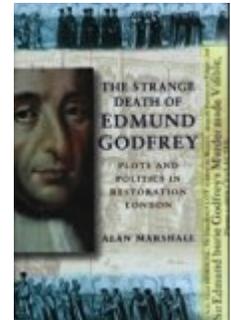


Alan Marshall. *The Strange Death of Edmund Godfrey: Plots and Politics in Restoration London.* Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999. xiv + 241 pp. \$ 34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7509-2100-8.



Reviewed by Tim Harris

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This is a splendid little book. It is a historical who-dunnit, and while it is unlikely to provoke a fundamental revision of Restoration historiography (this is hardly its intent), it makes for a fascinating read. Edmund Godfrey was a Westminster Justice of the Peace who was found dead in a ditch near Primrose Hill on the evening of 17 October 1678, after having been missing for several days. He was lying face down with his own sword run through him just under his left breast, but he had not been robbed, and the pose suggested he might have committed suicide by falling on his own weapon. The inquest, however, revealed that Godfrey had died several days earlier by strangulation, that he was already dead when the sword had passed through him, and that he might even have been beaten prior to death. What turned Godfrey's mysterious death into a *cause celebre* was the fact that he had recently taken a series of depositions from Titus Oates concerning a deeply laid Catholic conspiracy against the king's life. The death was therefore immediately attributed to Catholics, as an attempt to cover up what is known to history as the Popish Plot, and three men -- Robert Green, Henry Berry, and Lawrence

Hill -- were to die on the scaffold for having allegedly murdered the Protestant magistrate.

Numerous theories have been posited over the centuries to explain how Godfrey met his untimely end, some of them blatantly partisan, others based on a more scholarly examination of the evidence, not a few purely speculative and bordering on historical fiction. All of them share the same fault, according to Marshall: they start at the wrong end of the problem, by looking for the killer. A better approach, Marshall suggests, is to start with Godfrey himself, and an examination of his background, life and personality. The recent discovery of a series of letters between Godfrey and his friend, the Irish healer Valentine Greatrakes, means that we can now put some more flesh on the bare bones of Godfrey's story, and this is something Marshall achieves with aplomb.

After a brief introduction setting the scene and justifying his enterprise, Marshall proceeds to examine first Godfrey's family and early life and then his adult life as a man of business (Godfrey was a woodmonger by profession) and local mag-

istrate. Certain facts emerge which perhaps provide clues as to why and how Godfrey met his ultimate fate. Although he came to be cast as a 'Protestant martyr' for the Whig cause, Godfrey held what were, for the age, rather liberal attitudes towards Roman Catholicism, and he had a number of Catholic acquaintances (including Edward Coleman, the duke and duchess of York's former secretary named by Oates as an accomplice in the Plot, who was executed after a search of his papers revealed some rather incriminating correspondence with Jesuits and French agents).

Godfrey also never married (he may have had homosexual leanings, but if he did, he suppressed them), and was a rather grave and gloomy individual given to bouts of depression. The central chapters deal with Titus Oates and the Popish Plot, the last days of Edmund Godfrey and the coroner's inquest, and the reactions to Godfrey's death, from contemporary times through to the present. The final chapter attempts to resolve the mystery, through a close examination of what we know from the historical record and the forensic evidence that has come down to us. Various suspects are considered in turn: the Popish Plot informers themselves; the Earl of Danby, Charles's leading minister at the time, who in the manner of Henry II and Beckett may have wanted to rid himself of this troublesome magistrate; Whig politicians, such as the Earl of Shaftesbury or the Peyton gang, who might have had cause to contrive Godfrey's murder to make the Catholics look guilty and heighten public anxiety about the Plot; the psychotic Earl of Pembroke, a violent boor who had recently been found guilty of manslaughter by a jury of which Godfrey was foreman; and various Roman Catholics, who might have wished to kill Godfrey because he knew too much. Marshall weighs the evidence judiciously, carefully considering the pros and cons, and evaluating who are the more and who the less likely suspects. He also assesses whether it is conceivable that Godfrey did commit suicide after all. It would spoil the suspense for those who want to

read the book if I were to reveal which interpretation Marshall thinks most credible. All I can say is that the conclusion he reaches is certainly plausible and perhaps rather surprising.

There is some duplication in Marshall's account, notably in the last two chapters, where he first rehearses the theories put forth by various historians to explain Godfrey's death and then examines the potential suspects himself. Readers who like neat solutions will perhaps be disappointed; it is impossible, given the evidence we have, to know for sure how and why Godfrey came to meet his end, and Marshall himself concedes that his conclusions are ultimately speculative (hence why the book ends with a question mark). Moreover, cynics might suggest that solving the mystery is not particularly important; for historians, what is significant is how contemporaries reacted to the death of Godfrey, or the impact his death had on contemporary political developments, and this is something we have known for a long time. However, it would be wrong to give the impression that this is a frivolous book, entertaining perhaps, but with little to contribute to the burgeoning historiography of the Exclusion Crisis. Marshall gives us an excellent account of the intrigues behind the revelations of the Popish Plot, and his book would be worth reading just for that. It offers us much more besides. This is popular history at its best, a gripping read which is based on serious historical scholarship and which brings the historical period in which it is set vividly to life, in a way that professional historians, students, and the general reading public will be able to enjoy.

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