

**POLITICIANS AND STATESMEN II:
WILLIAM CECIL, LORD BURGHELY (1520-98)**

Dr Stephen Alford, University of Cambridge

Summary: In the second case study on major figures of the Sixteenth Century, Dr Alford describes the life and career of the most dominant statesman of the Elizabethan period. Cecil's correspondence forms a major part of the State Papers of the second half of the Sixteenth Century.

If there is one man who shaped the State Papers it was William Cecil, first Baron of Burghley, Elizabeth I's Secretary (1558-72) and Lord Treasurer (1572-1598). Burghley was many men rolled into one, the consummate servant of the Crown: in Britain today he would be Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Cabinet Secretary, and Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service. He called himself merely a minister. Discreet service to the Queen and her Privy Council was his trademark. 'Serve God by serving of the Quene,' he wrote to his son, Sir Robert Cecil, 'for all other service is in dede bondage to the Devill.'¹ Lord Burghley was a powerful, commanding and uncompromising servant. He dominated Elizabethan politics for forty years, only five years short of the entire reign.

He came from a family of servants. The Cecils were minor Welsh gentry. His grandfather, David Cecil, was a younger son who made his fortune as a soldier. He served King Henry VII at the Royal Court and as the steward of royal lands in and around Stamford, a beautiful late medieval town on the borders of the counties of Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire and Rutland. David's son, Richard, William's father, was a servant too, much along the lines of David: minor service at Court in the royal Wardrobe and local service in Northamptonshire. When Burghley was born plain William Cecil in 1520 he was the eldest son of a modestly prosperous family doing well for themselves in the English midlands.²

Cecil was educated as a boy in two small chantry schools in Grantham and Stamford. He was taught by priests: it was a modest early education and very Catholic.³ Grandier was St John's College, Cambridge, which he attended from 1535. Young Cecil saw Henry VIII's Revolution in Church and State at first hand: 1535 was the year of the execution for treason of Bishop John Fisher of Rochester. Fisher was the force behind St John's, and the College felt his loss acutely.⁴

At Cambridge Cecil made friends for life. Many of the men he later worked with, especially in Elizabeth's Church, he knew at university. St John's gave him a rigorous intellectual training also. He was drilled in Latin and Greek and Hebrew. He was, by training and inclination, a humanist, and in his public service he would apply rigorous scholarly methods. He was particularly proud of his fine humanist italic handwriting which we see everywhere in the State Papers.⁵

Public service began informally for Cecil in his legal studies at Gray's Inn in London from 1540. A good political

marriage to Mildred Cooke, the daughter of a scholar-courtier at the Court of Henry VIII, introduced young Cecil to the Court circle of Queen Katherine Parr.⁶ His career was launched properly on the death of King Henry VIII by his appointment as ‘agent’, later secretary, to Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford and later Duke of Somerset, the Protector and Governor to Henry’s heir, the boy-king Edward VI.⁷

The six-year reign of Edward was Cecil’s great political apprenticeship. It was a time of thoroughgoing Reformation. The old world was turned upside down: belief and worship were changed beyond recognition. It was also a royal minority. Cecil worked closely with Protector Somerset to govern the Tudor kingdoms on Edward’s behalf; he was thus introduced in his late twenties to the tough world of the Tudor Court, to patronage and to politics.

Cecil’s fortunes dipped severely when Protector Somerset was toppled from power in 1549; he was even sent to the Tower of London for eight weeks. But from then on he prospered. He was close to Princess Elizabeth Tudor, for whom he acted as a surveyor of her estates. And he became the right hand to the new power at the Edwardian court, John Dudley, Earl of Warwick and later Duke of Northumberland.

Agile, intelligent, hard-working and capable, Cecil became second Secretary to Edward VI in 1550.⁸ This put him at the heart of royal government: it was the office he picked up with ease when Elizabeth Tudor came to the throne in 1558. He was knighted in an elaborate ceremony in 1551.⁹

The great change came with King Edward’s death in 1553. Cecil supported the accession of Lady Jane Grey; in fact he was, through his wife Lady Mildred, a kinsman of Jane. When the government of ‘Queen Jane’ collapsed after days, it took all of Cecil’s formidable powers as a wordsmith to convince Mary that he had been merely an unlucky bystander caught up in the *coup d’etat*. We can be pretty sure that the defence of his actions he gave to Mary does not tell the whole story.¹⁰

In Mary’s reign Cecil became a private subject. However, he and his family were never far away from the Royal Court: often they were at home in Wimbledon, or at Cecil’s house on Canon Row in Westminster, a stone’s throw from the royal palace of Whitehall. Cecil conformed. He kept in touch with friends and family who went abroad to escape England’s return to Catholicism; he stayed as close as he could to Princess Elizabeth; and he maintained his contacts at court. He even became a friend of Mary’s great adviser, Cardinal Reginald Pole, with whom he often dined at Lambeth Palace. In 1556 the family and their servants and the parish of Wimbledon celebrated Easter Mass together.

When Mary died in November 1558, Elizabeth, her half-sister, inherited the throne. Cecil’s close, if careful, relationship with Elizabeth and her household paid off. In the last days of Mary’s reign he was identified as Elizabeth’s future Secretary. And on the day Mary died Cecil was ferociously busy dealing with all the business for the new reign: he produced list after list of things to be done. Elizabeth formally appointed Cecil her Principal Secretary: it was his duty to serve and advise her. It was Sir William who in turn wrote the oath sworn by the members of Queen Elizabeth’s new Privy Council.

Cecil dominated Elizabethan politics. He knew as well as any of his predecessors that there were two things any good Secretary did to make royal government run smoothly. The first was to control the flow of paper to and from the Queen: Cecil was, in so many things, Elizabeth's voice, in letters to diplomats, speeches to Parliament and royal proclamations. The second key to success as a minister was to keep a sharp eye on the staff of the private rooms of the monarch and the royal household but especially the Privy Chamber.

The resources of *State Papers Online* are eloquent on Cecil's political career. He believed he was merely a humble servant of the Crown. As he told Sir Thomas Smith, one of his old teachers at Cambridge, in 1564: 'I know the place which I hold hath bene of yeres not long passed, adjudged a shopp for conning men'. He wrote of his 'disposition to deale with all men playnely, and in dede my unhabilitie, or as I may saye of my self my dullness to invent craftes'. Many of his colleagues begged to differ: he was a natural and instinctive politician who knew how to get his way in the Privy Council and, more importantly, with the Queen.

Cecil was especially bothered by the prospects of marriage for the Queen and the future of the royal succession. He wrote bluntly on the Earl of Leicester as a candidate for Elizabeth's hand, though his relations with Leicester were cordial; the two men were in no sense political enemies. He took a keen interest in other suitors: the Archduke Charles of Austria, for example, and the Duke of Anjou. The long negotiations over Charles and Anjou are illustrated at length in *State Papers Online*.

Cecil wanted Elizabeth to marry, but he knew that if she did not her kingdoms would still have to have a clear succession after her death. He looked to Europe and saw religious civil war in France and the crushing of Protestants by Spanish military power in the Low Countries. He looked at the intelligence reports he received from foreign ambassadors and saw in them the menace of a vast Catholic conspiracy against Elizabeth's Protestant England. He was quite used to writing about the Pope as 'Antichrist'.¹¹

So it is no wonder that Cecil took a tough line on the politics of succession. In 1563 he wrote a clause for an act of Parliament which, if it had ever become law, would have made the Privy Council an interregnum government in the event of Elizabeth's death. He pushed the Queen hard for a resolution of the succession in the Parliament of 1563 and 1566, even going so far as to ignore a direct royal commandment to leave off the topic.¹²

As Secretary, Sir William Cecil dominated Elizabeth's government. He made it his business to know every nook and cranny of official business. He kept his own alphabetical Who's Who of the noblemen and landed gentlemen who, in the absence of a standing army and police force, ran local government on the Queen's behalf. He encouraged a tough policy on lawful obedience, and set out with great care harsh punishments for the rebels of the Northern Rising in 1569.

Sir William Cecil was made Baron of Burghley in 1571. It was a defining moment in his life: nobility meant the world

to him, and he did everything he could to maintain the old standards of behaviour. He built three fabulous houses at Burghley near Stamford in Northamptonshire (his father's old house), at Theobalds in Hertfordshire, and on the Strand in Westminster. This last house, Cecil or Burghley House, was as much an office as it was a home; the many letters or reports sent by Cecil 'from my house on the Strand' or 'my house near the Savoy' (by which he meant the old royal palace of the Savoy) were written there. He spent vast amounts of money on these houses; Theobalds was on the scale of a royal palace. And yet he still wrote to a friend in March 1571: 'my stile is Lord of Burghley, if yow meane to know it, for your wrytyng. And if yow list to wryte truly the poorest lord in England.'¹³

Lord Burghley continued to serve for a time as Elizabeth's Secretary, however in July 1572 he became the Queen's Lord Treasurer. Already he was a Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, a member of the elite club of Elizabethan chivalry. In a sense the State Papers become from this point on the archives of Cecil's successors as Secretary like Sir Thomas Smith and Sir Francis Walsingham. But it is clear, too, that so many of the papers we have were Cecil's, and that he continued to dominate policy at the heart of government. He controlled the purse strings. He also clung to a vision of politics that had at its core the great fight against the dark forces of Catholic Europe and the malign influence of Mary, Queen of Scots, Elizabeth's great rival. It was Cecil, more than anyone else, who engineered Mary's destruction.

Lord Burghley worked until the day he died. In his last years he craved retirement, or so he said: at the same time he clung to power and office. He trained up his youngest son Robert, and Robert followed the path of his father's career as a privy councillor and Secretary.¹⁴ Cecil was an instinctive dynast; he loved nobility and he knew that he had to exercise power – never for its own sake, of course, only for the good of Queen, realm and religion, or so he said for forty years.

He died a few weeks before his seventy-eighth birthday. His funeral at Westminster Abbey was a grand affair indeed, and there are two accounts of it in the State Papers. After it his corpse was taken up the Great North Road to St Martin's Church in Stamford where it lies to this day in a grand marble tomb in the chapel of the Cecil family.

Citation:

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Further Reading:

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Notes

(Endnotes)

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6 M.K. McIntosh, 'Sir Anthony Cooke: Tudor Humanist, Educator, and Religious Reformer', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 119 (1975), 233-50; P. Croft, 'Mildred, Lady Burghley: The Matriarch', in P. Croft, ed., *Patronage, Culture and Power: the Early Cecils 1558-1612* (New Haven and London, 2002), pp. 283-300.

7 S. Alford, *Kingship and Politics in the Reign of Edward VI* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 80-4, 86, 98.

8 *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, ed. J. R. Dasent *et al.*, new series, 46 vols. (London, 1890-1964), 1550-52, 118.

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11 Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, ch. 2.

12 Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, chs. 4, 6.

13 J. Hesselby, 'The Politics of Pleasure: William Cecil and Burghley House', in Croft, *Early Cecils*, 21-24; J. Hesselby and P. Henderson, 'Location, Location, Location! Cecil House in the Strand', *Architectural History*, 45 (2002), 159-93; J. Summerson, 'The Building of Theobalds, 1564-85', *Archaeologia*, 97 (1954), 107-26; J. M. Sutton, 'The Decorative Program at Elizabethan Theobalds: Educating an Heir and Promoting a Dynasty', *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, 7 (2000), pp. 33-64.

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