

TUDOR ENGLAND'S RELATIONS WITH FRANCE¹

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The sixteenth century was an unusual chapter in the long history of England's complex relations with France. At the beginning of the century only Calais remained of the English Crown's once-extensive possessions on the other side of the Channel. If Henry VIII harboured ambitions of regaining the lost territories, capturing Boulogne in 1544, the English occupation of Boulogne lasted only until 1550 and Calais fell in 1558. Throughout the century there was also a diplomatic (and occasionally military) struggle for influence over Scotland. The early 1560s saw a real novelty as England gained ideological allies in France, the Huguenots (the French Protestants). The reign of Elizabeth was characterised by a quadrilateral relationship between England, the French Crown, the Huguenots and Scotland.

Rivalry was only one dimension, for France remained — as it had been in previous centuries — the leading foreign cultural influence on England. The Renaissance was largely refracted through France, especially at the level of the court. The Reformation actually increased the cultural importance of France. Until the sixteenth century Rome had been the diplomatic hub of Europe, but with the severing of English allegiance to the Papacy, Paris became the main point of contact between England and the Catholic world, especially during Elizabeth's reign.

The personal relationship between Henry VIII and Francis I of France was an idiosyncratic compound of brotherhood, rivalry and mutual distrust. Under the treaty of London (4 October 1518), they agreed as a gesture of good will to post one of their chamber gentlemen as ambassador resident at the other's court.² This was the first English resident embassy established by treaty and the only permanent English embassy of the century. The French embassy in London ranked with those in Rome and Madrid.³ Diplomatic contact was broken briefly by war (in the mid-1520s, 1544-1546 and 1557-1559), but restored immediately afterwards. A further clause in the treaty was no less significant: an agreement to meet as soon as convenient. This was the origin of the best-known royal meeting of the century, the Field of the Cloth of Gold on the border of the Calais Pale in June 1520.⁴ Henry VIII and Francis I met again less formally in late 1532 on the eve of Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn. It was said that Henry's death in January 1547 hastened Francis's own two months later.⁵

Elizabeth I also attached great importance to establishing a personal rapport with the French Crown. She and the queen-mother, Catherine de' Medici, enjoyed an equally idiosyncratic mutual respect, even though many of Elizabeth's subjects regarded Catherine with deep suspicion after the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve in 1572. Elizabeth also established a more subtle understanding with the enigmatic Henry III, third son of Henry II and Catherine de' Medici.⁶ More dramatic was the famous 'courtship' of Elizabeth by Henry III's younger brother, François, Duke of Alençon and Anjou between 1578 and his death in 1584.⁷ After 1589 she finally obtained an open ally in the Protestant Henry IV (the former King of Navarre), a man also widely admired in England.⁸

With the exception of Anjou who visited her in 1579 and 1581, Elizabeth I never met any member of the French royal family, despite numerous expressions of interest on either side. In 1572 Catherine de' Medici seriously, if bizarrely, proposed they meet on ships in the middle of the Channel. Elizabeth went to the coast of Kent in 1573 in case Anjou was prepared to cross the Channel, and to Portsmouth in 1591 in anticipation of a proposed visit by Henry IV. French embassies in 1559, 1564, 1572 and, most famously, 1581 were the occasions of her grandest court entertainments. In 1581 Elizabeth appropriated Philip Sidney's planned tournament 'The Four Foster Children of Desire' to demonstrate she could match any spectacle the French court could mount.

Unlike Anglo-Netherlands diplomatic relations, commercial issues were only of limited importance to relations with France – seizures of shipping were the main problem. Instead Anglo-French diplomacy was dominated by the formal and the ceremonial, the conferring of orders of chivalry, the Garter or the St. Michael, or greetings on accessions, royal births and deaths. Matrimonial negotiations posed greater difficulties owing to their sensitivity. They were conducted by the monarchs personally and regularly initiated by informal agents. The relative ease of communication between London and Paris meant that the ambassador was rarely left to employ his own initiative and it was effectively up to the monarch whether to negotiate through his own ambassador or the resident at his court. All too frequently the resident ambassadors were reduced to intelligence gatherers.

The embassy demanded a degree of experience, but also personal wealth. Residents on both sides of the Channel complained regularly of the expense. For the English, knowledge of French was necessary, though Italian would serve. By contrast, few if any French

ambassadors knew English. The attraction of the embassy was the possibility that success might bring further advancement. Only two English residents achieved appointment as Secretary of State, Sir William Paget under Henry VIII and Sir Francis Walsingham under Elizabeth, though several other Elizabethan residents harboured ambitions in that direction. No French residents ever became *secrétaires d'état*, but a number proceeded to other embassies. For two, who were among the longest serving ambassadors of the period, Bertrand de Salignac, sieur de La Mothe-Fénélon (1568–1575) and Michel de Castlenau, sieur de Mauvissière (1575–1585), the English embassy was the height of their careers.⁹

The Reformation played a much more ambiguous role in England's relations with the French Crown than with Emperor Charles V or his son, Philip II of Spain. Initially this was because Francis I's priority was his rivalry with Charles V and the spread of Protestantism threatened to deprive France of a number of allies.¹⁰ As a result the French Crown tended to conduct its foreign policy as if the Reformation had never happened, a policy well established by the seventeenth century, when Cardinal Richelieu defended it as *raison d'état*.¹¹ Yet religion could not be ignored entirely, especially in Scotland, where by the 1540s England was associated with the Protestant interest and France with the Catholic.

The rivalry for influence over Scotland was well established by 1500 and it was loyalty to France that caused James IV to embark on the disaster of the Flodden campaign in 1513. In his subsequent efforts to control the minority of his nephew James V, Henry VIII believed the easiest way to settle Scotland was through Paris. It was his suspicion that James V's truculent independence was encouraged by Francis I that led to war with France in 1543–1544. The decision of Edward VI's government to revive 'the rough wooing' in Scotland in 1547 triggered Henry II of France's intervention the following year and his declaration of war in 1549. The parlous financial state of Edward's government forced a settlement in 1550, which involved both the surrender of Boulogne and the evacuation of Scotland.¹²

The sudden death of Edward VI and the accession of Mary I in 1553 brought the French embassy in London into unexpected prominence. Despite rumours of major concessions to France in exchange for assistance (Calais in particular), the French could only watch the Duke of Northumberland collapse and then try to pick up the pieces in the face of the marriage of Mary and Prince Philip of Spain. The 'Spanish marriage' brought England fully into the Habsburg nexus, and Henry II responded by intriguing with English dissidents,

despite the fact that they were Protestants. He also tried to protect Princess Elizabeth, and the French ambassador later claimed he had only just dissuaded Elizabeth from fleeing to France at the beginning of 1557.¹³

Elizabeth's attempt to continue the friendship got off to rocky start at the beginning of her reign, owing to Mary, Queen of Scots, who had gained a new importance in the English succession following the death of Edward VI. Suspicion that Henry II wished to advance Mary as a rival persuaded Elizabeth to assist the Scottish Protestants in 1559–1560.¹⁴ Maintenance of an Anglophile government in the face of the Queen of Scots' return in 1561 and the possible revival of French influence became one of the key aims of her subsequent foreign policy. Simultaneously, Elizabeth gained an ally in the emerging Huguenot movement, to whose aid she went in France's First War of Religion in 1562–1563. After 1563 Anglo-French relations took the shape they would hold until 1589. If the primary aim of Elizabeth's policy was to keep the French out of Scotland, the aim of French policy was to keep the English and the Huguenots apart.

During the 1560s Elizabeth gained two major advantages. One was her rapport with Catherine de' Medici, who was suspicious of the Queen of Scots and (generally) committed to maintaining the religious peace in France. Catherine made a careful choice of French ambassadors after 1561. If Catholic (though two had previously dabbled in Protestantism) and not exactly Anglophiles, they were also reliable royalists and aware that their mission was to cultivate Elizabeth and dissuade her from aiding the Huguenots. The other was the collapse of Mary Stuart in Scotland in 1567–1568. Thereafter, French diplomacy faced the uphill struggle of trying simultaneously to protect the interests of the captive Queen of Scots, keep on good terms with Elizabeth and regain some influence in Scotland. It was Mary Stuart's conviction that she had been abandoned by France that led her during her captivity (if not earlier) to turn to Philip II.

In France Elizabeth's immediate aim was to see the edicts of toleration maintained, but she was not prepared to see the Huguenots destroyed and when civil war broke out she subsidised Huguenot recruiting among the German Protestants. A new dimension was created by the outbreak of the revolt of the Netherlands in the early 1570s, as this nominally gave France and England a common diplomatic interest.¹⁵ The most complex phase in Anglo-French diplomacy was initiated by the courtship of the Duke of Anjou between 1578 and 1582, not

least because it involved an alliance between England and France in the Netherlands.¹⁶ Elizabeth largely conducted the negotiations in London through Mauvissière and Anjou's agent Jean de Simier, as well as by maintaining her own private correspondence with Anjou. Her ambassadors, Sir Amyas Paulet (1576–1579) and Sir Henry Cobham (1579–1583), both of whom distrusted Anjou, played distinctly subordinate roles.

The last phase of the Anjou courtship saw the appointment of Sir Edward Stafford as resident in Paris (1583–1590), who, due to claims that he became a Spanish agent, remains the most controversial Elizabethan ambassador.¹⁷ He had to deal with the French succession crisis following the death of Anjou in 1584 and the subsequent Eighth War of Religion, which broke out in 1585. Actively distrusted by Walsingham, Stafford nevertheless assessed French politics accurately, particularly Henry III's fundamental hostility to the Duke of Guise, despite their apparent alliance against the Huguenots.

The assassination of Henry III in 1589 and the accession of the Protestant King of Navarre as Henry IV introduced the final and most novel phase. Not only was he an ally but, for the first half of the 1590s, his ambassadors were Protestants. His personal rapport with Elizabeth survived the failure of joint military operations and his conversion in 1594.¹⁸ It was also bolstered by his friendship with the Earl of Essex. Only after Henry made a separate peace with Spain in 1598 and Essex entered his political decline did the relationship begin to cool.¹⁹ Nevertheless the *rapport* survived into James I's reign. The 'traditional' hostility to France did not revive until Henry IV's assassination in 1610.

Citation:

Simon Adams, 'Tudor England's relations with France', *State Papers Online, 1509–1714*, Cengage Learning, Reading, 2009

Notes

¹ For the English embassies see the relevant section of Gary M. Bell, *A Handlist of British Diplomatic Representatives, 1508–1688* (Royal Historical Society, 1990). Many of the ambassadors are the subject of articles in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Some French ambassadors for the first half of the century are also included, but plans to extend the coverage to those of the second half have been suspended for financial reasons.

² See David Starkey, 'Intimacy and Innovation: the Rise of the Privy Chamber, 1485–1547', in D. Starkey (ed.), *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (Harlow, 1987), pp. 84–6.

³ The survival of French diplomatic correspondence for the sixteenth-century is more complex than the English, owing in part to the French practice of recording correspondence in *registres* with the result that fewer originals

were retained. Moreover in- and out- letters were frequently *enregistrés* in separate volumes. Both the *registres* and the originals are dispersed among the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (AMRE) and the Archives Nationales (AN), the majority being in the BNF. Publication has been equally disparate. In the second half of the nineteenth century the AMRE began the series *Inventaire analytique des archives du ministère des affaires étrangères*, but only two volumes of relevance were published: J. Kaulek (ed.), *Correspondence politique de MM. de Castillon et de Marillac (1537–1542)* (Paris, 1885) and G. Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Correspondence politique de Odet de Selve (1546–1549)* (Paris, 1888). Simultaneously, a large (though not complete) collection of transcripts was deposited in the Public Record Office (now National Archives, PRO 31/3).

⁴ J. G. Russell, *The Field of the Cloth of Gold: Men and Manners in 1520* (London, 1969).

⁵ See R. J. Knecht, *Francis I* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 416.

⁶ The main biographical treatments of the last Valois are Ivan Cloulas, *Catherine de Médicis* (Paris, 1979), Pierre Chevallier, *Henri III roi shakespearien* (Paris, 1985) and Michel Simonin, *Charles IX* (Paris, 1995). See also R. J. Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici* (London, 1998). There is no English-language biography of Henry III. Central to any assessment of French policy are the major published series of royal letters, Hector de La Ferrière and Gustave Baguenault de Puchesse (eds.), *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis* (10 vols, Documents inédites pour l'histoire de France, xlv, Paris, 1880–1909) and Michel François, et al. (eds), *Lettres de Henri III roi de France* (5 vols published, Paris, 1959–).

⁷ On Anjou and the Netherlands, see P. L. Muller and A. Diegerick (eds), *Documents concernant les relations entre le Duc d'Anjou et les Pays-Bas (1576–1584)*, (5 vols., Werken van het Historisch Genootschap, new ser., li, lv, lviii, lx-lxi, Utrecht, 1889–1899), Mack P. Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Political Struggle during the French Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 1986) and Frédéric Duquenne, *L'Entreprise du Duc d'Anjou aux Pays-Bas de 1580 à 1584: les responsabilités d'un échec à partager* (Lille, 1998). On the courtship, Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: the Courtships of Elizabeth I* (Oxford, 1996) and Natalie Mears, 'Love-making and Diplomacy: Elizabeth I and the Anjou Marriage Negotiations, c.1578–1582', *History*, lxxxvi (2001), pp. 442–66.

⁸ Of the vast literature on Henry IV the most relevant to this subject is N. M. Sutherland, *Henry IV of France and the Politics of Religion 1572–1596* (Bristol, 2002), but see also M. Berger de Xivrey (ed.), *Recueil des lettres missives de Henri IV* (9 vols., Documents inédites pour l'histoire de France, xlix, Paris, 1843–76).

⁹ La Mothe-Fénélon has left the largest and best-known correspondence of any sixteenth-century French ambassador in England, [Alexandre Teulet (ed.)], *Correspondence diplomatique de Bertrand de Salignac de la Mothe Fénélon, ambassadeur de France en Angleterre de 1568 à 1575* (7 vols., Bannatyne Club lxx, 1838–40), printed from his *registres* in the AN. Only one volume of Mauvissière's *registres* survives (BNF, ms français 15973), covering the years 1578–1581, but there is also an extensive, if scattered, body of originals. Apart from a brief nineteenth-century biography (Gustave Hubault, *Michel de Castelnau, ambassadeur en Angleterre (1575–1585)* (repr. Geneva, 1970)), the most important assessment of Mauvissière's embassy is to be found in John Bossy, *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* (New Haven and London, 1991) and *Under the Molehill: an Elizabethan Spy Story* (New Haven and London, 2001). Mauvissière may have had some command of English; his daughter certainly learned the language.

¹⁰ See D. L. Potter, 'Foreign Policy in the Age of the Reformation: French Involvement in the Schmalkaldic War, 1544–1547', *Historical Journal*, xx (1977), pp. 525–44.

¹¹ 'Reason of state' was the answer given to French Catholics who queried why the Crown allied with enemies of the Church.

¹² D. L. Potter (ed.), 'Documents concerning the Negotiation of the Anglo-French Treaty of March 1550', *Camden Miscellany XXVIII* (Camden Soc., 4th ser., xxix, 1984), pp. 58–180.

¹³ E. H. Harbison, *Royal Ambassadors at the Court of Queen Mary* (Princeton, 1940) remains the classic study, for Elizabeth see pp. 312–3.

¹⁴ The most recent account of Anglo-French-Scottish nexus in 1559–1560 is Pamela E. Ritchie, *Mary of Guise in Scotland, 1548–1560: a Political Career* (East Linton, 2002). For the treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559) see J. G. Russell, *Peacemaking in the Renaissance* (London, 1986).

¹⁵ N. M. Sutherland, *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew and the European Conflict 1559–1572* (London, 1973).

¹⁶ For a minor but revealing example of the complexities, see Simon Adams and Mark Greengrass (eds.), 'Mémoires et procédures de ma négociation en Angleterre (8 October 1582–8 October 1583) by Jean Malliet, councillor of Geneva', in Ian W. Archer (ed.), *Religion, Politics and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Camden Soc., 5th ser., xxii, 2003), pp. 137–196.

¹⁷ The latest study is Mitchell Leimon and Geoffrey Parker, 'Treason and Plot in Elizabethan Diplomacy: the "Fame of Sir Edward Stafford" Reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, cxi (1996), pp. 1134–1158.

¹⁸ Howell A. Lloyd, *The Rouen Campaign 1590–1592* (Oxford, 1973).

¹⁹ For the last French ambassadors of Elizabeth's reign see P. Laffleur de Kermaingant, *Mission de Jean de Thumery, Sieur de Boissise (1598–1602)* (2 vols, Paris, 1886), and *Mission de Christophe de Harlay, Comte de Beaumont (1602–1605)* (2 vols, Paris, 1895).