individuals; his book has the potential both to refine future Reformation-era taxonomies, and to show where those taxonomies cannot reach. Would the 'protesting Catholic puritan' Harington and his kind have self-identified as PCP+ in our own time?

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Victor Stater, *Hoax: The Popish Plot that Never Was*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022, pp. xxi + 313, £20.00, ISBN: 978-0300123807

Victor Stater's *Hoax* is meant to be a rollicking read, and indeed provides a richly descriptive narrative of one of the darkest chapters in English history. In 1678 revelations by the despicable perjurer Titus Oates of a 'Popish Plot' to assassinate the king, massacre Protestants and reinstate Catholicism in England created a major moral panic and a political and constitutional crisis, resulting in the judicial murders of over a dozen Catholic laymen and priests on trumped-up treason charges, and the imprisonment and deaths of many more.

A new history of the Plot is long overdue: the last comprehensive overview, that of J.P. Kenyon, is now fifty years old. While it is an impeccably researched, lucid and concise account (Stater himself invokes it as his 'model' [303]), Kenyon's reliance on the language of mental illness to explain the Plot— 'psychotic' witnesses and prosecutors, 'unhinged' puritans and 'excitable' priests, 'neurotic suspicions', 'public hysteria' and 'paranoiac fear of Catholicism'—now seems dated. Nor have Kenyon's prurient references to Titus Oates's homoerotic seminarian fantasies and a supposed Jesuit 'homintern' aged well.

Kenyon's characterisation of the Plot as an essentially hysterical and superficial phenomenon has been rightly criticised by scholars such as Jonathan Scott and Peter Hinds for trivialising the crisis and minimising the centrality of antipopery to mainstream seventeenth-century politics. Yet Kenyon's assessment of the Plot as a genuine, if largely metropolitan, panic flamed by political passions, rumour and misinformation and abetted by the government's own miscalculations—he uses the analogy of a stampede in an overcrowded stadium—was itself a salutary corrective to older partisan conspiracist readings of the Exclusion Crisis. Tory historians viewed Oates and other informers as tools of the republican faction, engaged in a cynical and scurrilous attack on Charles II and his Catholic brother and heir, James duke of York. Whig scholars tended to gloss over the Popish Plot prosecutions as regrettable excesses in Parliament's otherwise

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righteous struggle against the covert arbitrary and Catholicising designs of the late Stuart monarchy (a *real* popish plot).

Stater's new account is a return to the partisan fray. Like Kenyon—and focussing mainly on the same, mostly printed, sources (parliamentary and state papers and trial accounts)—Stater portrays Plot witnesses and prosecutors as rogues and crackpots, and their allegations as 'preposterous', comparable to modern-day conspiracy theories like Pizzagate (ix). However for Stater, unlike Kenyon, the leader of the political opposition, the earl of Shaftesbury, not only weaponized the Plot in his vendetta against the royal brothers, but was the evil genius pulling the strings. In a reprise of J. R. Jones's classic work tracing the origins of the 'First Whigs' to the Exclusion Crisis, Stater sees the Popish Plot as 'crucial as a political catalyst', giving rise to a 'two-party political system' that would ultimately 'move English political conflict from the battlefield … to the bookstalls' (xii; 282).

Hoax is beautifully produced, with an arresting title. The writing style is undeniably colourful. Titus Oates is described as 'a shifty vagabond with a past so full of misdeeds and scandal that showing his remarkably ugly face in public was an act of courage' (ix). Stater takes some artistic liberties—for instance projecting himself into the mind of Charles II waiting for the assembly of Parliament in October 1678 under a portrait of James I in the Banqueting Hall, one of the last things Charles I saw before stepping out onto a scaffold to be beheaded. As the latter's 'son sat beneath the same image he must have thought about the fine line separating political opposition from treason' (66). Later, Stater assures us that Charles 'no doubt' contributed 'a hearty Amen' to a court sermon against zealotry, so rampant in that fractious meeting of Parliament (115).

Stater himself states that the book is intended 'as a narrative rather than analytic account of the plot' (xii). This has the advantage of simplifying a tortuously complex story and making the byzantine world of Restoration politics more accessible and relatable. A dizzying cast of players is essentially reduced to two antagonists and 'born partners': Oates, the 'malevolent inventor of the plot', and his Machiavellian patron Shaftesbury (xi, 279). Our protagonist is the urbane Charles II, 'Britain's first "modern" monarch—wearing "his religion lightly", promoting scientific research, pursuing a pragmatic rather than dynastic foreign policy, and (eventually) becoming "the leader of a political party": the "Tories"' (xi). Stater portrays Charles II as more resolute, consistent and shrewd than he appeared to contemporaries, not least his own supporters. (Here, again, the intellectual debt is to J.R. Jones: John Miller and Ronald Hutton have been more sceptical of Charles's political acumen.)

No history of the Plot can afford to ignore the partisan nature of the sources, and Stater's uncritical acceptance of the royalist writers Roger

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L'Estrange and Roger North's version of events inevitably reproduce a Tory narrative. And, while the anachronistic labelling of historical actors as Whigs or Tories is an understandable oversimplification, the choice not to engage with recent work on both the Popish Plot and late Stuart political culture more broadly lends itself to teleological—and anti-Shaftesburian—arguments. Shaftesbury becomes a kind of synecdoche for the Whigs, a much more diverse and fluid group than Stater implies. The Lords committee investigating the Plot is 'Shaftesbury's Plot committee' (162); oppositional MPs are 'Shaftesbury's worthies' (164), with the earl 'clearly orchestrating' the parliamentary prosecutions of the five Catholic lords (167), just as his 'subtle hand' was behind the Plot witness William Bedloe's attack on the queen (92). Bedloe and a train of venal imitators sing 'from the same hymnal as Titus', following 'Lord Shaftesbury's preferred narrative' (133). However, as Kenyon emphasised half a century ago, the testimony of these informers did not jibe well, nor was Oates a particularly effective witness even when belief in the Plot was at its height. Outside of accusations by Tory propagandist L'Estrange and the Catholic activist Elizabeth Cellier, there is no real evidence that Shaftesbury suborned or coached witnesses.

Characterizing the Popish Plot as a 'hoax' cooked up by 'one very bad man' (Oates) and served up by 'an unscrupulous opportunist' (Shaftesbury) also understates the magnitude of a larger crisis of which, as Jonathan Scott has pointed out, Oates was a symptom rather than the cause (x; xii). For all that his allegations were bogus, they tapped into longstanding—and credible—suspicions, exacerbated by repeated prorogations of Parliament, about crypto-Catholicism at court and secret Anglo-French diplomacy (the Treaty of Dover is conspicuous by its absence here). They were also seemingly corroborated both by the mysterious death of the magistrate who had received Oates's informations (Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey) and the discovery of letters by James's agent Edward Coleman soliciting foreign money to promote the Catholic cause by dissolving the intolerant Cavalier Parliament. Nor were suspicions that the Plot had originally been a stratagem of the king's principal minister Danby to justify the maintenance of a standing army intended to make his master absolute wholly without foundation. Stater downplays numerous attempts by the court to suborn or discredit Plot witnesses, including the 'Meal Tub Plot', a botched attempt to frame leading 'Presbyterian' opponents of the duke of York—in which the complicity of the latter's supporters, or even James himself, was at least as plausible as Stater's suggestion that the double-dealing informer Dangerfield had 'dream[ed] up the entire scheme himself' (217).

The inconvenient fact that Charles II was a pensioner of the French king is minimized ('his cousin was the richest monarch in Europe, why

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should Charles not benefit'? [111]), and relativized ('if the truth were known, wheedling money from Louis XIV was something of a national pastime', with numerous oppositional MPs in receipt of 'French backhanders' [109]). Charles II's having negotiated, on the eve of the 1681 Oxford Parliament, a new deal with Louis XIV so that he would no longer have to depend on parliamentary subsidies is seen as a winning move: 'another high card . . . with this knowledge he could face a new assembly with confidence' (269). Charles's failure to pardon those condemned for the Plot is seen as strategic: he 'shrewdly avoided further inflaming the situation' which only would have 'delighted' Shaftesbury (139). The king's continued prosecution of recusants, even when belief in the Plot was waning, was a political necessity: 'tightening the screws on English Catholics aided King Charles in his increasingly determined effort to counter Shaftesbury' (210). But if Stater is at a loss to explain the king's ready acquiescence to the death of the Catholic primate Oliver Plunkett in July 1681 ('Charles was not by nature a persecutor' [274]), contemporaries knew the court was keen to dispatch Plunkett's fellow-sufferer Edward Fitzharris, a double agent hired by Charles II's favourite mistress to plant a seditious libel on his political enemies, to prevent him from making damaging revelations in Parliament.

There is a happy ending, of sorts: Shaftesbury, after plotting 'overt treason', flees to the Netherlands where he dies soon afterwards. The merry monarch, 'after checkmating the Whigs', 'ruled a one-party state' and 'reverted to his former state of charismatic indolence' (278). The judicial murders of Catholics were followed by executions for the Rye House Plot and then the infamous Bloody Assizes under James II, whose short reign ended with the Revolution of 1688.

This is a glossy and gory narrative that will appeal to generalists and should attract a new generation of readers to late Stuart history and its surprising, and alarming, relevance to our own conspiratorial age. In this Victor Stater has done a service to scholars, as well as the broader popular audience targeted by this book.

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Leith Davis, *Mediating Cultural Memory in Britain and Ireland: From the 1688 Revolution to the 1745 Jacobite Rising*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. ix + 307, £75.00, ISBN: 978 1316510810

This book explores the development of print media in Britain from the Revolution of 1688 to the aftermath of the Jacobite Rising of 1745, offering an effective study of the ways in which a developing news

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