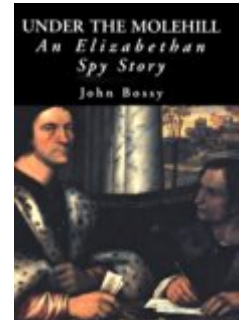


John Bossy. *Under the Molehill: An Elizabethan Spy Story.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. xiii + 189 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-08400-9.



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Retracing the Steps of Spies and their Masters

John Bossy's *Under the Molehill* is a sequel--or more precisely, a supplement--to his *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* (1992). The principal setting is the same: the London household of Michel de Castelnau, the French ambassador to England in the early 1580s, as England's relations with Catholic Europe were deteriorating. The focus is different, however. The earlier work revolved around Henri Fagot, a mysterious priest in Castelnau's establishment who was an informant for the English government and who also recruited a mole from among the ambassador's secretariat. In *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair*, Bossy made a strong (though not completely conclusive) case that Fagot was really Giordano Bruno, the iconoclastic philosopher and renegade friar. Fagot makes only brief appearances in *Under the Molehill*, however, and Bossy is careful to point out that his arguments in this book do not depend on the identification of Fagot with Bruno. *Under the Molehill* is instead a patient reconstruction of an elaborate espionage operation against the French embassy that Sir Francis Walsingham

directed. One misses the presence of Bruno, a difficult but always intriguing character with undeniable star quality. But the present volume has its own rewards. It sheds light on some of the murkier episodes and conspiracies of the early 1580s, as well as allowing one to participate vicariously in the pleasures, frustrations, and triumphs that meticulous research in primary sources can provide.

The first part of *Under the Molehill* carefully considers the circumstances leading up to the betrayal and arrest of Francis Throckmorton, a Catholic gentleman involved in intrigues on behalf of the imprisoned Mary Queen of Scots. This section covers some of the same ground already traversed in the earlier book, but further research has led Bossy to new conclusions about some points. Most importantly, he has changed his mind about the identity of the mole in Castelnau's household who helped finger Throckmorton. In *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair*, he had concluded that this individual was Castelnau's principal secretary Claude de Courcelles. Since then, he has discovered a misattributed letter by

Walter Williams, one of Walsingham's operatives, in which Williams refers to the informant operating *in the absence of* Courcelles. Ergo, the mole must have been someone different. Bossy eventually identifies a new candidate: Laurent Feron, a naturalized Frenchman long resident in London who worked as a clerk in the French embassy.

In the latter part of the book, Bossy examines the second major intelligence coup provided by the mole: a large bundle of drafts and copies of correspondence that had passed through the French embassy, including a series of compromising letters between Castelnu and Mary Queen of Scots. These letters provided the basis for a strong case against Castelnu, yet the English government curiously chose not to act against him, even though Elizabeth was already angry about his role in facilitating Throckmorton's schemes.

Bossy wins the confidence of his readers by the slow, patient way he builds his arguments and by his willingness to examine alternative explanations even when he ultimately rejects them. How persuasive are the conclusions that Bossy eventually reaches in *Under the Molehill*? This reader found his identification of Feron as the mole thoroughly convincing. The new evidence that Bossy has found combines with the details that are already known to point directly at Feron. Bossy's conclusion that we should credit Walsingham with deftly handling these cases so as to avoid the risk of simultaneous wars with France and Spain also seems persuasive. Actions and inactions that otherwise seem inexplicable make sense when viewed in this context. Our respect for Walsingham grows when we remember what happened four decades later when the considerably less expert Charles I and Buckingham managed to entangle England in the dual wars carefully avoided here.

The other elements of Bossy's interpretation are all plausible, though they do not have quite the same ring of certainty. To a large degree this is due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence

that remains. Bossy is trying to put together a particularly complicated jigsaw puzzle with many missing pieces. The discovery of new pieces, or even turning an existing piece a different way, can change the appearance of important elements in the picture, as Bossy's own revisions of his earlier book demonstrate. In some cases, the politically sensitive nature of certain pieces of evidence may demand more skepticism than Bossy has given them. For example, Bossy argues that Walsingham wanted at all costs to avoid a simultaneous breach with France and Spain, and therefore was hoping there would be no "smoking gun" in Castelnu's correspondence. The papers obtained by Feron from the French embassy and remaining in the archives to this day contain no "smoking gun." Bossy therefore concludes that Walsingham "finished his reading of Castelnu's correspondence with Mary in a state of palpable relief, and presented his findings to Elizabeth with some satisfaction" (p. 111). Yet if Walsingham was truly convinced that a war with France would be disastrous for England at this particular time, would he not have been tempted to destroy or hide any incriminating evidence that might have pushed the two countries closer to war? Might he not even have tipped off Feron to remove incriminating evidence from the copies he made? In the one case where a French copy of one of Mary's letters in the bundle survives, Feron's copy differs from it in some significant ways. This has to raise questions about the integrity of at least some of the seemingly hard evidence that Bossy is trying to interpret.

Yet in the end, this is a satisfying book. It is not a page-turner in the mode of fictional espionage tales. However, for people who care about how a skillful historian goes about constructing a picture of the past, *Under the Molehill* will have many rewards. As Bossy shows, even the well-thumbed volumes of the State Papers are full of documents with questionable dates and attributions that can suddenly yield new information when you contextualize them correctly. Bossy,

who in a running commentary in the background champions facts and narrative over analysis and theory, does not clinch his case that facts and narrative are all you really need to interpret the past. But he does show, in an almost tactile, sensuous way, that they are indispensable.

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