Gilbert Burnet's Politics

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In July, 1663, Archibald Johnston of Wariston was hanged at the market cross of Edinburgh, officially for the ‘high treason’ of accepting office in Cromwell’s government. Although many people in Scotland had held similar positions, and assisted Cromwell in other ways, only three were executed. (The others were the Earl of Argyle, and Wariston’s friend James Guthrie, a minister.) Wariston’s real crime was to have spearheaded the Scottish revolt against Charles I in the late 1630s, which began with bitter opposition to Charles’ plans to make the Presbyterian Scottish church more like the English one, and more amenable to his wishes. Wariston was co-composer of the Scottish Covenant which challenged the King’s authority, and Clerk of the unofficial parliamentary committee (made up of noblemen, lairds, merchants and ministers) which had subscribed the Covenant. When the King’s decrees on the Kirk were read out by a herald at Edinburgh’s market cross, in the traditional manner, supporters of the Covenant would oblige the herald to stay while Wariston read out a ‘Protestation’ asking for remedy of grievances and a ‘free [Kirk] Assembly and Parliament’. In insisting on the execution and quartering of this arch-Covenanter (his head was stuck on the Netherbow Port, beside James Guthrie’s) Charles II may have been motivated partly by personal resentment - though Wariston had no significant part in Charles I’s death - but was also eliminating a symbol of resistance to the King’s authority.

The clergyman who attended Wariston on the scaffold was his young nephew, Gilbert Burnet (1643-1714),

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later famous as historian, political and ecclesiastical theorist, and general man of letters. Burnet was present as a family duty and not because he sympathized with Wariston’s opinions; indeed, he was soon to become well known as a spokesman for the government and against the Presbyterians - of whom the most extreme were the Covenanters. His *Dialogues* (1669), *Vindication of ... the [Episcopalian] church and state of Scotland* (1673), and various sermons such as those on ‘Subjection for Conscience Sake Asserted’ and ‘The Royal Martyr Lamented’ (1674-75) preach acceptance of Episcopalianism (which Charles II had made the established Church of Scotland) and complete obedience to the King and his ministers. After this, his political opinions are rather less straightforward and evident, but as late as 30 Jan 1681, the anniversary of Charles I’s execution, his sermon on the occasion expresses his Royalism in fulsome terms. Yet in 1687 Burnet was, like his uncle, charged with High Treason for resisting Royal authority, and avoided the same fate only by escaping to Holland and not making his uncle’s mistake of crossing into France where he could be captured. He then rebelled against James II as Wariston had against James’ father, joined William of Orange’s invasion, and wrote polemic on William’s behalf, arguing that tyrants - as Burnet now classified King James - should be resisted and deposed. The young spokesman for non-resistance to the King had metamorphosed into a middle-aged revolutionary, not unlike his uncle.

Burnet is, then, interesting because he had an exciting life, and unusual in the change in his opinions - most people become more conservative as they age. And yet, paradoxically, he is also something of a seismograph of the times. His change from government spokesman to revolutionary is extreme and untypical, but he does represent the majority of the governing classes in that he welcomed both the accession of Charles II and the deposition of James II, and changed his views on what the King’s powers should be. He was able to articulate these views - he published about two hundred books and pamphlets - and was prepared to
write what others would only express in private conversation. He was an independent thinker, if not a very original one, and this paper begins by arguing that his change of views is understandable and, with some reservations, fairly consistent: the seeds of his later position are discernable even in his tracts against resistance to the King. However, the change from Royalist to Revolutionary is still a drastic one, and the paper goes on to consider why it happened: what so weakened Burnet’s loyalty to the establishment and strengthened his doubts about arbitrary power.

The dramatic change in Burnet’s political views has not received much attention, partly because his Scottish and English careers tend to be examined by different historians. Scottish historians are not much concerned with his career after he moved south in 1674, and English historians are often unaware of his Scottish background: an expert on late seventeenth-century England, Evelyn Cruikshanks, thinks that he was a former Presbyterian. Burnet’s biographer, Foxcroft, has of course to note his conversion to revolutionary, and she stresses ‘the very radical nature of the change in his views, and the very late period in life at which it occurred’; indeed, she appears to date it to 1686-87 (Supplement, p. 515). But she does not explain why it happened. This view - of a late, sudden, partly inexplicable change in Burnet’s political beliefs - seems to persist. Clare Jackman’s Restoration Scotland (2003) merely notes that Burnet originally preached that resistance to the King was never justified, and that Parliament had no power independent of the King (pp. 62, 86); but that later, as William of Orange’s propagandist, he had come to agree with the extreme Covenanters that Kings could be overthrown (p. 160). Two historians do qualify this view. In his entry on Burnet in the DNB, Martin Greig says that ‘the transformation that occurred [in Burnet’s political ideas] was not as sudden, or even as drastic, as has previously been thought’, but lacks space to say much more about the issue. He seems to date the beginning of the change from about 1677. Colin Kidd refers briefly to Burnet as exploring the middle ground
in his early Dialogues, which suggests that his views may have been relatively moderate, but does not elaborate.\(^3\) Burnet’s early ideas have not been examined in any detail, except as cannon-fodder by his enemies.

Burnet was one of six clergymen sent to the staunchly Presbyterian south-west to preach conformity to the Episcopalian Church. To assist in this effort, he published *A Modest and Free Conference betwixt a Conformist and Non-Conformist, about the present distempers of Scotland, in six Dialogues* (1669), which presented the case for conformity to the Episcopalian Church as the official (and only) Church of Scotland. A second edition followed soon after, with a seventh dialogue, and the work was generally known as ‘Burnet’s Dialogues’. It was, of course, almost bound to be unpopular with most Presbyterians, but it should also be admitted that the *Dialogues* are less persuasive than Burnet intended. Perhaps predictably, Conformist does most of the talking, and dismisses Non-Conformist’s arguments in a peremptory way. His tone becomes condescending: ‘this [what you are saying] is like all weak people, to censure what is above them, and they do not understand’ (p. 69). He sounds like Worldly Wiseman in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The basic assumptions are non-democratic and thus anti-Presbyterian: most people should have nothing to do with government, and simply obey laws and edicts.

The second edition does include a more defensive seventh dialogue, where Non-Conformist is allowed to argue that resisting authority is not always wrong by using the examples of various Protestant revolts against Catholics - awkward for Burnet’s case. However, his next major work justifying the establishment, *Vindication of the authority, constitution and laws of the church and state in Scotland* (1673) is decidedly aggressive. This is partly because he is reacting to a reply to the *Dialogues* which enraged him: he says in the Introduction to *Vindication* that his opponent, Robert McWard, is ‘belching up gall and wormwood upon every occasion’. (Burnet takes criticism rather badly: McWard’s book is undoubtedly long-winded and pedantic
but, at least by the standards of seventeenth-century polemic, not particularly stringent in tone.) Burnet’s reply is also long, four dialogues in 362 pages, and rather repetitive. The latter three dialogues cover questions similar to the first one: *can* the King be justifiably resisted, on religious grounds or any other? There are now five speakers who argue that he can not: a ‘moderate man’, an Episcopalian, a Monarchist, a scriptural authority, and a historian. They gang up on Isotimus, the Presbyterian, who is allowed only short, occasional statements.

The reader is probably meant to register the core part of ‘Isotimus’ as ‘sot’, in Burnet’s period usually meaning a blockhead rather than a drunkard. The position of the five anti-Presbyterians, who think alike and obviously state the views that Burnet wishes to propound, is somewhat to the right of Hobbes. Self-defence is not a law of nature and does not, for example, extend to slaves, who may be killed by their owner (p. 15). The powers of a magistrate, meaning a government official who draws his authority from the King, has normally, throughout history, been considered ‘sacred and divine’ (p. 11). It follows that the King himself rules by divine right and should never be opposed. Some of Burnet’s sermons of this period make the same points, and the titles already mentioned are self-descriptive. ‘Subjection for Conscience-sake Asserted’ does indeed have the theme that obeying the King’s magistrates is a matter of religious conscience as well as civil duty, for the King’s powers derive from God. ‘The Royal Martyr Lamented’ is as much an encomium as it sounds, with Charles I described as ‘the Lord’s anointed’ and compared throughout to the biblical Saul, much to the King’s advantage. After 1674, Burnet’s political writings are more varied and less specifically Royalist, although the strain of panegyric on Charles I continues. His 1681 sermon on the day of ‘King Charles the Martyr’ is in the same reverend tones as before. And even a vehement anti-Catholic sermon which he gave on 5 Nov 1684 ends with an exhortation not to go out of the way of ‘Patience and Submission, of Obedience’.
Burnet’s political views changed dramatically and, at least on first impressions, suddenly. By early 1687 he is arguing that resistance to bad Kings is indeed justifiable, and in fact a duty, and he becomes one of the main polemists for William of Orange and against James II. His new position first appears explicitly in three pamphlets published in early 1687, *Reasons against Repealing the Test*, *Some Reflections on the Toleration in Scotland*, and *On the King’s Declaration for Liberty of Conscience*. (The contexts are rather complicated and the titles confusing. Briefly, James claimed that he was introducing greater toleration, and his opponents that he was paving the way for tyranny.) The first pamphlet is perhaps most notable for the change of tone in referring to the King, which has become sarcastic: ‘instead of making himself a Terrour to all his Neighbours, he is contented with the humble Glory of being a Terrour to his own People’ (p. 2). It continues by arguing that James is arbitrarily changing laws, and oppressing his subjects. James, tyranny, bloodshed, and Catholicism are represented as closely linked, and there are references to the Gunpowder plot, massacres of Protestants in Ireland, and the persecutions of Louis XIV.

The pamphlet on Scotland is an even more direct and comprehensive attack on James’ good faith and policies, including his ‘conversions by Dragoons’. It argues that the King aims at absolute power, which will over-ride all laws, and even any promises that the King himself has made, and gives examples from James previous behaviour (pp. 14-16, 23). There is much sarcasm on what the King actually means by his phrase ‘Christian love and charity’. *On the King’s Declaration* goes into more detail on James’ track record of, according to Burnet, breaking promises and taking away his people’s property, liberties, and lives. As in the other two tracts, Catholicism is attacked as inherently aggressive, dedicated to converting or destroying Protestants. Burnet’s new political theory is explained more fully in *Enquiry into Measures of Submission to the Supream Authority*, published a year later after Burnet had twice been
summoned to answer charges of High Treason. Kings ‘have no immediate warrants from Heaven’ (p. 4) and they cannot make or break laws without Parliament’s consent (pp. 3,6). Moreover, self preservation has become a duty, and so has defence of the ‘foundations’ of the country’s constitution, that secure the subjects’ liberty and property. Kings who subvert these by ignoring laws and making a free Parliament impossible should be deposed. The one-time spokesman for total obedience to government now spoke for the Revolution, and was soon to sail with William of Orange.

One might argue that Burnet was simply writing what would advance his career: to gain the favour of King Charles and James, he supported their authority in effusive terms; and when he had irretrievably fallen out of favour with James II, he looked to William of Orange for advancement - or even survival - and changed his political writings accordingly. This view of Burnet was, not surprisingly, frequently expressed at the time, both by Scottish Presbyterians and English Tories. Yet even a brief consideration of Burnet’s career shows that he was not merely a time-server. As a junior clergyman, his dedication to Episcopalianism did not prevent him from circulating a ‘Memorial’ heavily critical of the Scottish Bishops’ extravagance and neglect of pastoral duties. Because he was not sufficiently a yes-man, he fell out with Archbishop Sharp, head of the (official and Episcopalian) Scottish Church, later with the Duke of Lauderdale, controller of Scotland for two decades after the Restoration, and then with Charles II and James, Duke of York, and even with William III. He lost favour permanently with Charles II after writing him a letter advising moral reformation of his personal life (January 1679) - an impolitic move even with Charles. His final split with the King and Duke was caused by his connection with Lord Russell, executed as a traitor in June 1683. His pamphlets attacking James prompted the first citation against him for treason, on 19 April 1687. Burnet’s change in views brought about Charles’ and James’ hostility to him, and not vice versa.
An even more sweeping charge against Burnet, based on the later *History of His Own Times*, is that he is such a congenital liar that no consistency can be expected in his writings. The marginal notes of two contemporaries are to this effect: ‘the most partial, malicious heap of scandal and misrepresentation, that was ever collected’ says the (first) Earl of Dartmouth at the conclusion of the *History*, and Swift’s comments are even more negative. Another younger contemporary, John Cockburn, concluded that the book was ‘little else than a Collection of common Calumnies and Reports, which Experience showeth to be generally false’. And half a century later, Sir John Dalrymple proclaimed: ‘I have never tried Burnet’s facts by the tests of dates, and of original papers, without finding them wrong’. It is true that Burnet can be careless about details, yet none of his critics really substantiate their judgments of falsehood, though Dartmouth writes many notes through six volumes, Cockburn a lengthy pamphlet, and Dalrymple a long history which overlaps Burnet’s.

What they really seem to object to are Burnet’s opinions and glosses. The three contemporaries were Tories, who strongly resented a Scots revolutionary becoming an Anglican bishop. To criticize the clergy shows ‘Imprudence and Indiscretion’ says Cockburn (an Episcopal royalist) and Dartmouth complains that Burnet fails to recognize Charles II’s ‘great perfections and good qualities’. Dalrymple says that Burnet lied in saying that James II was too anxious to save himself at the expense of others in a shipwreck in 1682. Yet other accounts, including one by Dartmouth whose father had prevented many people from boarding James’ boat, do not really contradict Burnet, but only interpret James’ actions more favourably. This seems to be the general pattern in complaints about Burnet’s veracity. Routh (a later Tory) objects that the ‘reconciliation of Charles [II] to the church of Rome’ came at the end of his life, in contradiction to Burnet’s assertion that it was much earlier, but this depends on what one means by ‘reconciliation’. It is also worth noting that not all contemporary Tories dismissed the
History as false. ‘Damn him’, Atterbury is reported to have said, ‘he has told a great deal of truth’.9 And most later commentators, as different as Johnson and Macaulay, have judged Burnet to be honest, if often prejudiced.

Burnet denied that his later position as a revolutionary was incompatible with his earlier one of non-resistance, arguing that for all precepts and oaths there are tacit reservations: we believe that a child should always obey its father, but not if the father has gone mad and is trying to kill the child: so with the King and his subjects. (See, for example, Enquiry into the Measures, pp. 9-10). This argument has some force, although in Burnet’s earlier statements, where the King is described as ‘sacred and divine’, it is not evident that resistance to him could ever be justified. Yet it is true that, even in the Dialogues and Vindication of the Church and State of Scotland, the possibility of resistance is not entirely ruled out. Principally, Burnet does allow the opponent-figure in his dialogues to ask some questions that effectively challenge the view he is expounding. As previously noted, in the seventh ‘Dialogue’ Non-conformist is allowed to raise the issue of Protestant revolts against Catholic authorities, and to give various examples. Conformist’s reply, mainly that such revolts were not against the King but the Church, is not very convincing. In the Vindication Isotimus the Presbyterian also asks many awkward questions. The Scottish King takes a Coronation oath, where he swears to follow the existing laws (p.149f): so has not the King committed himself to ruling by law, and also does not this oath, apparently made to the people of Scotland, imply that his power is conditional on their acceptance of him? Isotimus’ opponents have answers, of course, mainly on the lines that the ceremony is recent and the King only participates as a courtesy to his people, but important arguments have been raised against the King’s having absolute power. And, most crucial of the philosophical arguments, should obviously immoral commands be obeyed (pp. 212f)? The answers in favour of obedience are, again, rather strained. Thus various exceptions to Burnet’s position
surface in the debates, and are not entirely disposed of; this gives some credence to the later claim that his creed of non-resistance to the King was never unqualified.

And, at least with hindsight, there are marked changes in Burnet’s basic political opinions at least from his vehemently anti-Catholic pamphlets in late 1678. Admittedly, he was anti-Catholic long before his other political views changed. *The Mystery of Iniquity*, published in the same year as his *Vindication*, concludes that ‘no man to whom his salvation and welfare is dear, can, or ought to join himself to that Idolatrous and Antichristian Church’ (p. 165) - strong language. But nearly all the specific topics are ecclesiastical, such as the roles of images and saints, and there is little sense of Catholicism as a political force. This is also true of his account of a debate with several Catholic priests, *Relation of a conference held about Religion* (1676). The difference in the pamphlets of late 1678 is that he now sees Catholics as an immediate political threat, set to establish ‘popery’ and ‘tyranny’ by any possible means. The *Letter written upon the Discovery of the Late Plot* argues from history that they are greedy, cruel, and unscrupulous, and *The Unreasonableness and Impiety of Popery* continues this attack: they are agents of a foreign power and always potential terrorists. The *Relation of the Barbarous and Bloody Massacre ...by the Papists in the Year 1572* is a chilling account of treachery and bloodshed, and it is suggested that much the same may happen in England, a century later. James, heir to the throne, was an acknowledged Catholic: and there was always a fine line between attacking Catholicism in general and James as a Prince. The line disappears if one asserts, as Burnet now does, that all Catholics - presumably even Princes - are dedicated to overthrowing Protestantism and unscrupulous about how they achieve this. And even the avowedly Royalist sermons of the early 1680s are strongly undercut by anti-Catholic reservations. The 1681 sermon on ‘King Charles the Martyr’ does indeed lament that King in effusive language, but the bulk of the sermon is at attack on Catholic aggression and casuistry. His last sermon as
Chaplin of the Rolls, 5 Nov 84, ends with the exordium to ‘Patience and Submission’ already noted, but the short conclusion recommending submission - presumably to the King - hardly balances out the warnings in the body of the text, on the evil and danger of Catholicism. Burnet could claim that he was not advocating armed resistance to the King, but he was coming close.

Why the change? Andrew Marvell’s pamphlets, which appeared early in 1678, no doubt provide part of the answer. *Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* alleges that Charles II had a secret alliance with France, and was willing to accept a French conquest of the Netherlands in order to set up an absolute (or ‘arbitrary’) government in England, in the style of Louis XIV’s in France, which would involve forcible conversion to Catholicism. Its account of how Charles and his ‘conspirators’ were circumventing the English Parliament (Marvell was an MP) and serving Louis is detailed and plausible. *Seasonable Argument: a list of the principal labourers in the great design of popery and arbitrary power* lists all the MPs who accepted money from the government, and might be assumed bought by Charles and James. These pamphlets were very influential, as shown by the government’s vehement efforts at censure, and would certainly make Burnet - like many others - more suspicious of the King and Duke’s attempts to increase their power. But the timing of his urgently anti-Catholic pamphlets suggests that the immediate spur was the ‘Popish Plot’, which surfaced in the fall of 1678, and convinced many contemporaries - however unreasonably - that Catholics were now an immediate danger to British liberties.

A brief summary of the Plot may be useful here.10 In September Titus Oates produced a very detailed statement of a plot by Jesuits to assassinate the King and replace him with his brother James, now an overt Catholic. Contemporaries seem to have given the accusations much more credence after the magistrate who had first heard Oates’ deposition, Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, was murdered in mid October; presumably they feared that a wholesale
murder of notable Protestants was beginning. Another witness, Bedloe, came forward and supported much of Oates’ story. Three trials for treason, of Staley, Coleman, and Ireland and two associates, followed between 20 November and 17 December, with all the accused being convicted and executed. More executions followed, most notably of three men for murdering Godfrey in February 1679, five Jesuits in June 1679, and Lord Stafford in November 1680. Some other witnesses had appeared to substantiate Oates’ allegations. However the prosecution case did unravel in the trial of Dr. Wakeman, the Queen’s doctor, and three Benedictines, in July 1679. As at Ireland’s trial, it consisted essentially of the evidence of Oates and Bedloe; but this time the judge indicated the weaknesses in their testimony, and acknowledged the strength of Wakemen’s counter witnesses and arguments, and the jury did not convict. That summer many were executed essentially for being priests; but after this, the persecution slackened, and the execution of Stafford is a surprisingly late coda.

Burnet’s three anti-Catholic pamphlets came out by December, 1678 and the fears they express - of a widespread, well developed, and probably bloody plot to impose Catholicism in England - are understandable at that period. Godfrey was an important magistrate, and linked to both Oates and Coleman, and his murder must have seemed at first a confirmation of Oates’s stories of plots to assassinate Protestants. Then strong evidence appeared which supported Marvell’s account of a plan to establish Catholicism and tyranny. Coleman’s letters showed that he was indeed plotting to weaken Parliament and revive Catholicism (though certainly not to assassinate the King) by using money provided by the French for bribery. In November it was discovered that many Catholics had been given commissions in the army. (The King’s claim that they were just about to be sent abroad was not reassuring, as part of Marvell’s case was that the English army was being sent to support France). In December the former ambassador to France, Montagu, revealed letters showing that Charles II’s
chief minister had been soliciting money from France, apparently to make the King independent of Parliament.

Staley and Coleman, the first Catholics to be executed, were unlucky and unjustly treated; but they were apparently guilty as charged and, by seventeenth-century standards, guilty of treason. However the trials that followed were very different. The two witnesses against Ireland and his co-accused were evidently of bad character - indeed Oates had earlier been charged with perjury, though this point was suppressed. Ireland was not allowed to bring witnesses to show that Oates was not even in the country in April 1678, when he claimed to have observed the plotting. Yet Ireland did produce four witnesses to swear that he had been far away from London throughout August, when he was supposed to have been involved in the assassination Plot. He and the others were nevertheless convicted. In February, the trial of the three men for the murder of Godfrey (seen at the time as part of the Popish Plot) followed a similar course. There was a third prosecution witness, Prance, but he was testifying to save his own life, and his ‘confession’ had been exacted under what amounted to torture. Again, the accused had strong evidence in their defence, including at least one convincing alibi. It is hard to see how anyone could support the convictions except unscrupulously - for political gain - or because of rooted anti-Catholic prejudice.

Yet Burnet’s reactions were mixed. He was not entirely carried away by anti-Catholic bias, even in the first three tracts. Indeed he tried to save the first victim of the plot, William Staley, executed for declaring in public that the King was a great heretic and he could kill him himself. Burnet knew something of one of the witnesses against Staley and deponed that he was untrustworthy. (Staley was probably guilty as charged, but Burnet presumably objected to executing a man for some drunken, essentially meaningless words.) Moreover the King, who never believed in the assassination Plot, approached Burnet in December and had several conferences with him, apparently because Burnet was known to be
sceptical about the reality of the charges. And the account of
the Plot in Burnet’s *History of his Own Time* (written in the
late 80s though afterwards revised) suggests that Oates and
Bedloe’s testimony was worthless, and states Burnet’s
opinion, at the time of Ireland’s trial, that ‘the greatest part
of the evidence was a contrivance’ (p. 179).

Yet in March 1679 Burnet published a commentary on
the Jesuits’ ‘casuistry’, which here means false swearing. This
is less anti-Catholic - Burnet notes that most Catholic priests
strongly disapprove of the practice - but very anti-Jesuit, and
thus throws doubt on Ireland’s claim of innocence. (The trial
of the five Jesuits came later, in June.) And he seems to
have continued to believe in a Catholic Plot to assassinate
Protestants. In *History of the Rights of Princes* (1682) he
claims that Catholics have been well treated in England ‘till
within these three years, that their restless practices have
provoked the Nation to execute, and that but very moder-
ately, the old Laws against them’ (p. 99). This is perhaps
untypical of Burnet, and also vague, but does sound like
support for the verdicts. Remarkably, he even appears to
defend two of the convictions in the Godfrey case, perhaps
the most improbable of all and the first to be formally
reversed. According to Burnet himself, writing a decade
later in *History of His Own Times*, the main prosecution
witness, Prance, was kept in irons and acute cold till he was
almost dead, and recanted his testimony twice before he
finally agreed to testify in court. Burnet says, however, that
the clergyman William Lloyd (later one of the seven bishops
who defied James II) visited Prance and concluded that his
testimony was substantially true except that one of the men
executed (Berry) may have been mistakenly identified (II,
pp.187-88); and Burnet leaves the impression that he agrees.12

The Popish Plot seems to have affected in Burnet two
ways, though these often interact. The first is a gut reaction
of fear, sparked by the murder of his acquaintance Godfrey.
Intellectually, he apparently accepted that at least most of
the Jesuits who were executed were innocent, that they were
not planning to kill the King or anyone else. Emotionally,
his dislike and fear of the Jesuits increased, and they are the main villains in his later writing: spies for the French King, willing assassins and ‘the Pests of humane society’. Occasional comments, like the ones just quoted, imply that the Jesuits were, after all, guilty as charged, and his settled opinion seems to be that Godfrey’s true killers were found. On this view, the murder was planned by a priest, a mysterious Fr. Gerald. The other legacy of the plot is more rational. Coleman’s letters, and those Montagu revealed in December 1678, showed that Englishmen were indeed accepting money from France to help the King neutralize Parliament, and perhaps impose Catholicism. In the History of His Own Time Burnet says, not unreasonably, that the false accusations of planning to assassinate the King had obscured what was ‘certainly true … that the whole party had been contriving a change of religion by a foreign assistance’ (II, pp. 224-25) - French or Irish armies. It was the King himself who was prepared to invite foreign armies to invade Britain, and James was likely to proceed more directly and vigorously. So Burnet’s fears of plots and French and Irish invaders became focussed, even more specifically, on the King and heir apparent.

In the Rye House Plots of 1683, the executions fell on Protestants, supporters of the Parliamentary opposition to Charles. A group of six discussed how to oppose the King; and went at least as far as consulting in detail with some Scots (including Burnet’s cousin Robert Baillie of Jerviswood) who were planning an armed rebellion. (This eventually took shape as Argyll’s rising of 1685.) Another group considered assassinating the King, and Rye House was mentioned as a suitable place. There was overlap between the two plots, notably through Lord Howard, one of the Six, who turned King’s evidence against the others - Monmouth, Russell, Essex, John Hamden, and Algernon Sidney. There is some doubt as to how far those convicted were involved in a full-fledged plot (either of rebellion or assassination) and how far they were only speculating about one. Sidney was executed essentially on Howard’s
testimony - not a great deal better than Oates’ - and on his 
private writings, which justified rebellion against a bad king. 
Yet, whatever discounts one makes, the Rye House Plot was 
far more real than the Popish one. Even from Burnet’s 
account, it seems clear that the Six were planning to support 
a rebellion by the Scots.

But although he must soon have realized that this set 
of charges against Russell was justified, Burnet’s reaction 
was very different from what it had been five years earlier. 
He did not fear assassination by the Scots or Whigs, as he 
did by Catholics; and this time he was associated with 
several of the accused, notably Baillie and Russell, and 
viewed Russell as an inspirational martyr. 14 He says that 
he did not agree with the Six that the King had so far 
abandoned his part of the social contract with his subjects 
that armed resistance was now justifiable: ‘I always said 
that when the root of the constitution was struck at to be 
overturned, then I thought subjects might defend them-

But Burnet’s position was now dangerous. He had 
displeased the King and Duke in the past: he claims that the 
Duke especially hated him because he believed that Burnet 
had been encouraging Coleman and others to implicate the
Duke in the Popish Plot. Then Essex committed suicide in the tower, making Russell’s own conviction almost certain. Burnet was on friendly terms with many of those arrested and might quite easily have been accused of participating in their councils. He then wrote a letter, to a contact at court, to be shown to either the King’s minister Halifax or the King himself, where he presented himself as an obedient subject. His biographer describes this as a ‘grovelling appeal’ which reveals ‘moral collapse’ (Foxcroft, p. 193). Yet the language is not at all unusual for a seventeenth-century suppliant, and Foxcroft overlooks the one clear statement of intent that Burnet makes, which is defiant: ‘yet if my lord Russell calls for my attendance now [on the scaffold] I cannot decline it’. He did attend Russell to the scaffold, helped frame his last letter of justification, and kept a journal of Russell’s last days which presents him as a martyr. Burnet’s break with the King and Duke was now irreversible.

He left England in May 1685 to prevent arrest, and the accounts of his travels in Some Letters … Switzerland, Germany etc. and two supplements suggest that what he saw merely increased his disapproval of autocratic rulers and Catholicism. (His perceptions were not, of course, unbiased.) He describes the people of France as poor and oppressed, and the Protestants there as badly persecuted. Their situation became worse when, in October 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had given them at least nominal protection. This was an alarming precedent for the United Kingdoms, ruled by a zealous Catholic who was Louis’ kinsman. On the other hand, the Protestant Swiss states are described as prosperous and well-run. The bad condition of Italy, and especially the Pope’s territories, suggests that the misgovernment is to be associated with Catholicism rather than the French king personally. The Papal dominions are particularly miserable - even Catholic priests say that there is ‘more oppression and cruelty’ there than in Turkey (p. 191) - and Apulia, almost half controlled by the Jesuits, is not much better, with many starving even as corn is exported (p. 196). In a further visit to the
south of France, he comments again on the persecution of Protestants, but says that the French king’s personal traits are less to blame for this than his religion (pp. 226-269). He reached Holland in late May 1686 and praises its resistance to the French (‘Something there was in all this that was Divine’ p. 267) and the present regime. He ends with a panegyric on the Prince of Orange: ‘I dare not trust my self too long, to the heat that so Noble an Object inspires, therefore I break off abruptly’ (p. 269). There was little doubt as to who was to become Britain’s saviour, and Burnet’s conversion from non-resistance was complete. By early 1687 (as noted earlier in this paper) he was writing vehement polemical pamphlets inciting resistance to James and acceptance of William’s invasion. (Whatever the justice of Burnet’s case, both his travel writing and left-wing polemic are very readable. His conversion was of some service to literature.)

Burnet’s change of views is, then, apparently extreme but still explicable. Even in his early days, when he appeared totally committed to obedience to the King, he had a vein of scepticism. And, at least after experiencing the criticisms of his first six Dialogues, he was fairly open-minded, prepared to consider objections to his political position as he does in the seventh ‘Dialogue’. He later claimed that his fundamental opinions had not changed and, as has been argued here, this is at least partly true. But he might have added that he had learned a great deal from the experiences of nearly thirty years close to the sources of power, in Scotland and then in London: as he became more doubtful about the King’s motives, he gave more weight to his reservations about total obedience. Another factor in Burnet’s later opposition to the King and Duke was his basic prejudice against Catholicism, though here it is hard to distinguish cause from effect. No doubt anti-Catholicism encouraged his distrust of the Royal brothers in the first place, but then he became more hostile to Catholics because of the revelations that some were secretly involved in the King’s schemes to get French help and ultimately increase
his powers: much of this was sketched out by Marvell and confirmed by Coleman’s papers and Montagu’s revelations. And his largely irrational fears about Jesuits, aroused by the Popish Plot, never completely subsided. The Rye House Plot, which really was aimed at unseating the King and Duke, probably had less effect on Burnet’s political views. (It does show that strong opposition to the King was becoming more widespread, as the plotters were a fairly varied group.) However, he did associate himself with the accused, and the treatment they received certainly increased his opposition to the King’s policies. Finally, his experiences on the continent, particularly in France, reinforced his opposition to the idea of the British King modelling himself on Louis XIV.17

Many others changed their opinions of the Stuart Kings for similar reasons, and perhaps influenced by Burnet’s many writings: his anti-Catholic tracts; his popular travel books on France, republican Switzerland, and Italy; and his pamphlet attacks on James II’s ‘tyranny’. His Enquiry into the measures of submission to the Supreme Authority probably expresses a consensus view that had developed by 1688, that the King’s powers should be limited. Yet Burnet remains very unusual in that he changed his political stance so drastically, from government spokesman to revolutionary. One might argue that his conversion is less surprising in that he was reverting to a family tradition, exemplified by Johnston of Wariston and Baillie of Jarviswood. On the other hand, he might well have seen his kinsmen’s fates as warnings, especially when James II came to view Burnet much as his father had Wariston, as a symbol of the resistance to him: in his belated offer of amnesty, Burnet was one of only thirteen exceptions. However, as Burnet is said to have replied to James when charged with treason, ‘threatened men live long’18 - meaning that it would take more than threats to kill him - and he did, unlike Wariston, avoid capture. Indeed, he became a bishop, outlived James, and continued to propagate his opinions.
Notes

1 The titles of the printed versions of these ‘protestations’ explain their nature. That of 28 June 1638 is: The Protestation of the Noblemen, Barrons, Gentlemen, Borrowes, Ministers, and Commons, Subscribers Of The Confession of Faith and Covenant, Lately Renewed Within The Kingdome of Scotland, Made at The Mercate Crosse of Edinburgh. Others followed.

2 Cruikshanks, p. 72. Tim Harris can also be rather shaky on the Scottish context; for example, he refers to ‘the Earl of Wariston’ (Restoration, p. 111). And unawareness of Burnet’s background is not confined to historians of England. How the Scots Invented the Modern World - admittedly a popular work based on secondary sources - refers to him as English.

3 Kidd, pp. 149-50.

4 The former continued to resent his role as model Episcopalian and government propagandist in the 1660s and early 70s, seeing him as something of a turncoat from the beginning because of his mother’s, strongly Presbyterian, family background. Kirkton, who was married to Burnet’s cousin, said coldly that, ‘tho’ he speaks the newest English Diction, he spoke never the language of ane unexorcised conscience’ (History of the Church of Scotland, p. 68). Most English churchmen were Tories, and even more enraged at Burnet than the Presbyterians, as he had broken their fundamental political precept of allegiance to the King. Parliamentum Pacificum, (February, 1688) is probably the best-known attack on him. They were even more enraged when he was rewarded with a bishopric - Swift’s marginal commentary on Burnet’s History of His Own Time is an amusing example. Nor did Burnet’s strongly-worded, often recrimatory, speeches in the House of Lords, made in a marked Scottish accent, endear him to most English Lords.

5 A Memorial of Divers Grievances and Abuses in this Church (1685).

6 Routh’s edition of the History includes marginal notes by Dartmouth, Swift, and two others.

7 Cockburn, p. 67. Dalrymple, p. 34.


10 John Kenyon’s Popish Plot is the best detailed account.

11 Admittedly, seventeenth-century interpretations of what constituted treason could be very broad, and by modern standards Staley had not even committed an offence. On the other hand, Coleman’s plea that his actions were not treasonable looks doubtful even now, in that he had solicited money from foreign powers to change English laws.
Two later tracts which justify the executions, and are sometimes attributed to Burnet, can probably be set aside as the work of John Williams. *Impartial Consideration of those Speeches* (1679) argues that the Jesuits’ dying speeches, asserting their innocence, are false. *History of the Powder Treason ... and the Parallel betwixt that and the present Popish Plot* (1681) claims that the guilt of those executed for the Popish Plot was as well established as that of Guy Faulkes and his co-conspirators.

13 See *History of the Rights of Princes*, p. 33f.; *Three Letters ... Italy*, p. 129; *Dr Burnet’s Vindication*, p. 5.; *Meditation*.

14 See his account of Russell’s last days in *Life of William, Lord Russell*, p. 319f.

15 *Some Letters* and *Three Letters*. The latter are allegedly by an Italian gentleman but in Burnet’s style. It was safer to publish anonymously.

16 However, it is surprising that Burnet shared many of his opinions of Louis with the Pope, Innocent XI (1676-89), who also disapproved of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. In Burnet’s *History of the Rights of Princes* he supports Louis’ case for greater control of the Church, against the Pope’s, but also presents the latter as sensible, humane, courageous, and magnanimous. A modern reader may be reminded of the situation that frequently arises in Graham Greene novels, such as *The Power and the Glory*, where a personally good man is nevertheless in the wrong, and vice versa.

17 British Protestant polemicists, like Burnet and Marvell, usually associate tyranny and popery, though it seems illogical to connect Louis’ ‘tyranny’ with his Catholicism. Indeed, had Louis cooperated with the more liberal Pope on the administration of the Church in France, which would presumably have made him a better Catholic, he would also have been less of a tyrant. Ironically, Burnet was an Episcopalian who felt obliged to defend any King’s right to control the Church in his country.

18 According to *Parliamentum Pacificum*, p. 75. The statement is a proverb in both English and Scots.

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