

'A Monster Among Decisions': Prince Charles's Journey to Madrid, 1623

AT 8 o'clock on a Friday night in March 1623, two English gentlemen, Thomas and John Smith, made their way to the British Embassy in Madrid. While Jack waited on the other side of the road, the taller and more handsome companion entered the residence. To the astonishment of the ambassador, he revealed himself as none other than George Villiers, marquess and soon-to-be duke of Buckingham. He was King James's favourite. As some would have it, he was also his lover; moreover, his Jack turned out to be a Prince. Charles, Prince of Wales, had travelled with Buckingham and four other servants across France and over the Pyrenees to Madrid, the capital of the most Catholic country in Europe. For part of that journey they had resorted to false beards in order to avoid detection, and several times had fallen into scrapes that had threatened the Prince's life.

Now, when state visits are a common feature of diplomatic life, it is hard to remember just how rare it was for kings and crown princes to

visit one another – unless, that is, there was hostile intent and an army royal in attendance! The absurdity of the occasion was not lost on Ambassador John Digby. In barely coded diplomatic language designed to distance himself from the failure of the mission, he reported back to James how Charles's arrival was 'sudden & unthought of'. Nor was the sheer incongruity of the episode lost on James Howell, a secretary in the embassy and an eye-witness to the events which were to unfold that summer. He noted that he had seen with his own eyes Buckingham, the greatest peer in King James's realms, enter the embassy – carrying a holdall under his arm.

Dr Glyn Redworth, University of Manchester, describes a bizarre episode in British history, as the Protestant heir to the Stuart throne visited Madrid in an attempt to win the Spanish Infanta as his bride.

Europe apart, and which had resulted in the exile of Charles's own sister from her husband's ancestral lands in the Palatinate and from the kingdom of Bohemia which he claimed.

Only Charles, it seems, was unaware of the mistake he was making in travelling to Spain. To the Venetian envoy in London the decision was 'a monster among decisions, a labyrinth without head or way out'. As for Ambassador Bristol, it was obvious that, once Charles had put himself into the hands of the Spaniards, they would only seize the opportunity to reiterate their original demands that the price to pay for a Spanish princess was for the Prince to convert to the Roman religion.

The first few weeks of the Prince's visit saw an explosion of festivities, which incidentally put paid to the austerity plan which had only recently been announced by Olivares, the favourite of King Philip IV. Many of the ceremonies had a religious dimension; at one time or another, every religious house in Madrid was emptied in order that its members should process in front of the heir to the Protestant thrones of Britain. On one occasion, 52 fallen women joined in – presumably one for every week of the year! Much more seriously, it was simply assumed throughout Catholic Europe that Charles's arrival at the Court of the Catholic King could only mean one thing: he had decided to acquiesce to Spain's long expressed wish that he should convert to Catholicism.

That assumption is evident in a number of ways. First, there are abundant examples of how the Spanish court had to think on its feet in order to accommodate the arrival of a still-schismatic prince and his Protestant entourage. Charles was quickly isolated from the majority of his fellow countrymen by his removal to the royal palace, and he was informed in no uncertain terms that, if one of his chaplains even attempted to enter the palace grounds, the unfortunate cleric would be put to death at once. Though the Prince's



Charles I, by Gerrit van Honthorst (1628). By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

The reason for the 23-year-old Prince's arrival in Madrid was to claim a Catholic bride. He believed that the even younger King Philip IV had agreed, a little before Christmas 1622, to allow his sister, the Infanta Maria, to marry the future head of the Scottish, Irish, and English churches. In return, all King James would have to promise was to allow Maria free exercise of the Roman religion, along with an even vaguer promise to turn a blind eye to the Catholicism of his own subjects. The Spanish Match also held out the prospect that, if Madrid and London were allies, the pressure of their combined diplomatic weight might be able to bring an end to the 30 Years' War which was tearing Protestant and Catholic

ceremonial entry into Madrid was based on that accorded to a Spanish king, the route had to be altered so as to omit the traditional visit to a Catholic church. Second, and most important, is the secret correspondence which has recently come to light between Olivares and the papacy. Convinced that Charles's conversion was imminent, the Spanish favourite had almost at once asked Rome to grant a dispensation for the Prince and the Infanta to marry. When, only a very few days later, Olivares concluded that Charles had no intention of swapping religions, he had to write again to beg the papacy to place intolerable demands on Charles before any permission to marry would be conceded. We know this because Cardinal Ludovisi's correspondence reveals his eminence's enormous delight in reproving the importunate Spanish favourite. With chilling hauteur, he informed Olivares that it was well known that the original easy dispensation had already been despatched, so all he could do was send a further harder dispensation – and predate it so that Olivares could switch them round in Madrid!

Meanwhile, the endless festivities continued. By the height of Summer, when the heat in the capital is unbearable, even the hard-nosed madrileños had had their fill of the enforced jollification. Thanks to the poems of Francisco de Quevedo, we are for once reminded that even the masses can become tired of bread and circuses. One satirical poem he wrote about a display put on for the Prince of Wales can freely be translated as,

The public were watching
Happy to cheer
But to moisten their throats
They left for a beer

Rather like the infamous meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev in Iceland, Charles's journey to Madrid reveals all the dangers of summit diplomacy. By July 1623, it seemed to him that the only way for him to leave for home with the Infanta Maria was if he capitulated – to everyone's surprise – to all of Olivares's demands. On Monday, 7 July 1623 the Prince of Wales made the preposterous agreement to seek approval for public toleration of Catholicism from the parliaments of Westminster, Edinburgh, and Dublin. Within weeks, his anxious father had obliged the entire English Privy Council to



Infanta Doña María of Austria, by Diego Velázquez. By courtesy of the Museo del Prado, Madrid.

endorse that treaty. Sadly for Charles, Olivares had already made up his mind that, even if the vacillating young prince could be trusted, Spain's reputation as the champion of uncompromising Catholicism would be irretrievably damaged by such a mixed marriage. The Prince was informed that the Infanta could not possibly leave Spain until toleration had taken root in the Stuart dominions.

All Charles could do was to depart with as much dignity as possible. He said his farewells to Philip IV just outside the Escorial on Tuesday, 2 September 1623. On paper, he

was still bound to introduce religious toleration some two hundred years before it actually came to pass. But the very next day – as soon as he was safely on the other side of the Guadarrama mountains – he sent word back to Ambassador Digby that he was not to proceed with the scheduled marriage by proxy to the Infanta. To hide his shame at returning without a bride, Charles gave out that he had spurned the marriage because Spain had refused to fight their Viennese cousins until his sister and brother-in-law were restored to the Palatinate. To top it all, he did not stop until he had bullied his father – the Rex Pacificus – into declaring war on

Spain early in 1624. The prince who had abandoned the Established Churches' state monopoly of religion had now transformed himself into a Protestant hero, all at the cost of thousands of lives in a futile and vainglorious war with Spain.

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From the point of view of the historian's craft, explaining the Prince's journey to Madrid poses several challenges. It is not a set of stories which can be told only from a single national point of view. It is a set of Spanish stories as much as British ones, not to mention the varying perspectives of Rome, Heidelberg and Vienna. Quite apart from the need to find funding for visiting a range of archives in several countries (for which this writer happily acknowledges the support of the British Academy as well as other organisations including the Leverhulme Trust), it is an historical episode which reminds us of the crucial importance of narrative. Narrative has received short shrift in recent years from a variety of critics. It is a form of expression that is still little practised in France and other countries where the influence of French schools of historical interpretation is particularly strong. There is

little doubt that, in the past, narrative has often been seen as a triumphalist way of writing the story of a single nation, empire, or even of a single race. But analytical narrative, where various threads of a story are interwoven, where time is taken to assess both evidence and cultural assumptions, still seems to me to be a form of expression which challenges the historian's craft to its utmost.

The tight relationship between analytical narrative and interdisciplinarity was brought home to me by a conference which was generously supported by the Academy, and which was arranged through the AHRB Centre for the Study of Renaissance Elites and Court Culture at Warwick University by Dr Alex Samson, now of University College London. A conference entitled *1623: The Journey of Prince Charles to Madrid to negotiate marriage with the Spanish Infanta, and his return to London* was held in Stratford-upon-Avon on 3–4 May 2003. With participants and speakers from Britain and the Republic of Ireland, as well from as Spain, Italy and the United States, a remarkably diverse set of disciplines was set to work around a single topic. Historians talked to literary scholars about the interpretation of masques. Hispanists delved into how the marriage was

seen and reported in Spain, while art historians in particular helped us to explore the significance of the cultural exchanges which took place as Charles and his entourage bought up as many choice works of art as they could afford. It is often said that the success of a conference lies in what takes place after the proceedings have ended. All I can vouch for is the extent of the exchange of ideas and information between myself and other participants which has followed from that conference. I have come away thinking that Study Centres develop the range of contacts necessary for making conferences sharp, focused, and above all inter-disciplinary. It's just a sobering thought that the conference was a greater success than the event it was commemorating!

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Fiesta in the Plaza Mayor in honour of the Prince of Wales, by Juan de la Corte.
By courtesy of the Museo Municipal, Madrid.

