

## State Papers Foreign, 1603–1640

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On first opening volumes of the early seventeenth-century *State Papers Foreign*, readers are dazzled by the collection's contents and its comprehensiveness. In almost all other areas of early modern history, researchers have to become accustomed to working with stray surviving documents from a much larger correspondence, much of which has subsequently disappeared. Yet SP Foreign contains practically the complete early Stuart diplomatic archive with precious few exceptions. So vast is the collection that we can not only follow in abundant detail as monarchs and ministers, ambassadors and agents discussed the major and minor events of the period, but we can often reconstruct the evolution of a particularly important treaty through various drafts. Given the importance of these documents, to which subsequent statesmen and diplomats regularly referred, it is scarcely surprising that Whitehall bureaucrats kept a very careful record of them.

The importance of these materials makes it all the more remarkable that aside from a few honorable exceptions, so little has been made of them.[1] The scholarly indifference is the more baffling since the handwriting by and large is particularly clear. To be sure, traditional diplomatic history has rarely, if ever, been among the trendier historiographical fields. But much of the neglect can be ascribed to comparative inaccessibility; after all, these records have been only available at The National Archives, and their sheer mass required months, if not years, of research at Kew in order to understand even a few years of the seventeenth century. Mercifully this lamentable state of affairs has ended with the introduction of Part Four of the *State Papers Online*, which at last allows scholars and their students from around the globe full access to these documents, and this happy development in turn reveals that these documents, long dismissed as bureaucratic minutiae, can tell us much about questions as varied as court patronage, contemporary religious issues, parliamentary affairs, consumption patterns of luxury goods as well as dynastic and strategic politics.

While it is now infinitely easier to access State Papers Foreign, its bulk remains daunting. It becomes less forbidding once researchers appreciate that these volumes are the products of a handful of state actors operating in predictable genres of reportage.

### I. *Dramatis Personae*

To open a volume of SP Foreign is to step into the inner sanctum of the *arcana imperii*, the secrets of state which contemporaries were so eager to glimpse and monarchs to conceal. Here the king looms so large as to obscure even the Privy Council, save for occasional ceremonial roles when its members were trooped out to ratify a decision that the king had already made. Not surprisingly, this collection is periodically studded with personal letters between the English monarchs and their fellow rulers – Philip III and IV, Louis XIII, Marie de Medicis, Christian IV, Gustavus Adolphus, Ferdinand II and III, Maurice and Frederick Henry – and leading ministers – Lerma, Olivares, Luynes and Richelieu. While the initial delight of reading their letters fades after appreciating their formality, they can signal important diplomatic shifts among “cousins”; English goals in the French match, for example, are clearly evident in James's short note to Louis applauding the forthcoming wedding between Charles and Henrietta Maria, which would ensure “la paix bien et prospérité des pais voisins et principalement du Palatinat.”[2] Such high-level personal correspondence, however, represents only a small fraction of SP Foreign.

For obvious reasons James I and Charles I and their secretaries carried the diplomatic details close to their administrative chests. A royal kinsman like the Marquis of Hamilton was reduced to offering to help James I with “any hard words” in a sensitive dispatch from Madrid, a gambit that earned a grin from the king but nary a glimpse of the letter.[3] Even a favorite like the Duke of Buckingham, while obviously strongly influential, rarely intruded directly in diplomacy; instead he generally acted through the monarch and the secretaries of state. James I and Charles I spent a considerable portion of their time carefully attending to the latest reports abroad, and when some envoys' agents proved unbearably prolix – a celebrated offender in this regard, for example, was William Trumbull – the secretaries prepared summaries for the monarch. After reflecting on the news and

discussing it with his intimates, the king then issued carefully prepared instructions to individual ministers abroad. While the monarch could convey subsequent alterations in a personal letter to the ambassador, he more often did so through a letter from one of his two secretaries of state.

The diplomatic responsibilities of the two Secretaries of State varied in the early Stuart regime. Sometimes the two ministers divided responsibilities, one handling Protestant states and the other Catholic ones. More commonly, one Secretary would take care of all foreign affairs, relying on his colleague only in emergencies. This arrangement allowed one man a full understanding of sometimes intricate negotiations across the continent. But it also meant that in crises, the workload could overwhelm even the most industrious minister and lead to awkward delays. Nevertheless rare indeed is a dispatch in SP Foreign from London not signed by the monarch or a Secretary of State.

Their letters generally went to an “ordinary” resident ambassador. The early Stuarts maintained permanent posts in Madrid, Paris, The Hague and Copenhagen with a northern Italian envoy shuttling between Venice and Turin and a permanent agent in Brussels. With financial assistance from the Levant Company, they also had an ambassador at the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. They maintained more intermittent representation with the German Empire, Sweden, Poland, Muscovy and Switzerland. Learned gentlemen who devoted decades of their lives to diplomacy, these men numbered polymaths like Sir Henry Wotton and Sir Edward Herbert, dutiful office-wallahs like Sir Walter Aston and Sir Robert Anstruther, and policy wonks like Sir Thomas Edmondes, Sir Isaac Wake, Sir Thomas Roe, Sir John Digby, later the Earl of Bristol, and Sir Dudley Carleton, later Viscount Carleton. All were sophisticated observers both of the peculiarities of the state where they resided and of the slightest political shifts back in Whitehall. While the rate of reply from London could sometimes be maddening slow, these ambassadors generally wrote a dispatch back to Whitehall at least once a week, and more frequently when a crisis developed. When these ambassadors occasionally returned to England on leave, their secretaries would then assume the duty of drafting regular reports to Whitehall, and their reports introduce us to rising men like Thomas Rowlandson, Henry de Vic, Thomas Lorkin and John Woodford.

While these envoys would have happily handled all business, James and Charles also sent abroad “extraordinary” ambassadors to conduct specific high level negotiations often regarding a marriage alliance, a military league or a peace treaty. In these situations, the ordinary ambassador was generally relegated to the sidelines. The extraordinary ambassadors were either veteran diplomats with the steadiest of hands (Digby, Carleton and Wake) or prominent courtiers like the Earl of Carlisle, the Earl of Holland, the Earl of Arundel and the Duke of Buckingham himself. Such “extraordinary” ambassadors generally measured their foreign stays in months, if not weeks, and on their departure, the diplomatic business reverted to the “ordinary” envoy. These extraordinary missions often included an attached special agent, part courier and part confidant; men like Tobie Mathew, Kenelm Digby, William Becher and Edward Clerke.

While the bulk of SP Foreign is filled with formal diplomatic business, it also contains less official correspondence. To see the full range of a contemporary diplomat’s correspondence, we have only to go to the British Library and inspect the extensive Trumbull Manuscripts, only a small percentage of which can be described as official. Sadly the SP Foreign has little such unofficial backchannel correspondence, but there is some in which an array of correspondents – merchants, clerics, military officers and visiting aristocrats – developed new relationships and cemented old ones, while they analyzed the latest developments. All foreign agents suffered from a professional paranoia about shifting factional power alignments at Whitehall which could render current negotiations – and perhaps the envoy’s services – unnecessary. For that reason, they understandably prized the occasional letters from London friends sketching out the scene there. Carleton in The Hague, for example, received occasional letters from his brother, Bishop George Carleton, and his brother-in-law, Sir Richard Harrison, and more frequent ones from John Chamberlain. Equally fascinating is the chatter from second tier diplomatic personnel like Dudley Carleton writing to his uncle, the famous ambassador, or Sir Francis Nethersole’s private letters commenting on English affairs to Carlisle and Elizabeth of Bohemia. SP Foreign also contains sets of private letters like those from Woodford in Paris to friends in London as well as Carleton’s letters back to Chamberlain.[4]

Finally the other correspondents in the series are the various foreign envoys in London. For a host of obvious reasons – to protest a new policy or a legal judgment, to negotiate details of a commercial arrangement, to congratulate on a monarch’s recovered health, marriage, new wife and/or child, or simply to nag about a sore diplomatic point – these ambassadors made their presence felt in Whitehall and in SP Foreign. Thus readers will become acquainted with major figures like the Conde de Gondomar, the Marquis d’Effiat and Abbé Scaglia and minor ones like Tillières, Van Male and Rosencrantz.

Few, if any, manuscript collections can boast a cast of major and minor characters to match those who populate SP Foreign. This extensive series becomes even more welcoming once we appreciate the basic flow of routine business, which essentially falls into two basic categories: information out of, and into, Whitehall.

## II. The Flow of Business

Since ministers and envoys alike paid scrupulously careful attention to the king’s instructions, we too should accord these items pride of place in the outward flow of information. Although these were not particularly lengthy, royal instructions were certainly the most carefully read and re-read items, and with ample reason. Here the monarch spoke directly about his objectives and set precise limits on the envoy’s freedom of action. In subsequent dispatches, the ambassador would often refer to their instructions, as would Mr Secretary back in London, constantly checking to see that the envoy had not exceeded his warrant. These directions were then modified, or reaffirmed, with subsequent royal letters, which recorded subtle if significant policy shifts. In addition, monarchs occasionally wrote personal letters to foreign rulers, and while all are inherently interesting, few can exceed the extraordinarily awkward letters that Charles I sent to Christian IV of Denmark explaining his failure to support to his uncle.[5]

The bulk of the traffic out of Whitehall, however, came from the Secretary of State, whose letters scholars have generally ignored. The letters themselves fall into a standard pattern. First the Secretary will carefully record the arrival of recent dispatches, a process which sometimes revealed unexpected political and climatic interruptions in the smooth flow of information. Then the Secretary would discuss recent developments, generally applauding but sometimes chastising the envoy’s suggestions and actions. This section would fill most of the letter. But having gotten immediate business out of the way, the Secretary would present a diplomatic *tour d’horizon*, connecting the events in the envoy’s country to general trends across the continent and at home. While these assessments were invariably optimistic, these surveys nonetheless represent a remarkable – and little utilized – indication of how the regime viewed itself and the world outside Whitehall. In 1630, for example, Secretary Carleton interrupted an otherwise mundane letter to the English ambassador in Madrid to applaud the stiff sentences meted out to turbulent members of the 1629 session “wherby now the world sees that Parliament men must be responsible for their words and actions.” Consequently since “they wilbe more moderate and circumspect,” Charles “when he finds good may meete with his people with so much the more assurance that they will never transgresse in the point of due respect and obedience.”[6] Public affairs might then give way to private ones. The Secretary might comment on the envoy’s recurrent requests for money, leave and advancement. He might make his own requests for local luxury goods, and while art and sculpture were always in demand, so too were high-end luxury goods like glassware and fabrics. Late in 1627, Conway protested to Wake that a recently arrived set of Venetian wineglasses were “too hi[gh]” and “too little,” and in the 1630s Secretary Windebanke’s search for just the right virginal for his drawing-room runs through several volumes of SP 77 [Flanders].[7] For its mixture of diplomacy, domestic politics and conspicuous consumption, the Secretary of State’s letters make compelling reading.

While the bulk of the out letters came from the secretaries of state or the king himself, a few came from senior courtiers and bureaucrats. The Lord Treasurer and the Chancellor of the Exchequer sometimes wrote to explain the grim fate of those who advanced money to the Crown and expected timely repayment. Buckingham himself only wrote occasionally to the diplomatic corps, and hardly ever did he display more whimsy than in his letter to the English envoys in Paris of 23 January 1626; “me trouvant environné d’affaires et despouuer de Secretaire Englois,” he dictated his thoughts to a French secretary.[8]

# State Papers Online

*The Government of Britain, 1509-1714*

The traffic back to Whitehall invariably outnumbered the outward-bound letters by a factor of three or four to one. Some came from rulers and senior ministers writing to their opposite numbers in Whitehall. These often were formulaic complementary notes; indeed in 1624, Cardinal Richelieu once wrote the same letter, word for word, both to Secretary Conway and to Buckingham. But in Christian IV's testy letters to his English nephew, anger increasingly overshadowed politesse after Charles I signally failed to fulfil his treaty obligations to Denmark. These high-level letters also had room for warmth, as can be seen in Elizabeth of Bohemia's many letters back to her friends like her brother Charles, her admirer Buckingham and her old client, Secretary Conway. Affection is the only way to account from Elizabeth's reaction to Conway's new title, Viscount Killultagh: "you have gotten the maddest new name that can be, it will spoile anie good mouth to pronounce it right." [9] The bulk of the inbound letters, however, came from English diplomatic representatives.

The envoys sometimes wrote directly to the king, but while this was somewhat common among extraordinary ambassadors – they after all had a close personal relationship with the monarch – it was comparatively rare among resident ambassadors. Instead they generally addressed their correspondence to the Secretary of State, following roughly the same pattern as Mr Secretary had. First they carefully analyzed developments in their capital, predicting what might happen next and alerting Whitehall to possible repercussions. In addition to commenting on the health of the ruler and their immediate family and delineating factional alignments, the envoys also keep a careful watch on the local British emigres such as soldiers and peers as well as exiled dissident writers like Thomas Scott, the author of *Vox Populi*, and Dr Eglisam who famously accused Buckingham of poisoning James I. Then after the standard caution about excessive reliance on rumors, they presented the news that had reached them before teasing out the possible implications for England. In addition, even more than the pursuit of advancement and honor, all resident ambassadors shared a common desire: they wanted to be paid. Given the precarious state of the Exchequer, they inevitably fell deeply into arrears with local merchants, some of whom in extremis declined any further business with the embassy. Those furthest from London suffered most. By 1626, Anstruther in Copenhagen was at his wit's end; "I am forced to make the best excuses I can, I must absent my selfe out of the way, for I am brought to that now, that I have neither Credit for my Master [Charles] nor my selfe." In fact, the intractable problem of debt soon forced him to move his embassy to Hamburg. Such letters, several dozen a month from across the continent, poured into Whitehall from English representatives.

Another sizeable portion of SP Foreign is comprised of letters that envoys wrote to one another. These tended to be potted versions of their letters back to London, sent to keep their colleagues abroad informed of developments and prepared, lest trouble came their way. These letters also underscore the intimacy scale of the early Stuart diplomatic corps; even a form letter sent to a half-dozen diplomats across the continent would often include a final paragraph in the ambassador's hand with a particular note to the recipient. Along with strengthening personal ties, these contacts also allowed for favors; thus Herbert in Paris requested a Dutch pocket watch from Carleton in The Hague.[10]

Along with this mass of diplomatic traffic out of and into Whitehall, SP Foreign contains a significant amount of miscellaneous material. Some items in this category relate to military and naval activity involving Englishmen. SP 75 [Denmark] details the fate of Col. Morgan's little English force outside Hamburg, 1627–9, a tale fairly well known after E.A. Beller's 1928 article. Meanwhile SP 84 [Holland] is essentially the archive of the old and new English and Scottish regiments in Dutch service, with several hundred letters from senior and junior officers; but aside from Charles Dalton's 1885 biography of Edward Cecil, Viscount Wimbledon, this material has scarcely been used.[11] Even more dimly known is the material in SP 77 [Flanders] and SP 81 [German States]; the former chronicles the substantial English and Irish units in the Army of Flanders as well as the unfortunates captured by Dunkerkers, while the latter tells the somber story of the English garrison in the Palatinate, 1620–24, and to a lesser extent, subsequent military actions. Plainly this material deserves, albeit belatedly, more careful analysis. Finally the volumes are littered with manuscript tracts and position papers about the foreign policy and religion as well as scraps of poetry, most of which has received no scholarly attention.

### III. Conclusion

Thanks to the advent of *State Papers Online*, the scholarly fog that has long engulfed these documents has vanished, and once we have ready access to them, several facts become abundantly clear. First because most documents were “presentation” items to the king, they are by and large relatively easy to read. Next, by remembering the function of these documents, most authors are also state actors of some sort and so fairly identifiable. Lastly the mass of the collection become quite manageable if we remember the basic flow of information in and out of Whitehall. Consequently these important documents, which have spent the last four decades in relative obscurity, can now, at long last, be integrated into the history of England and early modern Europe.

Along with recording subtle but significant policy shifts, these letters generally contained a broader diplomatic tour d’horizon and some comments on the domestic situation. While they tended to be sometimes pathetically optimistic, these letters represent an invaluable, and little used, insight into the regime’s thoughts. Likewise the mass of the letters back into Whitehall came from ambassadors and agents in the field. Like those of the Secretary of State, their reports followed a rather stylized form.

### Citation

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### Notes

[1] For some honourable exceptions, see Maurice Lee, *James I and Henry IV* (Urbana, 1970) and idem, ‘The Jacobean Diplomatic Service,’ *American Historical Review*, LXXII (1967), pp. 1264–1282; Caroline Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot* (Chapel Hill, 1983); L. John Reeve, *Charles I and the Road to Personal Rule* (Cambridge, 1989); Ian Atherton, *Ambition and Failure in Stuart England*, (Manchester, 1999); Thomas Cogswell, ‘Foreign Policy and Parliament: the Case of La Rochelle, 1625–1626,’ *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), pp. 241–267; Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven, 1992); John Stoye, *English Travellers Abroad* (London, 1952); Martin Havran, *Caroline Courtier: the Life of Lord Cottington*, (London, 1973); Simon Adams, ‘Spain or the Netherlands? The Dilemmas of Early Stuart Foreign Policy,’ in *Before the Civil War*, ed. by H. Tomlinson, (London, 1983).

[2] James I to Louis XIII, 13 December 1624, SP 78 [France]/73 f. 350.

[3] James to Charles and Buckingham, 1 April [1623], in G.P.V.Akrigg, ed., *The Letters of James VI and I* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 403.

[4] *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. by N. McClure (Philadelphia, 1939); and *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain: 1603–1624. Jacobean Letters*, ed. by M. Lee (New Brunswick, 1972).

[5] See, for example, Charles I to Christian IV, SP 75 [Denmark]/6 ff. 224–5. For a cluster of instructions surrounding the 1626 Hague Congress between England, Denmark and the United Provinces, see “Instructions” for Dutch negotiations, SP 84 [Holland]/129/188–191; “Instructions” for Danish negotiations, SP 84/129/191–201; and “Memorial”, SP 84/129/216–7.

[6] Carleton to Cottington, 28 Feb 1630 OS, SP 94 [Spain]/34 f. 192 [draft].

[7] [Conway] to [Wake], [late 1627], SP 99 [Venice]/28 f. 181.

[8] Buckingham to Carleton and Holland, 23 Jan 1626/6, SP 78 [France]/77 f. 53. See also Rudyerd to Nethersole, SP 81/19 f.21, SP 81/22 f.152 and SP 81/31 f.222.

[9] Richelieu to Conway; and idem to Buckingham, 1 September 1624, SP 78 [France]/73 ff. 87 and 88; and Elizabeth to Conway, 22 May [1627], SP 81 [German States]/34 f. 193. See, for example, Christian IV to Charles I, 13 September 1627, SP 75 [Denmark]/8 f. 296.

[10] Herbert to Carleton, 31 January 1623, SP 78 [France]/72 f. 22.

[11] E. A. Beller, 'The Military Expedition of Charles Morgan in Germany', *English Historical Review* [1928], pp. 528-539; and Charles Dalton, *The Life and Times of General Sir Edward Cecil* (London, 1885).