometimes emerged faint and tottering from hideouts concealed between walls, under gables, or beneath fireplaces. An especially skilled carpenter called Little John died mute under torture rather than reveal the whereabouts of the hides he admitted having constructed.

On occasion it became necessary to provide clandestine burials for priests who had died on the English Mission. These were effected at night near a deserted monastery or ruined abbey.

Funds were obtained from the laity. Members of certain great Catholic families poured money into Gerard's coffers; he seems never to have lacked in this regard. He remarks on the expense of the various houses it was necessary for him and his Superior to maintain in London and in the country. He was able to offer annuities to persons in a position to facilitate the accomplishment of his mission: he granted a liberal one to a prison warder who had been of some service to him in the Tower.

Specialists in audiosurveillance and interrogation may note with particular interest the incident of a warder who, feigning friendship for an imprisoned priest, offered to show him how he might talk secretly "through a cleft in the wall" with the priest in an adjoining cell. The place was "purposely so contrived that the sound of their words must needs be carried to another place, not far off, where this keeper would stand and some other with him, to have a double witness in their double hearing."

The Jesuits themselves appear to have made use of counterintelligence deception. After Gerard's escape from the Tower, the Government received a false report that he was about to go to Ireland. "Gerard hath been lately in London, and hath disguised himself with an artificial beard and periwig of a brown color, somewhat dark. His beard is very long, cut after the spade fashion, very even and formal." (When an Elizabethan

spoke of a "very long" beard, he *meant* long, upwards of two feet.)

Prison

Gerard's basic instructions forbade him to meddle in political matters, and he professed loyalty to the Queen and to England. The question of whether a Catholic priest could be loyal to a Protestant government was the subject of much English dialectic, entailing as it did an ambiguity which the State found it increasingly difficult to live with. It was only after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, however, that the ambiguity became intolerable;² at the time of Gerard's arrest in the spring of 1594 the temper was still in some respects relaxed. Moreover, Gerard's connections with those in high places were good

Refusing to disclose any information that would help the authorities in arresting others on the English Mission, he spent three years confined with other priests and Catholic laymen in the Clink, where the guards grew fat on regular bribes. In return for these payments the inmates were allowed facilities for saying mass, hearing confession, and receiving visitors. Needless to say, it was not money alone that made this possible; there was considerable popular feeling in favor of the old church. During this time in the Clink, and later in the Tower itself, Gerard successfully maintained clandestine correspondence with his Superior and others, including the "saintly and martyred widow" who kept his safe house, which was used even during his imprisonment to shelter young recruits for the English College until passage to the Continent could be arranged.

He continued operating thus under relatively slight handicaps until a certain priest who seemed "a little unsteady" and perhaps jealous of "all the people he saw coming to me" turned informer and told the authorities that Gerard received letters in the Clink from Rome and Brussels. "Two of the Queen's pursuivants came without warning to my room with the head warder. Providentially they found no one with me except two boys--I was giving them instructions before sending them abroad." They found nothing but a hair shirt under Gerard's doublet, but he was taken to the Tower of London for safer keeping. His new warder went to the Clink to fetch a mattress from Gerard's friends and returned

with money and instructions to treat him well.

Three days later, however, before the Lords Commissioners,³ when Gerard refused to disclose details relative to his foreign correspondence or the whereabouts of his Superior, a warrant for putting him to torture was produced. The Lords Commissioners begged him not to force them to such a loathsome measure. These formalities over, he was hung from his wrists, his feet dangling, for about 5 hours. This was to be repeated daily until he either confessed or died. The Commissioners left the room after it became apparent he would not speak.

He was eventually helped back to his cell.

On the way we met some prisoners who had the run of the Tower, and I turned to speak to my warder, intending them to overhear.

"What surprises me," I said, "is that the Commissioners want me to say where Father Garnet's house is ... I will never do it, even if I have to die!"

I said this to prevent them spreading a report that I had confessed. I also wanted word to get around through these men that it was chiefly concerning Father Garnet that I had been questioned, so that he might get to hear and look to his own safety. The warder was not pleased at my talking in their hearing.

The message got through to Father Garnet. In a report to the General of the Society, written eight weeks later, Garnet says: "He [Gerard] hath been thrice hanged up by his hands until he was almost dead, and that twice in one day. The cause was for to tell where his Superior was ..."

The authorities did not carry through to the end. Although Gerard was rendered physically helpless for a time, he seems to have largely recovered in the following months.

He resumed his usual cell life, performing the Society's discipline, known as the Spiritual Exercises, and conducting his clandestine correspondence. He explains in some detail that he used orange juice instead of lemon or citron for invisible ink because once orange juice has been brought out with heat it stays out, whereas the other two fade away. Consequently the recipient of a letter written in orange juice will know whether or not it has been read. "If it has been read and contains something that compromises him, he can disown it." As a matter of routine, he never used true names in his letters.

Escape

Gerard's escape from the Tower exhibits good planning, teamwork, and a variety of clandestine techniques. In a small tower nearby there was a Catholic layman, John Arden, who had been in prison for ten years under sentence of death. He walked daily on the roof of his tower and eventually he and Gerard began to communicate by signs. The warder was coaxed and bribed to allow Gerard to visit Arden to say mass. He even sent his wife to get the things necessary for the sacrament from Gerard's assistant, John Lillie, in the city. With mobility thus established, Gerard observed that Arden's tower was quite close to the moat, "and I thought it might be possible for a man to lower himself with a rope from the roof on to the wall beyond the moat." Arden was eager and willing but had no outside help; Gerard had Lillie. He sought the permission of his Superior to make the try, and Father Garnet agreed to it provided the risk of life was not too great.

Then I asked John Lillie and Richard Fulwood (he was attending Father Garnet at the time) whether they were prepared to take the risk, and, if they were, to come on a certain night to the far side of the moat, opposite the squat tower I had described ... They were to bring a rope with them and tie it to a stake; we would be on the roof of the tower and throw them an iron ball attached to a stout thread, the kind used in stitching up bales. They must listen in the darkness for the sound of the ball touching the ground, find the cord and tie it to the free end of the rope.

This done, we would draw up the rope by pulling the other end of the cord which we held in our hands. I told them to pin a piece of white paper or a handkerchief on the front of their jackets, for we wanted to be sure of their identity before throwing the cord. Also, they were to bring a rowing boat so that we could make a quick get-away.

The first attempt aborted because of unwitting intruders on the riverside. On the second attempt, which proceeded as planned, Gerard's physical condition was such that he almost collapsed while clinging to the rope; but it was successful. By daybreak he was with Father Garnet at a safe house in the country. He was careful to make arrangements to protect the illiterate warder of his cell from possible punishment. Although this man had refused a large bribe to let his prisoner walk out, he had for some months been willing to carry letters and to grant what he judged to be harmless favors. In return, Gerard arranged his flight to the house of a friend a hundred miles from London and gave him an annuity of 200 florins a year, which enabled him to live comfortably with his family.

Gerard had eight more years of undercover work in England. He was particularly successful with the old established families in the conservative counties. His physical endowment and social position, combined with his undoubted abilities and the aura of special interest arising from the perils he had endured and still faced, gave him an almost hypnotic influence over certain men and women and insured for his Society a ready source of shelter, hospitality, and money. In the course of his mission he sent at least 30 recruits to the Continent.

He was the only one to survive of the four priests who landed together in 1588. Two were executed in Fleet Street three years later; the third was active for a number of years before he gained, to use the language of the time, the crown of martyrdom. The Superior was executed in the aftermath of the Powder Plot, along with many others with whom he had worked.

Motivation

The purposes of a clandestine mission are basic to the motivation of its agents. For the Jesuits martyrdom was a glory, and their motivation was rooted in acceptance of this end. Although the ultimate aim of the English Mission, to return Canterbury to Rome, was not achieved, its operatives were regarded as accomplishing the mission when they were able to perform rites for those who otherwise would have been deprived of them, to make converts, to send recruits to the College, and above all to suffer martyrdom. A lay intelligence service must make do with a motivation less absolute than that afforded by religion. If the cogency of its purposes declines or the achievement of its avowed end becomes remote, it risks making the means the end. Then operations tend to be admired as demonstrations of technique, professionalism may become a fetish, and the mere apparatus of intelligence proliferates as results lose definition. The maintenance of an inspired service depends on the maintenance of an inspired policy for it to serve. In this sense, we get the motivation we deserve.

1 John Gerard, *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, translated from the Latin by Philip Caraman. (Longmans, Green and Co., 1951.)

2 The atmosphere created by uncertainty as to what was treasonable is indicated in a passage from John Donne, who had a Catholic background and delayed for years his commitment to the Church of England. Donne is calling down a curse upon an enemy:

"May he dream of treason, and think to do it, and confess, and die.
And no record tell why."

3 Edward Coke and Francis Bacon were among them.

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