

Diplomats, Agents, Adventurers and Spies: Information Exchange in the Early Modern Period

In September 2008, the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters (Queen Mary, University of London) and the Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (University of Kent) co-hosted a 3-day interdisciplinary conference, entitled 'Diplomats, Agents, Adventurers and Spies, 1500-1700'. The main focus of the event was to consider early modern agency and the transfer of knowledge between states, agents, travellers and spies in the period 1500-1700. Working in this field, my co-organizer Rosanna Cox and I were frustrated that while the recent scholarship in this area had focussed on early modern interactions and questions of policy, polity and politics, the personal experiences, attitudes and encounters of intelligencers, agents and spies remained relatively unexplored. This special issue of *Lives and Letters* takes a selected handful of the proceedings of the conference which illustrate particularly vividly the wide and fertile scope of current research in the field which goes beyond the embassy door or ceremonial audience and offers a wider view of the activity and circulation of knowledge between individuals and nations in the early modern period. The issue complements a printed volume of essays entitled *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture*, currently in press with Palgrave. Both collections take a fresh approach to the study of those involved in the transmission of information, looking beyond the traditional figure of the diplomat and revealing the wider panoply of agents engaged in and concerned with the gathering of information. These essays extend and augment the existing research in this field, exploring the environments in which this information was accumulated, stored and disseminated, and bring to light the neglected spaces, forgotten activities and alternative populations of the early modern diplomatic arena.

In her article 'Henrietta Maria, Political Intrigue, and Early Modern Diplomacy', Michelle Dobbie explores the energetic marshalling of diplomatic channels and domestic information-networks by the queen of England in the 1630s. By drawing on intercepted correspondence, diplomatic despatches and contemporary newsletters in English and French archives, Dobbie follows the archival trail of a plot which could have seriously compromised Henrietta Maria and destabilised the political landscape of England and France.

In 'Intercepting the Burley Letters' Peter Redford examines a curious set of letters found within a seventeenth-century manuscript miscellany. Through tracing the handwriting in a selection of correspondence between Sir Henry Wotton and John Donne, Redford is able to identify two scribes at work. Tracing the biography of

William Parkhurst, one of these scribes who was associated with the manuscript from an early point, Redford pieces together a riveting narrative of intercepted letters, covert surveillance and vigorous secretarial activity.

Madeline Dewhurst examines the family correspondence of the Cavendish family in 'True Relations: piecing together a family divided by war'. She follows the letter trail between the exiled patriarch William Cavendish in The Hague, and his children back in England. Navigating the geographical and domestic distance created by the Narrow Sea, Dewhurst examines how these letters record the attempt by Cavendish to maintain and control his own estate and the family's interest from afar.

In his work-in-progress report of his research to reconstruct the network of political informers in sixteenth-century Italy, Simone Testa introduces the story of Camillo Volta, agent of the Duc de Nevers. His letters to Nevers being intercepted, Volta's is a cautionary tale of the dangers of the transmission of sensitive information. Testa reflects on the decisive measures taken by the Pope and other authorities to limit the circulation of hostile and uncontrolled news and intelligence in the period.

These articles examine in valuable detail the processes, activities and landscapes of the circulation and transmission of information in the early modern period. Populated by diplomats, agents, spies, exiles and travellers, these scholars present us with the opportunity to observe the spaces around and beyond the formal diplomatic embassy which has for so long dominated studies of political agency. Linked by their focus on letters, whether family correspondence over distances, political news summaries or intercepted missives, these articles share roots in advanced and original archival exploration and study. Much of the material from which the contributors draw their conclusions has never been published, and has been transcribed by the individual author. The fascinating narratives which emerge from this painstaking and highly-skilled work reconstruct for the modern reader the precarious journeys and fragile existence yet strange and durable power of the early modern epistle. This new focus on the agents, texts and contexts of continental travel and the accumulation of knowledge makes a significant contribution to the current and dynamic research into the exchange and dissemination of news and information in the early modern period.

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