THE PRIEST HUNTERS

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the lives of men employed by the Elizabethan government in the persecution of Catholics. They have received only fleeting attention in Tudor historiography, and that has been one-dimensional. This paper was written in the expectation that a detailed study would yield an explanation for the priest hunters' actions, and contribute something toward our knowledge of the Elizabethan attitude toward Roman Catholicism.

When I researched this paper, I paid particular attention to the priest hunters' own correspondence and publications, contained in the calendars of state papers for the reign and the microfilm series of English books published prior to 1640. I was also able to examine a number of the original documents held in the Public Record Office, London. As well, I examined the correspondence of other public figures, some Jesuit memoirs, and the standard secondary works.

I reached several conclusions. The first and earliest was that the priest hunters were part of an extensive network, the levels of which were interdependent. Hence, I made the decision to study examples at each level in order to have a complete picture. The second conclusion was that the priest hunters had clear reasons for their actions, ranging from coercion
to deeply held religious and political convictions. The third was that a surprising number of priest hunters had Roman Catholic backgrounds. And the fourth was that in attempting to justify their actions, the priest hunters sparked a blaze of religious controversy which has not yet abated in Tudor historiography. For this reason alone, they are historically important.
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The Priest Hunters

... They have suborned such a number of secret spies who, under colour of the Catholic religion, do insinuate themselves into our company and familiarity, and that with the pretence of such zeal, sincerity and friendship, that it seemeth a thing almost impossible either to decipher or to avoid them. These men to give intelligence, and inform our adversaries continually of all our actions, sayings and many times our secret intents....

- Father Richard Holtby, Catholic priest, referring to the priest hunters, 1582.

Notwithstanding, I determined with myself (for certain causes which I omit) to sound the depth of their devilish drifts (if I might) and the rather therefore used and frequented their company, whereby appeared unto me not a few of their ungracious and villainous hearts' faith, and disloyal minds, slanderous words, and most vile treasons.

- George Elliott, priest hunter, referring to the Catholics, 1581.


Prologue

After crossing the sea we sailed up the English coast. On the third day my captain and I saw what seemed to be a good place to put ashore. . . . At the first watch of the night we were taken ashore in the boat and dropped there. The ship spread its canvas and sailed on.


Father Gerard arrived in England in secrecy because it was illegal for him to be there at all. Between 1573 and 1590, the government of Queen Elizabeth I passed a series of statutes designed to make Roman Catholic life in England impossible. The religious Act of Uniformity was enforced, establishing penalties for recusants. Catholics whose children were being educated abroad were ordered to return them without delay. Jesuits and seminary priests were barred from the kingdom, and those who harboured them were considered guilty of high treason. "Seditious" books were outlawed, as were any communications from the See of Rome. But the question remained: who was going to enforce these laws?

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In a quiet office in London, the Queen's secretary Sir Francis Walsingham was preparing part of the answer. In October 1584, he was issued five hundred crowns "for the Secret Service". This quickly became a quarterly allowance. By September 1590, it had quintupled. In another office nearby, Walsingham's assistant, Thomas Phelippes, was decoding correspondence which poured in daily from all over England, from France, Spain, Italy, Scotland and the Low Countries. The correspondence was from Walsingham's agents, and it contained information on priests.

In offices and prisons all over London, and in towns the length of the country, other men were at work. They were examining Catholic prisoners and presiding at Catholic trials. They were writing speeches, sermons and books denouncing the influence of the See of Rome. They were waiting and watching for days at a time in remote country villages. They were bursting into great houses with warrants, searching every corner for priests in hiding.

These men were the priest hunters, and their work had just begun.

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The Priest Hunters: An Introduction

During the reign of Elizabeth I, 189 Catholics were executed. Traditionally, this has never been considered an overwhelming number, especially compared to Mary Tudor's reign which saw 282 Protestant martyrs over a much shorter period. However, the 189 who died at the hands of Elizabeth's officials have a historical interest not possessed by their predecessors. Firstly, they were only the tip of the iceberg. For every Catholic who was executed, there were many more who spent the rest of their lives in prison or in exile. The Elizabethan government jailed so many priests that it had to institute a prison exclusively for them -- Wisbech Castle, which was full to overflowing for most of the reign. And English Catholic refugees abounded on the Continent.

Secondly, there was the question of why the 189 were executed. In Mary's reign, the reason had been simple -- religious dissent. Protestant martyrdoms had been justified by heresy laws. But in Elizabeth's, it was more complicated.

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2 Although I have relied somewhat on the Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, I have also been able to examine a number of the original documents held in the Public Record Office, London. This reference from the original unpublished State Papers, Domestic Series, Elizabeth I, Public Record Office, Series SP 12/-/-.. Hereafter P.R.O. SP/12/-/-.. For this reference, P.R.O. SP 12/195/21.
The government insisted that Catholics died, not for their faith, but for treason against the state. The truth of this statement has preoccupied historians ever since. Protestant historiography has created the illusion of a benevolent Queen, surrounded by wise councillors, who executed only the most dangerous of traitors. Before a Catholic was prosecuted in Elizabethan England [so the story went], he or she had to be guilty of the most heinous crimes against the State. Owning a rosary, attending Mass, even being a priest, was not a grave enough offence to die. This is the great lie of Elizabeth's reign, sustained by all those in power and nurtured by cleverly orchestrated propaganda. In fact, simply being a Roman Catholic was enough for many to be arrested, imprisoned and put to death. The government's goal was not simply to repel foreign invasion and protect the sovereign, as was so vociferously maintained; it was to eradicate Catholicism in any form.

Finally, the Catholics were hunted down and caught in a way which was not likely to have been employed in Mary Tudor's time. Mary's martyrs were either well known Protestant theologians who had made their views eminently clear, or lowly beings who did not remain quiet about their dissent. By the

time Elizabethan religious persecution began, the rules had changed on both sides. The Catholic victims had gone underground. The government sent predators after them who were part of an extensive and successful espionage system. Of the 471 Catholic priests identified as "active" during the reign, only 171 had five years or longer at large before they were caught: ". . . no less than 294 were at one time or another in the government's hands, that is over 62%. It is not always realized how successful the government was in tracking down the priest who came to England. . . ."

This grim success rate was engineered by the men who the Catholics called "the priest hunters." The contemporary term generally referred to undercover spies. For the purposes of this paper, the definition will be extended to include those public officials who took a lively interest in persecuting Catholics and dedicated their careers to doing so. The reasons for this extension are twofold: firstly, the government officials were, if anything, more anti-Catholic than the spies and equally active in their own sphere. Secondly, the two levels of priest hunting were interdependent. It is impossible to understand the life of the spy without understanding those who controlled him, and vice versa.


The priest hunters were the nasty secret of the Elizabethan religious settlement. They moved between every line of its history, now in hiding, now in the Queen's uniform. They were to be found in every class of society, with varying educational backgrounds, and on both sides of the religious divide. A complete hierarchy existed. It began with the lowly hired spy who may have been just literate enough to compose a rough letter. One stage up were the better educated "poursuivants" -- a type of sergeant-at-law who were officials of the Crown and who arrested Catholics and examined them on order. Many prominent priest hunters began their careers this way. Then there were the local authorities in each shire -- the sheriffs and justices of the peace who authorized arrests and presided at examinations. These were often composed of the local gentry. At the national level in London were the men who not only made decisions about the more notorious Catholics, but who also took an active role in determining policy. These men were justices of the King's Bench, Members of Parliament, leading Anglican clergymen, and appointed public officials. They were well educated, articulate, and usually from established if not brilliant social backgrounds. The men from this category who are mentioned in this paper have been singled out because they displayed a singular interest in the apprehension and persecution of Catholics over other concerns, and because
they took every opportunity to indulge their interests. These were the men who voluntarily served on special commissions, who made speeches in public against the Roman Catholics, and who hired numerous underlings to assist them in their campaigns. They are of more interest than the very highest level of priest hunter -- the great statesman with direct access to the monarch -- because they were able to devote almost all their time to one objective.

This hierarchy was not fixed. It was possible for a man to move from the lowest rung to near the top within the space of his career. Moreover, the priest hunters often worked in dual roles: spy and poursuivant; judge and examiner; propagandist and statesman. And there were countless "little people" between the lines -- printers, pamphleteers, casual informants -- who supported the priest hunting organization. Despite their divergent backgrounds and positions, the priest hunters had certain views in common. And chief among them was the conception of an ideal society with no papists in it.

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But who were these men? Where did they come from, and why did they become such efficient instruments of religious persecution? And why does no one talk about them now? Part of the answer lies in the nature of their work -- secretive, double-dealing, unwilling to commit anything of importance to paper. The other part lies in the propaganda whitewash the priest hunters themselves helped to create -- the in-print position that Roman Catholics under Elizabeth died for treason, not for their faith. Consequently, if the priest hunters are mentioned at all in standard histories, it is briefly and often reluctantly. They are "Government agents", "loyal Englishmen" or "Puritans". They are suborned into the larger and better known phenomenon of "Mr. Secretary Walsingham's Secret Service" and made responsible for everything from monitoring Court scandal to the unravelling of the Babington Plot. They are paid spies, no more, with no allowances made for personality or individual convictions. The only historiography willing to discuss them at length is the Catholic martyrology; here, they are the villains of the piece. The men who hunted down Edmund Campion and his

fellows are portrayed as monsters without motivation or beliefs.

It is the purpose of this paper to learn more about the priest hunters -- their backgrounds, careers, loyalties and goals. Such an examination should lead us to some conclusions about their thought processes in particular, and on the attitudes held towards Catholicism in Elizabethan society in general. If we can understand why so many people were willing to spy, persecute, even to betray their own families; then we shall be further along the road to understanding the English problem with religious tolerance which persisted throughout the nineteenth century. A greater appreciation should be gained as well of the Elizabethan propaganda machine which was run by priest hunters or those closely allied to them. This machine effectively covered up a religious terror with the veneer of political necessity; as such, it is deserving of scrutiny.

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Chapter One: The Making of a Priest Hunter

Priest hunting was not desirable employment, even in Tudor England. It was dangerous, demanding, frustrating and ill-paid. What sort of people, then, were attracted to it, and why? An examination of the priest hunters' family, religious and social backgrounds will demonstrate that while there were differences among these men, there were also recurrent patterns. Most of them had either a determination to preserve the status quo, or a Catholic background which made them useful to the Elizabethan government and ideal targets for coercion.

Religious views, one way or another, were perhaps the single most important factor in the evolution of a priest hunter. Of the thirteen active spies mentioned in this paper, nine had Catholic ties which had been formed prior to their involvement in priest hunting. Six had been born, raised and educated as Catholics; the other three were either double agents or admitted to a period of Catholicism at some point in their life. Two were apostate priests. This is revealing, especially when their correspondence shows these men literally informing against their own families and friends. To the Elizabethan government, hiring them made sense. Catholics (or ex-Catholics) made the best spies, because only they had the requisite contacts to get good information.
They moved easily among the Papists, were accepted by them, and gained their confidence in a way that a stranger never could. They were less likely to slip up if tested. These "wolves in sheep's clothing", as the Catholics called them, were common. Some, like Walsingham's agent Ben Beard, were the scions of prominent Roman Catholic families. Beard was born Benjamin Tichbourne, a name which figures prominently in the correspondence on recusancy in the sixteenth century. His letters routinely referred to his "Papist" relatives, and to the fact that his grandmother sheltered priests. George Elliott, a relatively inexperienced priest hunter, accomplished in 1581 a great coup; he tracked down and arrested Edmund Campion, the Jesuit priest who became Elizabeth I's most famous martyr. Elliott maintained that the trail which led him to Campion began with his own brief conversion to Catholicism while he was in the service of the Roper family, relatives of Sir Thomas More. Ironically, the contacts he made with one great Catholic's descendants assisted him in the persecution of another.

1 John Gerard, Autobiography 41.
2 C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 183 #45; 184 #17; 165 #18.
3 Ben Beard to Lord Keeper Puckering, 28 February 1594.
4 P.R.O. SP 12/247/104.
Then there were the apostate Catholic priests. Anthony Tyrrell was, by his own admission, "sometime a seminariae priest" on the European Continent, but he ran into difficulties in the Roman Catholic fold. He approached English agents overseas and persuaded them to use him as a messenger. He then returned to England and threw himself on Walsingham's mercy. Tyrrell went on to spy on the Jesuits for Lord Burghley both in England and abroad. He converted to the Church of England, eventually entered the clergy, and by 1589 was preaching an establishment sermon at St. Paul's Cross. John Cecil, alias Snowden, also began as a seminary priest. He turned priest hunter after being apprehended by the English authorities in the spring of 1591 while returning from Spain. He did espionage work for Lord Burghley in Italy and Spain for the next few years, but unlike Tyrrell was not able to resolve his religious dilemma. By 1599 Cecil had returned

5  Anthony Tyrrell, A Fruitful Sermon Preached in Christchurch the 13 of Julie 1589, Containing an admonition unto virtue, and a dehortation from vice (London: 1588)

6  Saltonstall & Fletcher to Walsingham, 1 August 1587. Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the Reign of Elizabeth (London: Longman & Co. 1870--) p. 348. See also C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 199 #41; 201 #40

7  Tyrrell, A Fruitful Sermon

8  Interrogation of John Snowden, 22 & 23 May 1591. C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 238 #167-68.
to Catholicism -- but not before he had provided the English
with a considerable amount of information.

That any of these men should have betrayed their erst-
while co-religionists on such a scale is hard to believe,
until the circumstances are fully understood. Why would
Catholics defect and spy on their own? If we are to answer
this question without dismissing them as amoral vultures,
then we must recognize the pressures placed on them. Many
Catholics became priest hunters only after they were caught
and charged under the recusancy laws. Ben Beard was a prime
example. As Benjamin Tichbourne, he was accused of papistry
in 1581, but "was shown favour" -- probably because of his
high birth and powerful connections. In 1591 he was in trouble
again, and this time the government was unwilling to let
him off lightly. He was imprisoned in the Fleet, and first
shows his colours early in 1594, when he offers his services
to the Lord Keeper of the jail, George Puckering, as a priest
hunter. At this point, it is quite obvious that Tichbourne's
sole aim is to be released from prison. He "begs a trial,

9
Interrogation of Snowden by Burghley, 25 & 26 May 1591.
C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 238 #178-9, #181.

10
C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 147 #74
and if he does not discover some of those about the Court by Sunday night, will commit both his life and liberty to discretion... " In the meantime, he does his best to glean information from prison, missing no chance to plead his case:

The priests named are so infinite and their harbours so straitlie kept, that for my life I can never discover them unless I were amongst them at liberty... my good lord if it pleaseth you to make tryall of me, if I do not so apply myself as I deserve (if I gayne liberty) I will renege my life and liberty to your Lordship's good disposal, and will in the mean time do my best during my imprisonment to understand of them....

Beard informed regularly on his prison mates. His favourite target was Philip Tregion, member of a well known Catholic aristocratic family. Beard used his connections to enter Tregion's social circle inside the prison -- something a humbly born Protestant spy could never have managed. From Tregion's dinner table one evening, he reports:

They... having also some speech of the dangerousness of the time, and how rigorously Catholics were sifted, yet for all that saith Tregion's wife and Mrs. Soames who supped there also, that new priests came daily into this land and were reconciling to the catholic faith. As also how

11 Ben Beard to George Puckering, 5 May 1594. P.R.O. SP 12/248/95 & 96.

12 The same to the same, 5 May 1594. P.R.O. SP 12/248/96.
those good men, making no account of losing their lives, did hazard themselves to save men's souls, affirming that they thought in their conscience, that (as dangerous as the time was) yet within the town there was now daily as many masses said, as commonly in any country abode. . . .

Beard also informed on possible hiding places for priests in the great country houses with which he was familiar, and even offered to extract information from his own uncle. As a reward, in May 1594 he was released from jail. He wrote a few more letters to Puckering; these ceased by summer. Shortly afterwards, another spy wrote to Puckering, saying he "regrets incurring his displeasure for another man's cause" and he "would not spare him that so abused his Lordship."

It is unclear, but the circumstances suggest he was referring to Ben Beard. It is possible that Beard slipped back into the Catholic fold or fled the country; but, like John Cecil, he incriminated many of his own people first.

Beard and Cecil are two examples of men who were apparently unable to sustain their careers as informants. But during their time as priest hunters, they and others displayed an inordinate

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13 Beard to Morgan Jones, April 1594. SP 12/248/83.
14 The same to the same, 16 March 1594. C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 248 #30.
15 Morgan Jones to George Puckering, 13 July 1594. C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 249 #27.
pride in their connections and were quite well aware of their value to the state. Ben Beard at one point proposed a priest hunt in Ireland because "... being acquainted with divers Papists, [he] can discover them." 16 At the same time, he was attempting to locate priests at Court through his connections there. Shortly afterwards, he boasted that he had heard "... a good many matters as among the self of one still a Papist." 17 But the danger of his position shows when he begs the authorities for anonymity: "as it would be a great disgrace to him, his mother and all his kindred being Papists and recusants." 18 Thomas Dodwell, another of Walsingham's agents, went into France to Cardinal William Allen, president of the Jesuit college at Rheims, "... by whom he shall be appointed their agent and know their chief secrets. Hopes to do wonderful great service." 19 George Elliott used his lapse into Catholicism as an asset, saying he "... weaned himself away ... nevertheless using their company's skill, for that it gave me the better occasion, to see into the depths of their horrible intentions." 20 Regardless of the circumstances which led these men to inform on fellow Catholics, they ultimately played their connections for all they were worth.

16 Beard to Puckering, 5 May 1594. SP 12/248/95.
17 Beard to Jones, undated. P.R.O. SP 12/248/118.
18 Beard to Puckering. 28 Feb. 1594. P.R.O. SP 12/248/104
19 P.R.O. SP/12/168/29
20 Elliott, A Very True Report
On the other side of the religious coin were those priest hunters who were and always had been committed Protestants. As a rule, the closer a priest hunter was to power, the more likely he was to be a hidebound member of the establishment. These were men like Sir Nicholas Bacon, Keeper of the Great Seal; William Fleetwood, Recorder of London; Sir Richard Grenville, of naval fame; Justices Topcllyffe and Young; and Thomas Norton, MP, press officer, and propagandist. All these men used their positions to try to rid England of Catholics, and all of them were pillars of the Reformation.

Sir Nicholas Bacon, for example, was a lifelong friend of Matthew Parker, Elizabeth's first Archbishop of Canterbury and a committed Protestant. In his youth, Bacon was a favourite of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's; as a young man he was instrumental in, and profited from, the dissolution of the monasteries. He was held under suspicion in Mary Tudor's reign — a sure promise of favour in Elizabeth's. Throughout his life, he was an ardent supporter of the religious settlement of 1559. Bacon was also a vocal advocate of a Protestant political network, and endorsed alliances

with Scotland and the Netherlands to this end. After the massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Eve, he publicly suggested that French Catholics be expelled from England in retaliation. Politically and in a religious sense, Bacon did his utmost to make the Church of England the only legal religion. Upon his death, he was eulogized: "No patch of popish minde was ever in him founde/But favoured those and helped them to, who did the truth expound."  

William Fleetwood, who was appointed Recorder of London in 1571, was of Lancashire origins. There is evidence that he was a committed Protestant by Mary’s reign, if not earlier, and one of his best friends became a Marian martyr. Fleetwood was educated at Eton, Oxford and the Middle Temple. He used his legal background to gradually advance in a career of public service. He sat in every Parliament from 1558 to 1588, and was vocally anti-Catholic throughout. His first appointed office was Chief Serjeant-at-Law for Chester, then Queen’s Serjeant for Lancaster. He was appointed a Visitor for the

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22 J.P. Collier, "On Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper" *Archaeologia* 36 (1856) 340-41.
23 L. Ramsey, *A Short Discourse of Man’s fatall end* [sic] (London:1579)
Uniformity of Worship in 1559, and in 1561 began examining Catholic prisoners in the Marshalsea. Fleetwood viewed his appointment as Recorder as tantamount to being made police commissioner for the city of London, and he policed mostly the Catholics. From 1571 until his retirement in the early 1590's, most of his work was directed against the Catholic presence in the City.  

Sir Richard Grenville's family was another that profited considerably from the sale of monastic lands. He made his military reputation putting down Catholic rebellions in Ireland and he swore the Act of Uniformity at a time when many of his Cornwall neighbours were refusing. Grenville was periodically returned to Parliament, but it was on the local scene in Cornwall that his Protestant loyalties were the most obvious. When his proposal to explore the South Seas foundered in 1573, he retired to his country seat as a justice of the peace and sheriff. His most famous case was the discovery of the priest Cuthbert Mayne in 1577, but Grenville had many interests. He was a signatory to the Bond of Association for Cornwall in 1584 -- the document which pledged to defend England from invasion and to protect the Queen from assassination. He was actively involved in maritime defence

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P.R. Harris, "William Fleetwood, Recorder of the City, and Catholicism in Elizabethan England" Recusant History 7 #3 (1963) 109-118.
and mustering local militia at the time of the Armada.

Besides his obvious commitment to the Anglican establishment, Grenville seems to have had some personal interests which encouraged him to hunt priests. He was not above trying to aggrandize his status among the local gentry this way. During his well-documented persecution of Cuthbert Mayne, Grenville did his best to inculpate Sir Francis Tregion, in whose house Mayne had found shelter. Tregion happened to be connected to the Arundells of Devon, a powerful Catholic family who held sway over Protestant squires like Grenville. On another occasion, Grenville denounced the keeper of Tintagel Castle to the Privy Council as "an evil and papistical person", laid this fault at the Arundells' door, and recommended his own cousin for the post. Grenville also frequently engaged in piracy off the coast of Devon, a profitable enterprise in those times. His ships accumulated a number of charges,


27 As above.
and yet he retained his offices and privileged position. It is safe to assume that Grenville was an assiduous priest hunter in order that the government would overlook his misdemeanours.

Thomas Norton was another man whose loyalties were irretrievably Protestant, and who indeed became more radical as he went along. He married Thomas Cranmer's daughter. Lord Protector Somerset was his first sponsor, and John Foxe his good friend. He combined a Parliamentary with a literary career in his early days; in 1561 he translated and published Calvin's *Institutes* in English. In 1563, Norton was appointed to the Parliamentary commission for the royal succession, and remained one of those Protestants very concerned about England's fate should the Queen die childless. In 1567, he stepped up anti-Catholic measures by beginning a series of inflammatory pamphlets against Rome. In 1571, he was appointed Remembrancer to the Lord Mayor of London, and was again returned to Parliament. In 1579, he travelled to Rome for information about the Catholics, and in 1581 he reached the pinnacle of his career as the official censor of Catholic subjects, licenser of the London press and a commissioner at the trial of Edmund Campion. After this, Norton's career

fell prey to his increasing attachment to radical Protestant theology. He eventually went too far by criticizing the Anglican episcopal hierarchy. He was thrown into the Tower in 1584 and only released after Walsingham's intercession; he died shortly thereafter. Norton's subordination of all aspects of his career to priest hunting was extreme, but completely guided by his religious views.

Moving uneasily between the two extremes were a few unknown quantities. Anthony Munday, a playwright who became one of the chief government propagandists in the 1580's, was suspected of being a Catholic. He spent time at the Jesuit college in Rome and had numerous Catholic friends, but maintained that his only purpose was to spy on and expose the Jesuit designs. While he certainly became a vocal government spokesman in later years, his personal beliefs are difficult to trace. Similarly, several of Walsingham's most trusted spies did not indicate their religious backgrounds for posterity. The reports of Nicholas Berden, one of the most prolific and longest-lasting agents, were laconic in the

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extreme. Malverny Catlyn was another spy who was all business. Although Conyers Read has speculated that Catlyn had what he calls "Puritan tendencies", Catlyn's origins are obscure. The majority of the priest hunters, however, fall into the two sharply defined religious groups outlined above.

As a rule, those priest hunters who had Protestant connections and loyalties stayed with them. The reason for this was simple: they had the most to lose. Bacon, Norton, Fleetwood and Grenville all had a vested interest in the English Reformation. Without it, they would not have enjoyed wealth and privilege to the same extent. Admittedly, Norton expressed a genuine interest in radical theology, and was therefore more eloquently anti-Catholic. But all four, and others like them, firmly believed that it was necessary to eliminate Catholicism, if only for secular reasons.

The Catholics who turned priest hunter did so for negative reasons: either a growing conviction that they were on the losing side, or more likely because they had no choice. If they wanted to live out of prison, they had to turn spy.

31 Nicholas Berden to Walsingham, June 1586 P.R.O. SP 12/190/62; December 1586 SP 12/195/75; SP 12/190/30.
32 Conyers Read, Mr. Secretary Walsingham 320.
It might, therefore, be argued that these particular priest hunters were not devoted to destroying Catholicism. But it must always be remembered that they were only the tools of dedicated Protestants with real power. As will be seen in the next chapter, the apostate Catholics' determination to preserve their freedom far outweighed crises of conscience. Moreover, the priest hunters with the most doubtful origins often became more anti-Catholic than the Protestants. Perhaps this was because they needed protection. George Elliott was said to have feared Catholic reprisals for the rest of his life. Anthony Tyrrell may have dreaded the fate which awaited him if he re-converted. Or perhaps they genuinely accepted the Protestant propaganda package, which was a powerful one. One thing was certain. Their lives as priest hunters would be more uncertain and more dangerous than anything they had yet known.

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Chapter Two: A Day in the Life

Any effort to understand the priest hunter must include an examination of his daily life and the exact nature of his work. Only by tracing the practical implications of his career can we appreciate the concerns attendant upon this very uncertain walk of life. And only a close examination will determine the extent of governmental control over the priest hunting operation.

Priest hunters at the grass-roots level were spies. They were operational field agents, picking up and relaying information whenever and wherever they could. Their work, therefore, depended heavily on both surveillance and contacts. If a priest hunter had Catholic connections, so much the better. But whether he did or did not, a large part of his job still revolved around nocturnal meetings, payoffs to anonymous sources, checking known spots for activity and, most of all, pretending to be someone he was not in order to get information. A common tactic was to charge a priest hunter with some misdemeanour and imprison him alongside Catholics. Malverny Catlyn, one of Walsingham's agents, did this more than once and found it most effective. On one occasion, he wrote to Walsingham from Portsmouth (where he was working undercover) regretting that he had not been sent instead to the Marshalsea prison in London "... where he could have
insinuated himself among the prisoners there." Ben Beard did most of his espionage work while a prisoner in the Fleet. This line of surveillance was obviously a dangerous one; discovery could lead to death for the priest hunter. Beard talks in one of his letters about trying to get information on a particular subject from his prison sources "... but dare not press them or any enquiry but issues voluntarily from them, for fear of discovery."

There were other ways. Priest hunters had contacts everywhere, and worked hard to maintain them. When searching for Catholics in a city the size of London, for example, it was valuable to know an assortment of hostellers and publicans. William Sterrell, one of Walsingham's longest lasting and most versatile spies, used the Swan tavern in Bishopsgate as a repository for his correspondence with Thomas Phelippes, Walsingham's right-hand man. Similarly, Ben Beard's go-between was Morgan Jones in the City; he reports on one occasion "a common conveyor of Seminaries into this land, dwelling at the Green Dragon. ..." On other occasions,

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1 Catlyn to Walsingham, 25 June 1586. C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 190 #62.
3 Beard to Nicholas Bacon, 5 May 1594. P.R.O. SP 12/248/96.
4 Sterrell & Robinson to Phelippes, 1 May 1592. P.R.O. SP 12/262/3
5 Beard to Morgan Jones, date unknown. P.R.O. SP 12/268/118.
priest hunters made use of the lower orders. George Elliott eventually tracked down Edmund Campion with the help of a cook in the house that was sheltering him. These men thrived on innuendo, an incautious word, a shilling paid in the right direction. Once in the presence of the enemy, they blended into the background until the time came to act. George Elliott, with a companion, gained entry into the house which harboured Campion by posing as a Catholic anxious to hear Mass. They listened quietly to Campion's sermon, disappeared and returned hours later with a search party. Ben Beard used his Catholic connections to ingratiate himself with imprisoned recusants. Nicholas Berden knew all the favourite London hideouts for priests, and set a watch for them the minute he received intelligence that one was on the run; he apprehended Father William Weston after he saw him on the street heading to shelter. Malverny Catlyn had a network of informants all over England. He watched the sea ports especially; consequently, he not only knew when a priest had landed and where, but where he was headed, what he had brought with him and for whom.

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7 P.R.O. SP 12/248/83.

8 *C.S.P. Foreign* V. 19 #4

9 Catlyn to Walsingham, 1581? (undated) P.R.O. SP 12/151/5.
Surveillance was one half of the priest hunter's job: the other half was reporting the results. Communications were vital at all levels of the spy network. Of course, we have no way of knowing how much information was transmitted verbally: it is quite possible the priest hunters felt some things were too sensitive to be recorded. As it was, they took elaborate security precautions with their correspondence.

Ben Beard and William Sterrell, as mentioned, used public houses as go-betweens. When a missive was sent direct, it was common practice to assure the receiver of the bearer's trustworthiness. Aliases were common: Sterrell alone had five in the course of his career; Beard, Cecil, Catlyn and Berden all disguised their names at various times. Even Thomas Phelippes received communiqués under an alias: Mr. Morice. Sometimes, letters from operatives were written in cypher, to be decoded by Phelippes. Berden used onion juice; Sterrell framed some missives as one merchant to another discussing trade routes, writing crucial information ["... there are eight priests to come to England from Rome."] in code. The priest hunters' letters reflect the treacherous nature of their work.

10 William Sterrell @ Robert Robinson to Thomas Phelippes @ Mr. Morice, 1 May 1592. C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 242 #3.
11 Sterrell @ Robinson to Phelippes @ Morice, 13 June 1592. C.S.P.D. Eliz. Vol. 242 #53.
The priest hunters' primary mission was to hunt down Catholics for the authorities. However, they frequently used their successes to assist them in further work. If a spy located a recusant who was not particularly important prey, it was not uncommon to recommend he be spared in order to lead to more important arrests. These requests, providing they came from respected spies, were usually honoured. Both Beard and Catlyn provided detailed information against priests and recusants which was used by the government to set its priorities. Nicholas Berden frequently asked for these favours from Walsingham. On one occasion, he drew up a list of recommendations for recusants held in various prisons. Phelippes forwarded it to Walsingham. Opposite each, in Berden’s handwriting, is the terse recommendation "mete to be hanged", "fit for Wisbech" (the two most common suggestions) or other. According to Phelippes’ endorsement, "Such as are meet to be hanged are of the most traitorous mindes and dispositions." How Berden arrived at his evaluations we are not sure, but it is obvious that his opinion was valued. On numerous occasions, Berden asked for clemency for a Catholic to enhance his image in papist circles. In his own words for one such case: "In which suit I earnestly pray your furtherance,  

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12 Berden to Phelippes, December 1586. P.R.O. SP 12/190/62. See also Catholic Record Society, Miscellanea 261-2.
not only for the gain, but also to make them beholden to me and thereby to make them instruments to do Her Majesty good service, though against their will." And another time:

I humbly thank your honor for that it pleased you to spare Christopher Dryland's life at the last sessions, at my request, assuring you that it hath much increased my credit amongst the Papists ... I protest I abhor the man in regard of his profession, and the only thing that moved me thereunto was for that the man is singularly well persuaded of me.

Like most priest hunters, Berden was not interested in mercy, only in results.

A priest hunter's career could, and often did, take him out of the country. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of this study is its geographical range. Walsingham was well informed about priests travelling to England because he retained spies in almost every Western European country. It is certain that he had plants at various times in all the Jesuit colleges on the continent, the royal courts, and the most popular crossing-places for Catholics sailing to England. Priest hunters were part of an extensive network, and they knew it. In March 1586, Berden wrote to Walsingham proposing an elaborate espionage system with overseas contacts, through

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13 Berden to Walsingham, Dec. 1586. P.R.O. SP 12/190/75.
which Walsingham could intercept the correspondence of such known Catholic plotters as Throckmorton, Englefield, Cardinal Allen and Father Persons, Mary Queen of Scots and Catherine de Medici. He also suggested a possible intelligence base for defeating the Spanish Armada. That Berden could even envision such an arrangement is a tribute to Walsingham's Secret Service capabilities. And something like this was indeed implemented. Gilbert Gifford, the spy who became famous for his role in uncovering the Babington Plot, was an active participant. Early in 1587, Gifford was in France, assigned to collect intelligence on the European reaction to Mary Queen of Scots' execution. By June, Phelippes was sending him money with instructions "... to practice with the agents of foreign princes." Despite being thrown into a French prison, Gifford continued to collect information on the upcoming Armada as well as other aspects of the Catholic threat. In October, 1588, he was able to warn Walsingham of "eight priests arrived from Rome, of whom John Gerard and Arthur Sheffield will be in England in a few days." He also advised that Gratley, a known Jesuit, had arrived at Rome and that "his Holiness hath

16 Berden to Walsingham, March 1586. P.R.O. SP 12/187/81.
17 Phelippes to Gifford, June 1587. P.R.O. SP 12/199/96.
sent Shippes to Spain." William Sterrell regularly informed from the Continent, where he spent most of his time, on priests bound for England. He provided details on the channels being used for Catholics to get into the country: "The ordinary ways of sending to England are Flushing, Calais and Dunkirk; both letters and priests are set ashore from both towns." Sterrell spent time in the Low Countries, following Phelippines' instructions to "offer his help to the traitors." He writes quite casually stating he has a friend going to Germany who for twenty nobles would go on to Rome if Phelippines wants news from the seminary. Sterrell adds that he "deals with Catholic, which is the surest way." This indicates that infiltration of the Jesuit schools was nothing new. Indeed, Anthony Munday had lived in the college at Rome fourteen years prior to that. Munday returned to England and wrote a biassed account of life in the seminary which played up internal dissonance and satirized many tenets of the Catholic faith. Although Munday never admitted it, it was widely suspected that he had been sent as a government plant. Whether the priest hunter was a spy or a young traveller, his connections were far-flung.

19 Sterrell to Phelippines, 13 Jun 1592. P.R.O. SP 12/242/53.
21 Sterrell to Phelippines, 1593. P.R.O. SP 12/246/64.
22 Anthony Munday, The English Romayne Life
Any operation as extensive as this was susceptible to certain risks. And chief among them was the presence of double agents. The English government could never be quite sure of its priest hunters; there were too many temptations in the way of a trained spy, and he moved too far away from the national orbit to be controlled. However, the government did sometimes manage to use double agents to its own advantage. One of the most famous was Gilbert Gifford, who not only posed as a Catholic adherent of Mary Queen of Scots; he actually carried letters between Mary and the European Catholic powers. However, he rerouted them via Phelippes' office for decoding and the information of the English authorities. By doing this, Gifford was going one step further than most priest hunters. He was not only involving himself in a Catholic plot, but he was accepting pay from both sides. And he never quite forgot the power that had given him. Two years later, he wrote to Walsingham from a French prison that he "... has great offers if he will cease dealing with England." The veiled threat was clear.

Thomas Morgan was a well-known Welsh Catholic, and a self-proclaimed follower of the Queen of Scots. He was secretary

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to Mary's emissary in France and facilitated her European correspondence. In 1583, he was drawn into a plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth. And yet the English employed him, because Morgan's increasing hostility toward the Jesuits made it easy to take advantage of him. In the 1590's, he spent time in both Spain and the Netherlands. He wound up in Antwerp doing his best to impede the Jesuit traffic into England. Robert Persons held Morgan directly responsible for divisions in the Catholic ranks.

But double agents cut both ways, as the English well knew. William Parry was an example of a once loyal priest hunter turned bad. He began his career in the service of the Earl of Pembroke, and then the Queen. In the 1570's he hired himself out as a spy, and went to Italy. Unknown to the government, he converted to Catholicism. By the early 1580's he was a double agent. He was implicated in the plot to assassinate the Queen along with Thomas Morgan. His Catholic sympathies became obvious then, and again in December 1584, when he made a passionate speech in Parliament opposing the Bill Against Jesuits and Seminary Priests. Parry was eventually tried for treason and executed in March 1585.

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26 As above.
government had learned a sobering lesson in the priest hunters' potential duplicity and the havoc it could wreak.

Surveillance, foreign connections, double agents -- the priest hunters lived in a dangerous and uncertain world, and they were well aware of it. Above all else, the insecurity of these men's existence -- the distrust, the uneasiness, the fear for their lives -- leaps out from the pages of their correspondence. They were constantly watching -- the Catholics, each other, their employers. The priest hunters were used by the Tudor administration, but at the same time held in suspicion by it, because of the underhanded nature of their work and the potential for betrayal. As a result, they were constantly trying to convince superiors of their loyalty. Malverny Catlyn had many ups and downs in his career, and at one time wrote to Walsingham begging to be restored to favour. Gilbert Gifford swore, "All the malice of his enemies cannot prevail. Has suffered much, but would endure a thousand deaths rather than offend his honour. . . ."

William Sterrell wrote a revealing letter to Phelippes in which he stated he was sorry that Phelippes doubted the truth of his relations. We do not have Phelippes' original

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28 Catlyn to Walsingham, c. 1580. *C.S.P.D. Eliz.* V. 146 #15.
30 Sterrell to Phelippes, 15 Feb. 1592. *V.* 241 #45.
profession of doubt, but the fact that such a prolific spy would even be questioned is interesting. Nicholas Berden hastened to assure Walsingham of his unwillingness to act independently: "For that I would not deal in any matter with the practicers beyond the seas without your Worship's special allowance, the matters in themselves being passing dangerous and the practicers both traitorous and exceeding subtle." The letters of all these men show anxiety and a desire to be perceived as trustworthy.

Unfortunately, little remains of the directives which provoked this response. One which survives -- Robert Cecil's reply to a letter of John Snowden's -- is illuminating. Cecil emphasizes that he can only do so much for Snowden. His suspicion is evident when he exhorts Snowden "... wheresoever you resort amongst Catholics and be received for conscience only by them, and with this purpose in you to do service avoiding always any needless frequentation of these persons. . . . ." Obviously, Cecil felt his spy was an easy target. He then goes on to discuss some documents which Snowden had tried to forward from the Continent and which have been lost in transit. Cecil apparently feels there

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is a more sinister explanation:

For when I consider it seeing your Papers have miscarried, the greatest part of your loyalty and your fellow's depends on your own assertions. It is to expect at your hands, this great favour shewed you, must bring forth good fruit with profitable correspondency to Her Majesty and your Countrie's good which is the true end of your enlargement, and cause of this extraordinary favour as many others thirst for... 32

"The greatest part of your loyalty... depends on your own assertions." -- this statement summarizes the government attitude toward the priest hunters. They were considered useful, but not to be trusted. Because many of them were recruited when they were in trouble with the law, they must be conscious of the privileges granted them. And their work must have quick results, or all their loyalties would be held suspect. The pressure on these men was immense. It coloured each decision and every action.

The priest hunters' insecurity was reflected in a more concrete way: their constant need for money. Most of the operatives were paid out of Walsingham's Secret Service treasury, but judging from their correspondence these payments were few and far between. Ben Beard called attention

32 Robert Cecil to John Snowden, June 1591. P.R.O. SP 12/239/3.
to his financial straits several times, and he did most of his work in prison. This suggests that spying in Tudor England was an expensive business even if one was not mobile. For men like Gifford, Berden and Sterrell, who were travelling on the Continent and using the foreign network, the need for money was acute. Gifford, who settled in France under the alias of Jacques Colerdin, quickly racked up expenses. He was continually badgering Phelippes for money, and only occasionally got it. Nicholas Berden seems to have worked on some sort of commission or bribery basis. On two occasions, he wrote to Phelippes asking for the release of prisoners. "Sir if it please you to procure me the liberty of Ralph Bickley, Seminary priest in the Gatehouse, at his honour's hands. it will be worth 20l to me." William Sterrell was constantly asking for money to subsidize his considerable activity. One of his letters to the long-suffering Phelippes demonstrates the frustration priest hunters often felt in dealing with their employers. He " . . . has received letters, but no money and is much hindered for the lack of it. With it he could intercept the Cardinal's packets." 

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33 Ben Beard's reports, spring 1594. P.R.O. SP 12/268/30. 67 & 88.
34 Gifford to Phelippes, 3 Jan 1588. C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 208 #4; 23 Jan 1588 V. 208 #20; Feb. 1588 208 #48.: V. 203 #36; V. 199 #96.
35 Nicholas Berden to Phelippes, c. 1586. P.R.O. SP 12/195/75; SP 12/190/30.
36 Sterrell @ Robert Robinson to Phelippes @ John Morice, 13 June 1592. P.R.O. SP 12/242/53.
Generally, the Elizabethan government was long on instructions and short on money. For spies who were incurring large debts in both travelling expenses and bribes, the financial battle was never-ending.

Tied in with monetary concerns was the question of what special consideration should be given to the priest hunters, and what was to happen to them at the end of their careers. The Elizabethan government considered in many cases that special consideration had already been extended to them by being spared treason penalties in exchange for spying. On the priest hunters' side, however, there was understandable concern for the future. And some, indeed, were rewarded. Edward Thorne had been employed hunting down recusants in Darbyshire. In May 1590, he was brought before the Court of King's Bench and fined twenty marks for words spoken against another man. The Privy Council quickly intervened, stating that Thorne had been "... doing Her Majesty's important services", and deserved consideration "In regard of Mr. Thorne's former services once more to signify unto you that in no case you proceed to judgement in that matter." Ben Beard was released from prison after supplying information. Nicholas Berden apparently ended his days as Purveyor of the Poultry

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Counter Prison in London. Gilbert Gifford was awarded a pension for his role in uncovering the Babington Plot. And higher profile priest hunters received steady advancement to increasingly important positions. As a rule, the prominent figures got the money, the promotions and the privileges. The spies benefitted only rarely. Some disappear from the records without a trace; some returned to the Catholic fold; others, like Berden and Gifford were rewarded but on a small scale.

Two things become clear from all this. The first is that the undercover priest hunter's career span was very short, ranging in most cases from one to five years. (William Sterrell at seven years was a notable exception.) After that, a spy had either become known and was of no further use, or moved on voluntarily. The second is that when the spy had come to the end of his run, he could not expect bouquets from his employers. The government attitude was clear: it had rescued many of these men from the law to begin with, and they should consider themselves lucky. Even if that was not the case, the Tudor administration exacted complete dedication from its servants as a natural obligation. The work was arduous, the pay sporadic, and the career necessarily short. It is understandable that some priest hunters

38 Conyers Read, Mr. Secretary Walsingham 328.
39 C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 199 #96.
40 Read, 327-8.
left the service as soon as they had paid off whatever debts they owed. But there were those who remained as long as they possibly could, and those who, while they enjoyed greater benefits, pursued Catholics above and beyond the call of duty. The next chapter deals with their ethical reasons for doing so.
Chapter Three: The Reason Why

The priest hunters' reasons for doing what they did, and their vision of what they were accomplishing, is at least as important as how they accomplished it. How did these men see their work, why did they persist in it, and what were their goals? Some weight must be given to the obvious reasons. Of course, a number of spies were under duress. But this was not the whole story. At the bottom of the scale, there might be a man forced to choose between spying or hanging. But at the top were men completely dedicated to eradicating Catholicism in England, who believed they were acting to save their country. And there were all sorts of mixed motives in between. Considered together, they point to a common attitude towards Roman Catholicism, politics and society which tells us a great deal about the world of the priest hunters.

Like any group, the priest hunters were splintered between moderates, radicals and (to us) unknown quantities. Many of the spies' reports were so laconic it is difficult to discern any personal convictions. Nicholas Berden, for example, was not one for expounding theories. His missives were businesslike, his recommendations calculated; if he
betrayed anything else, it was accidental. But at the opposite extreme was a man like Justice Richard Topclyffe.

Topclyffe was passionately devoted to tracking down, examining and persecuting Catholics. Even to the unversed reader, his vitality and commitment leap from every line of his correspondence. He firmly believed that it was a citizen's duty to preserve the Church of England as the symbol of political solidarity, and he did not tolerate any deviations. Topclyffe was the scion of a prosperous Lincolnshire family who were devoted Protestants, and he frequently called attention to this fact. His advancement under the Elizabethan administration was characteristic of the top-ranking priest hunter. He was returned as MP for Beverly in 1572, and again for Old Sarum in 1586. He was then employed by Lord Burghley in a capacity which remains unclear, but obviously had a lot to do with persecuting Catholics, as he functioned as a poursuivant most of the time. In the early 1590's, Topclyffe was officially recognized with a commission against the Jesuits in addition to his duties as judge. Before his career was over, he had involved himself in priest hunting in every corner of the country.

1 P.R.O. SP 12/190/62.
Topclyffe had two maxims: it was essential to do as much as possible, and the end was always worth the means. Consequently, he had no compunction in applying for a licence to torture Catholics in his own home. A contemporary description of him is succinct: "He was old and hoary and a veteran in evil." Topclyffe routinely practiced cruelty and deception which would have made the Borgias recoil. After the arrest of one family for harbouring priests, he directed that the mother be separated from her children to achieve better results:

...hears that Mrs. Bellamy’s two daughters are committed to the Gatehouse, but that the old hen that hatched those chickens, the worst that ever was, is yet at a lodging. She should be sent to the Gatehouse, and kept from her daughters ... let them feel a day or two's imprisonment; will then play the part of a true man, with charity in the end, to the honour of the State.

He then wrote a completely deceptive letter to Mrs. Bellamy, exhorting her to show "loyalty and obedience." In the same case Topclyffe is said to have had one of his employees seduce a Bellamy daughter. The desired effect was achieved: the girl

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3 C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 230 #57.
4 John Gerard, Autobiography, 68.
became pregnant, was forced to marry Topclyffe's man and turned witness for the prosecution against her own family.

One thing is significant: Topclyffe was conscious that not everyone shared his "diligence", as he described it. In the letter concerning Mrs. Bellamy, he admonished the warden, "Neither Mr. Young nor any other commissioner must know that the writer has had anything to do with it." Richard Young was a fellow magistrate and certainly part of the priest hunting organization. And yet Topclyffe did not trust him. Neither did Ben Beard, who in April 1594 wrote to a fellow spy worried about the arrest of a recusant that he had engineered. Beard "fears if Justice Young knows he is taken by the writer's means, he will tell the Papists of it."

The fact that a man in the same position and with ostensibly the same loyalties was being circumvented indicates a divergence of opinion among the priest hunters. Obviously, some had more scruples than others.

These discrepancies were reflected to some extent in the priest hunters' attitude toward Roman Catholicism. Some -- although not many -- conceded that some recusants were more

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7 Although the source of this rumour is a Catholic one, it appears to be borne out by Topclyffe's correspondence. Strype, V. 4 53.

8 Topclyffe's note to examination of priest Robert Gray, Oct. 1593. P.R.O. SP 12/245/138. "Grey . . . was taken again by my diligence."
dangerous than others. In conjunction with George Egerton, William Fleetwood wrote for the Privy Council a list of articles to be administered to Catholics during examination. Their avowed purpose was "... to discerne those that carry traitorous maligned minds against Her Majesty from those whose simplicitie is misled by ignorant or blinde zeal." The articles recommend severity toward the seminary priests, but concede that some Papists might be "... unlearned and ignorant, and so not capably informed herein." They suggest that tolerance might be extended to these people, but provide no criteria for determining ignorance. They make no distinction, either, between priests who were only practicing the Catholic religion and priests who were politically active. One senses that Fleetwood and Egerton felt the process was futile. A Roman Catholic was a traitor: the only question was how important he was. Thomas Norton, in an effort to express tolerance, only made things worse:

Although it may be true that some Papists are not traitors, because some men are seduced of simplicity or countenance, yet it is also true that there is no enemy to our Queen but he is a Papist, if he be of any religion at all.

10 Beard to Jones, April 1594, P.R.O. SP 12/248/83.
11 Fleetwood & Egerton to the Council, 20 July 1588. P.R.O. SP 12/212/70.
The process of selectivity was not very far advanced, even with those who chose to exercise it. And for every man who attempted to distinguish among Catholics, there was another like Richard Topclyffe who declared "my wish is not to have all papists to be shut up", only because "the prisons of all England cannot retain them."!

There was continual tension between the inclination to allow freedom of worship and the conviction that all manifestations of Catholicism were treasonous. Most of the conflict among the priest hunters themselves was produced by divergence of opinion in this area. The spies, especially, were very much affected by their long-term attitude towards Roman Catholicism. One of the most eloquently expressed predicaments was that of John Cecil, alias Snowden, the seminary priest who was arrested and turned spy. During his initial examination, Snowden stated that "his principle object in coming into England was to live in peace in his own country, and in the free exercise of his religion." He was prepared to inform on Spanish affairs, but only so Lord Burghley could see "how he might gain over the priests in England that were enemies to the Spanish practices, by allowing them the free exercise of their religion." Snowden's insistence that "it

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13 Topclyffe to the Lord Treasurer, 1590. Strype, V. 4 53.
is not so impossible as is generally thought to be a good subject, and at the same time a good Catholic" and that many priests "would come of themselves, if they might hope for liberty of conscience" was nothing short of revolutionary. This is proven by the length of time it took to negotiate his release -- obviously, the government agents were non-plussed by this man. Despite obvious risk to himself, Snowden continued to maintain that it was possible for Catholics and Protestants to co-exist as loyal subjects. He also held, with considerable courage, that a man's religion was not enough to convict him of treason. He wrote to Cecil:

I plead with you that I cannot in conscience accuse a Catholic as a Catholic, or a priest as a priest unless he stande on the other legge and be a lowe member or evil subject to his prince and country. If this be expected I will neither see nor guard nor come near any but of that little money I have I will live poorly to myself till the time serve to put into practice... the important business you wot of.

Snowden's fate is a commentary on the fate of religious toleration in Elizabethan England. He was unable to sustain his career as a spy and returned to Catholicism within a few years. Obviously, his views were not accorded a warm reception by his employers. Years later, he was to defend

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15 John Cecil to Robert Cecil, 1 June 1591. P.R.O. SP 12/239/2.
his involvement with the priest hunters by saying:

... if to procure by all honest, lawful, humble and practical means, the conversion of souls and redress of our brethrens' calamities, if to give to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's ... be treason, be spyery ... such a spy I am, and will be till death after death.

The fact was that very few of the priest hunters were able to "give to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's." Too many things stood in the way of their doing so. John Snowden, as far as staying power was concerned, was a failure. The men who survived in the business were the singleminded ones, who held certain beliefs which enabled them to function. And they believed that it was necessary to exterminate Roman Catholicism. It has been argued that the Elizabethans were not this bent on total destruction, that they targeted only the Roman Catholic priests and left the laity alone. This is not true. Of the 189 Catholics executed during the reign, sixty-two, or approximately one-third, were laymen. This figure does not include the many laymen who were imprisoned for recusancy and who figure prominently in the spies' reports. When a priest was caught,

16 John Cecil, A Discovery of the Errors Committed by a malicious mythologie titled an apologie, and compiled by William Criton pryst and professed Jesuite (Montmartre: 1599) pp. 9-12.


it was common practice to also arrest the people who had been sheltering him - women, children, servants and all. Topclyffe advocated no mercy. At one point, he urged his superiors not to hesitate to imprison gentlewomen: "... and seeing far greater is the fury of a woman once resolved to evil, than the rage of a man. I humbly beseech your Lordship, that the sex of women be not overlooked."

And even if the priests represented the majority of the victims, one must consider why. Priests were not killed for their political danger alone. They were killed because without them there would be no more Roman Catholics. Topclyffe wrote an entire treatise stressing the importance of eliminating priests so that the Catholic religion would not flourish. Thomas Norton was convinced that without priests, God's word would manifest itself plainly to the Queen's subjects: "... and for the delivery and expectation of it, it behoveth you, being no better clerkes than you are, to credit the whole Parliament, the learned clergy of the Realme, and those that teach you by the book of God." To say that English Protestants objected to Catholic priests

19 Topclyffe to the Lord Treasurer, 1590. Strype, 4 53.
21 Thomas Norton, To the Queene's Majesty's poor deceived subjects of the North Country (London: 1569) Sig. Fj V.
proselytizing because it was against statutory law is facile. They objected to proselytism because it implied continuance of the Catholic religion. Father Joseph Lecler points out that the Elizabethan recusancy laws were directed toward the elimination of priests from the kingdom. "Its purpose was . . . to destroy Catholicism throughout the kingdom by depriving it of priests."

This theory of deprivation extended to the outward trappings of Catholicism. The priest hunters reasoned that if they got rid of all the priests and all the "trinkets", the old religion would have nothing left to succour it and would gradually disappear. They realized they could not kill every Catholic in England, and they did not try. Instead, they killed every form and representative of Roman Catholic worship they could get their hands on. All successful priest hunters included in their reports an account of the religious paraphernalia found during an arrest. The government was extremely interested in how many rosaries, crucifixes and medals immigrating priests brought with them, and for whom they were intended. In January 1580, the Privy Council issued a letter expressing concern over "Popish articles" being sold in the City and requesting the trade be controlled.

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24 P.R.O. SP 12/151/5.
The priest hunters became preoccupied with these so-called "shows without substance" and were convinced that if the tangible proofs of Catholicism could be destroyed, the religion itself would evaporate.

Tied in with the determination to eliminate symbols was a growing distaste for Roman Catholicism as a kind of sorcery that bewitched otherwise loyal subjects. The image of something sick, evil, even demonaical, is very prevalent in the priest hunters' writing. Anthony Munday refers to priests as "wolves in sheep's clothing" and says they accomplish their goals with:

... threatenings, lies of miracles of their Church, and stynking Reliques they show; they make our Englishmen bewitched by them, so they stand in as much awe to offend him [the Pope] as they do God, who is in heaven. For through his Indulgences granted to their Agnus Deis, their Beades, Crosses, and medals, they as verily think that they redeem so many souls out of Purgatory as the Pope doth set upon them at his blessing them.

In his account of life at the English college in Rome, Munday mocks various practices of the Catholic faith, and refers with revulsion to such things as graven images, beads and

penance. George Elliott refers to "Popish relics" with

\[\text{26} \quad \text{Anthony Munday, } \textit{The English Romayne Life} 32-37.\]

\[\text{27} \quad \text{As above.}\]
contempt and to his own flirtation with Catholicism as a sick dream: "I myself about that time by the space of one quarter of a year together, was deeply bewitched and drawn into their darkness, as the blindest bayarde of them all." But, he says, "by God's especial grace", he "... perceived all their witcheries, forgeries and enchantments to be shows without substance." A modern historian notes that these images of iniquity and deceit were not uncommon in the latter part of the sixteenth century: "... the Antichristian nature of popery, summed up in the identity of the Pope as AntiChrist, provided the central organizing principle for a whole view of the world." The priest hunters were men of their times in that Roman Catholicism was to them false, evil and deserving of elimination.

The priest hunters' perception of the law was inextricably bound up in their treatment of Catholics. As children of the Act of Supremacy, most of them believed that simply to practice Catholicism was to break English law, and they voiced their belief at every opportunity. The keystone for contemporary opinion was a publication entitled The Execution of Justice in England authored by William Cecil. Cecil wrote it in response to Cardinal Allen's denunciation of the English persecution of Catholics. Consequently, he took pains to

28 George Elliott, A Very True Report, Sgg. A3 l. - A3 ν
justify the measures taken. He insisted that all the Catholics who had been executed were tried legally and condemned for violations of statutory law. The Jesuits, he said, were breaking the law in that:

... the whole scope of their secret labours is manifestly proved to be secretly to win all people with whom they dare deal so to allow of the Pope's said bulls and of his authority without exception as, in obeying thereof, they take themselves fully discharged of their allegiance and obedience to their lawful prince and country.

Here was the crux of the matter. To be a Catholic was illegal because it demanded an allegiance outside England, in direct contravention of the statutes. The priest hunters were forced to uphold these statutes, because it was they and their fathers who had passed them through Parliament not so very long before. Sir Nicholas Bacon insisted that the Queen did not prosecute Catholics simply for their religion; however, he saw nothing odd about penalizing recusants (ie. those who refused to attend Church of England services) because "... if they had not given thereby manifest occasion by their open and wilful contempt of Her Majesty's laws they had not been in any wise molested or dealt with at all." The very choice of worship was to Bacon, and men like him, a transgression of the law.


31 Nicholas Bacon, Speech to the Star Chamber, 15 June 1570. P.R.O. SP 12/71/16.
Anthony Munday played upon the requirement of Catholics to be loyal to the Pope and argued that this necessarily precluded the ability to be a good subject. He insisted that Edmund Campion and his fellows were not simple proselytizers, but were sent into England to do the Pope's bidding and therefore to do treason. The first step to sedition, maintained Munday, was conversion:

The people must first be reconciled from their religion, to embrace the laws and decrees of the Pope, then, they must be persuaded to forsake their duty and allegiance to Her Majesty, because she is excommunicated out of the Pope's Church and he hath freed them of any obedience they should use to her. . . .

When Edmund Campion and his confederates came to trial, they were charged, significantly, with counts other than conspiracy. These included "overthrowing the religion now professed in England", "persuading and seducing the Queen's subjects to the Romish religion, obedience to the Pope, from the duties and allegiance to her Highness." Campion argued that proselytizing was not tantamount to treason, but in vain. His refusal to swear to the Supremacy was held against him, his conversions viewed as a deliberate attempt to pervert the Queen's subjects. Religious and temporal issues were simply too closely inter-

32 Anthony Munday, *A Brief Discourse of the Taking of Edmund Campion* (London: 1582) Sig. Aiii f

twined in Elizabethan England. In the words of a Catholic historian: "From the year of Elizabeth's excommunication, the political character of the persecution became so inextricably bound up with the religious that the profession of catholicism came to be regarded as in itself dangerous to the state." Small wonder that priest hunters' reports dealt mainly with proving a man was a priest, and that he was proselytizing. Nothing else was required to prove sedition.

There was also the issue of legal means to an end. What were the boundaries for priest hunters in the execution of their duty? The allowances were usually generous, but there were limits. When William Fleetwood, in his zeal, broke into the Portuguese ambassador's chapel looking for Englishmen attending Mass, he was imprisoned for it. Richard Topclyffe also spent a brief time in prison, ostensibly for his cruelty in torturing Catholics. But they were both forgiven their transgressions and quickly restored to favour. Priest hunters worked in disguise and it was considered a necessity; priests did the same and it was considered proof of treasonous intent. Torture and entrapment were common. No questions were ever raised as to how "evidence" against Catholics was obtained. Thomas Norton, who earned the epithet of "the Rack-master", had something to say about the employment of

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34 Meyer, 128-9.
35 P.R. Harris, "William Fleetwood . . ." Recusant History
torture in those times. According to him, silence was considered a sign of guilt and torture was employed to break it. Of Alexander Brian, one of Campion's fellows, he said: "... if he would not for his dutie to God and the Quene tell truth, he should be made a foot longer than God made him." Despite Robert Cecil's stiff warning to Snowden that he "... could not dispense with the least law made", in reality the priest hunters dispensed with quite a few.

As has been seen, the question of tolerance -- or lack of it -- was the key to the priest hunters' attitude. Simply put, they had an exaggerated view of the dangers of religious dissent. In their minds, dissent equalled unrest which equalled sedition which equalled open rebellion on all fronts. This complete inability to allow any middle ground in the religious issue is the explanation of the priest hunters' diligence, fervour, even brutality. Because of this, they were willing to use any means to arrest what they perceived as a cancerous growth in their country. Sir Nicholas Bacon used his power to stamp out diversion of opinion. He made a speech concerning "seditious books" in which he emphasized the necessity for

38 Robert Cecil to John Snowden, P.R.O. SP 12/239/3.
vigilance:

... the bringing in of these books and seditious libels maketh mens' mindes to be at variance one with another ... diversity of minds maketh seditions, seditions bring in tumult, tumult maketh insurrection and rebellion ... and bring in utter ruin and destruction of men's bodyes, goodes and landes.

Obviously, individualism was not prized in Tudor England. Thomas Norton, in his denunciation of the Northern Rebellion of 1569, insists that:

... all advices to great personages to persuade neutrality or an entertainement of contrary sides in religion with uncertainty of countenance and favor, is the surest way to supplant assured safety, to make sure enemies and unsure friends, to lie open to parasites and traitors.

William Fleetwood expressed the general view when he shouted at a priest on trial, "There is treason enough proved against thee in that thou art a priest." Anthony Munday's favourite theme was that by proselytizing, Jesuits meant "to be ready in their hearts and minds ... to join their forces as well with such as their heads and superiors who sent them ... of purpose to deprive Her Majesty of her life, crown and dignity." Munday, like many of his contemporaries, reasoned that the only

39 Bacon, Speech to the Star Chamber, 15 June 1570. P.R.O. SP 12/44/52.  
40 Thomas Norton, To the Queene's poor deceived subjects  
41 P.R. Harris, Recusant History  
42 Anthony Munday, An Advertisement for Truth (London: 1581) Sig. Aii
sedition in England was imported and it was therefore necessary to stamp out the smugglers: "This little land, God having so bountifully bestwoed his blessings upon it, that except it prove false within itself, no treason whatsoever, can prevail against it . . ." Richard Topclyffe lumped all Jesuits and seminaries into one treasonous mold:

All men of experience I think have founde and seen that the Jesuits and Seminary priests be men taken out from amonge the most traitorous, and most bloodyminded wit that have liberty . . . every one of them that have returned over have done their best to provoke the Queen's subjects to disobedience, rebellion and traitorous bloodletting.

The equation was absolute: Catholicism spelled treason. Zealots these men might have been, but they were zealots in power, and their beliefs filtered down the priest hunting framework. Taken to its logical conclusion, this meant that even the most innocuous harbourer of priests, even the man who heard Mass in his own house, was a traitor because he was different. And he was hunted down accordingly.

Concomitant with the desire to eradicate Catholicism was a determination that it would not revive in the next generation. A conscious effort was made by the priest hunters to

43 Munday, A Brief Discourse
44 P.R.O. SP 12/235/8.
encourage education in and adherence to the established Church. T
Topclyffe made a pet project out of locating and re-educating the children of recusant families, separating them from their parents if necessary. Thomas Norton wrote an entire book "Touching the Universities" in which he makes recommendations for the proper education and supervision of England's youth. He advises that religion be taught in accordance with statutory law. He further proposes:

That twice or at the least yearly there be general summons of the whole university, in so many thereof at random, may be and the name of those absent to be noted and the partie to be apprehended and examined to purge himself by profession and other ways lest his forbearing were at variance in religion.

This reflects government concern that the universities were breeding grounds for dissent. And the move to reform extended beyond the schools. Norton suggested that every Englishman re-entering the realm be obliged to take an oath of allegiance; that Jesuits be publicly proclaimed for the knowledge of all, and that the ministry be reformed. The priest hunters in power wanted more than political safety. They wanted complete control, and they envisioned a sort of reverse Utopia, an ideal society with no Catholics in it.


46 An MS Book of Mr. Norton's Devises, included among the State Papers. P.R.O. SP 12/177/59.
The priest hunters were men of strong convictions. They acted the way they did because they believed it was the right thing for their sovereign and country, or because they were under such duress it was impossible for them to say no. The opposition to their deeds was, of course, terrific. The Catholics reacted to what they perceived as unmitigated persecution with public denunciation of the priest hunters. During the 1580's and 90's, when priest hunting was at its peak, this denunciation reached crescendo scale. Catholics in every corner of Europe rushed into print to warn their fellows about the priest hunters, to criticize them and to combat their purposes. From the contemporary tracts and pamphlets, an entire Catholic martyrology was spawned which painted the Jesuits as beleaguered heroes and their opponents as despicable, unnatural and monstrous beyond belief.

The priest hunters, for their part, responded to the challenge. In order to defend their flagging reputations, many of them turned author themselves. In the last three decades of the sixteenth century, a mass of tracts and pamphlets were published in England justifying the persecution of Catholics. These publications were sponsored and financed by the Elizabethan government in an effort to convince the (literate)
populace that such persecution was politically necessary. From these publications grew a Protestant historiography which glorified Queen Elizabeth and her advisors, sanctified the Reformation and painted Catholics as a threat to national well-being. The two historiographies, Catholic and Protestant, survive to the present day.

The Catholics had been vocally critical of England since the break with Rome, but the existence of priest hunters drove their propaganda machine to top speed. William Cardinal Allen, director of the Jesuit colleges at Douai and Rheims, decried the persecution of Catholics in England frequently. He published several broadsides against it. The most famous, maintained that Catholics were being persecuted for religious reasons alone, that Father Campion was executed unjustly, and that it was not the intention of Jesuits to stir up political rebellion. Peter Holmes, in his work on the political thought of Elizabethan Catholics, sees it as a turning-point in the writing of Catholic propaganda. It marked the beginning of a more aggressive attitude toward the English government. It introduced the idea that things were rotten

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in England because of those in power, and while it did not directly attack the Queen it did suggest that she was surrounded by evil advisors who were inducing her to persecute innocents. Allen's *A Briefe History of the Glorious Martyrdom of XII Reverende Priests* is a direct attack on the priest hunters themselves. His three main targets are Anthony Munday and George Elliott (who deposed for the prosecution at Campion's trial) and Thomas Norton (who deposed at the priest Orton's). Allen reviles them all as liars, and refers to "...false witnesses as of the chief players in this action. Let us count the notorious and public lies which they have uttered for furnishing their wicked accusation and evidence."

Priests who had spent time in England and escaped added fuel to the fire by publishing their memoirs, a practice encouraged by the Church. Father Robert Persons' memoirs contain damning statements about the priest hunters, as do Father Christopher Grene's, and Father Richard Holtby's. Father John Gerard, in his autobiography, describes in detail his sufferings at the hands of the poursuivants and attributes any miraculous event to perseverance in Catholicism.

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4 J. Morris, *Troubles of our Catholic Forefathers* 121-22.
5 Gerard, 64-115.
The speeches of Edmund Campion at his treason trial in 1582 were quickly published around the Catholic world. He inveighed against Elliott and Munday:

"What truth may you expect from their mouths, the one hath confessed himself a murderer, the other well known a detestable Atheist, a profane heathen, a destroyer of two men already. On your consciences would you believe them? They have betrayed both God and man, they that have nothing to swear by, neither religion nor honesty."

Father William Crichton published a pamphlet denouncing John Snowden as a turncoat priest (he was right). Thomas Norton, Topclyffe and Fleetwood were all reviled by Catholics. And the counter-reformation propaganda did not lack willing printers. William Carter, whose Catholic sympathies were well known, was eventually prosecuted and hung for the distribution of seditious books in London. Fleetwood presided at his trial. But despite all efforts to halt it, the propaganda spread.

The priest hunters were galvanized into action. They replied directly to their accusers. John Snowden, having returned -- at least ostensibly -- to the Catholic fold, published in 1599 a reply to Father Crichton's pamphlet.

*Howell, State Trials* 1071.
*Mentioned in preface to Cecil, A Discovery of Some Errors* 1.
*P.R.O. SP 12/152/72 & Gerard, 68.*
*C.S.P.D. Eliz. V. 206 #92.*
He indignantly denied any involvement in the betrayal of Scottish Catholics, saying he was originally taken by force, and protested against "touching a hair on a Catholic head." He insisted that he remained at all times a good Catholic, and attempted to correct some of Crichton's inaccuracies.

George Elliott published an account of Campion's arrest in which he candidly admits to his role of priest hunter. He says that after his lapse into Catholicism, he made full confession to the Privy Council and "found at their hands most honourable dealing." This is followed by propaganda on royal justice and mercy as opposed to the Pope's treachery. Elliott concludes his account defiantly, saying "Some men blame me for dissembling the matter as I did, but to do my Prince and country service, I hold it lawful to use any reasonable policies. . . ."

Anthony Munday was a Protestant hack writer of the first order. In the 1580's alone, he produced at least nine pamphlets on subjects ranging from Campion's arrest to the role of magistrates in the commonwealth. Most of these were justifications of his role in Campion's persecution. Munday's

10 John Cecil, A Discovery of Some Errors 9.
12 S.T.C. #18259-18281.
writing fostered the idea that Jesuits and seminaries were a direct personal threat to the sovereign; that Campion and his confederates were condemned for high treason, not for religious reasons; and that Catholics who owed a bond to the Pope could never be counted upon to be good Englishmen. His statements were the precursor of a Protestant viewpoint which was to stick through history.

The prominent priest hunters wrote propaganda as well. William Fleetwood made an impassioned speech to the Guildhall in October 1571, occasioned by recent trouble in the North. He played upon every Londoner's fear of foreign invasion and encouraged people to inform the government if they observed strange behaviour. Thomas Norton published half a dozen anti-Catholic tracts. He issued a thundering warning against Papists:

Every such English Papist is a traitor to the Queen of England, and hateth her life, wisheth the alteration of her government, and liveth in hope of another world... Every such English Papist is a special traitor to the realm of England, and hath no regard into what slavery, conquest, subjugation to foreign tyranny, dishonour or other misery it be thrown...
The Elizabethan government did an effective job of distributing Protestant propaganda. Its positive measures included wide dissemination of royal proclamations, sponsorship of religious pamphlets and sermons, publication of Anglican prayers and numerous defences by Lord Burghley of Elizabeth's foreign policy. The negative measures were taken to ensure that Catholic propaganda did not get the upper hand: priest hunting itself, tightened customs regulations to prevent importing of forbidden books, and appointment of priest hunters to key censorship positions. Consequently, Fleetwood became a commissioner for the reform of abuses in printing; Norton the licenser of the London press; and Nicholas Bacon took an interest in the suppression of seditious material. During the 1580's, at least four proclamations were issued in an attempt to control published material. The Elizabethan propaganda machine was every bit as powerful as the Catholic one, and its effects were to prove just as permanent.

On the Catholic side, the propaganda war would produce a commitment to martyrology which has not yet abated. The memoirs of the Jesuit priests who survived their term in England provided the basis for a number of detailed works.


17 S.T.C. #7754.8-8172.
on the Jesuit mission there. The nineteenth-century Catholic historian, John Lingard, maintains that Elizabeth I's government tried to take a road of religious compromise and failed, unable to do more than strike down the radicals on both sides. "But", says Lingard, "the sufferings of the Puritans bore no comparison with those of the Catholics." He goes on to expound on the persecution of Catholics in England and to undertake a legal defence of Campion. In the early twentieth century, A.O. Meyer's *England and the Catholic Church under Queen Elizabeth* became the standard Catholic work on the period. Meyer insisted that Campion's trial was rigged and inveighed against the witnesses for the prosecution: "Men were produced as witnesses against the priests who were renegades and had betrayed their co-religionists." He blames "the puritans" for most of it, with Walsingham at their head. Meyer goes to great lengths to justify the Jesuits' reluctance to be frank under examination, and obviously has a hard time with apostate priests. He finally dismisses them as unfortunate by-products who could not possibly have known what they were doing.

Meyer's work has been followed by a number of learned studies in the history of English Catholicism, among them

18 Lingard, V. 6, pp. 328-40.
19 Meyer, pp. 150-51.
those of Father Philip Hughes and Father Joseph Lecler, S.J.  
These works are scholarly but still conventional in that they  
assign all the interest to the persecuted and none to the  
persecutors. And even the most recent work in English Catholic  
historiography is following a predictable pattern. The experts  
are now arguing over "the relative strength of Elizabethan  
Catholicism before and after the coming of the seminary  
priests"  rather than examining the efforts to defuse what  
strength Elizabethan Catholicism did possess. Again, the  
emphasis is on the hunted, never the hunters.

The Protestant propaganda also produced a rich historio-  
graphical tradition. John Foxe sees the accession of Elizabeth  
I as a miraculously happy ending to his Acts and Monuments.  
Camden's Annals (1635) might be quoting one of Cecil's pamph- 
lets verbatim:

Re Seminaries: The Queen and her Counsel found that they were sent  
underhand to withdraw the Subjects from their allegiance and obedience  
due their Prince, to binde them by Reconciliation, to perform the Pope's  
commitments, to raise intestine rebellions . . . to the end that way might  
be made for the Pope and the Spaniard, who had of late intended the  
conquest of England.

21 For examples of this controversy, Christopher Haigh, "Revisionism,  
P. McGrath & J. Rowe, "The Marian Priests under Elizabeth I" Recusant  
History 17 (1984) 103-121.
In the nineteenth century, defense of Elizabethan policy was still popular. James Anthony Froude, a historian devoted himself to the Church of England, subscribed to the idea that the 1559 religious settlement had formed a middle road which would lead to tolerance: "The moderates of both parties could meet and worship under its ambiguous formula . . . Zealots who could not be satisfied might pay a fine for their precision, and have their sermons and sacraments at home." He also endorsed the Gloriana image of a wise and farsighted Queen steering England through troubled times: "Her theory was two centuries before its time . . . She recognized for a time that her wrestle with Spain was a mortal one, and that she must win or perish."

The twentieth-century work on Elizabeth's reign has only served to reinforce the Gloriana image. Her most famous

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24 Froude, V. 11, 7-8.

25 Froude, V. 11, 9 & 616.
biographer voices it thus:

There was no greater tribute to the tolerance, sagacity and masterful nature of Elizabeth than her choice of such ministers as Walsingham. She chose them for their ability, their honesty and their unshakeable loyalty. Even in their intensity they were the expression of the England she was nurturing, and if like thoroughbreds they were hard to ride, she was a perfect horsewoman.

Mary Queen of Scots' execution is described as an unfortunate but necessary tragedy. Of the Babington Plot: "Is it any wonder that a wave of passionate indignation swept over Protestant England?"

It would be no wonder to the Elizabethan Protestants because they could have written these words themselves. The adulation of the sovereign, the wise advisors, the danger posed by the Catholics to England and the necessity to strike back -- all the elements of contemporary propaganda are still in place four hundred years later.

But the Catholic historiography is no more independent of its origins. The same ideas prevail there, to a great extent, that did four hundred years ago in the broadsides

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26 Neale, Queen Elizabeth 228-9.
27 Neale 265.
of Cardinal Allen and Father Persons. Campion's words at his trial are the stuff of legend, while the men who condemned him are still considered unspeakably diabolic.

This is the legacy left by the priest hunters and their world -- a barrage of propaganda which has perpetuated itself, with modifications, to the present day. Beneath the masses of books, papers, pamphlets, speeches and sermons, there are still traces of the men who began it all. The remarkable thing is not that the traces are so few, but that we have found them at all. Most men leave something of a paper trail after their deaths; the one started by the priest hunters is not finished yet.
Conclusion

I wish to conclude by declaring what this paper is not. It is not a moral judgement on the actions of the priest hunters. Nor is it a moral judgement on the actions of the Elizabethan Catholics. Those judgements are as impossible to render now as they were in the sixteenth century.

This paper is an exploration of a particular group of people who had great repercussions on the society in which they lived. If the priest hunters had not existed, there is no doubt that Elizabethan England would have been a quieter place. Not that it would necessarily have been Catholic. Some historians believe that the Counter-Reformation came to England bearing the seeds of its own destruction. But would it have been so completely defeated without these men? One wonders.

The priest hunters were responsible for the deaths of Catholics who might otherwise have gone free. They eliminated priests, and therefore proselytization, on a wide scale. They encouraged the establishment of Protestant education. And they created a body of written self-justification which spawned Elizabethan historiography as we have known it for

1 Christopher Haigh, 395.
centuries. This is no mean accomplishment for men who have been described as "a number of seedy and disreputable characters."

They might have been seedy and disreputable. They might have been bigoted, cruel and coerced. But they do not deserve to be dismissed as the tools of an administration whose only goal was to preserve political unity. It is not that the priest hunters did not believe Reformation propaganda. Most of them did. But they were doing more than that, and they knew it. At the most basic level, they were hunting down and destroying Roman Catholicism in England. They did this because they were genuinely unable to distinguish religious from political dissent. To the priest hunter, uniformity was survival. This belief makes them virtually incomprehensible to the modern mind. And it is the best reason why they cannot be judged.

Long after the priest hunters were dead or gone into hiding, their legacy remained. Their complete unwillingness to compromise produced a form of religious intolerance which was to last for centuries. If one is to understand why Roman Catholics were still fighting to hold public office and to sit in Parliament in the reign of Queen Victoria, one must go back three hundred years to these men. The Reformation

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2 Meyer 171.
produced only the ideas of Protestantism, and the break from Rome produced only the legislation of royal supremacy. The priest hunters constituted the enforcement. Like most enforcers of the law, they were often confused themselves, usually unpopular, and sometimes hated. But the work could not have been done without them.
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