INTOLERANCE OF CATHOLICS AND CATHOLICISM IS ONE OF THE best-known features of seventeenth-century England. In some ways it is also one of the least explored. In particular, little is known of the essential feature of this intolerance — the nature, extent and causes of the Protestant fear of Catholics. Yet without some understanding of such fear the growth of religious toleration, or analyses of political conflict in Stuart England — to mention only two areas — must remain in some respects shallow and incomplete. Shallow because no explanation of religious tolerance can convince until the depth of contrary prejudices are appreciated; incomplete because studies of the opposition to Charles and Archbishop Laud, of the Popish Plot hysteria, or of the growth of a rebellious consensus against James II, assume but do not analyse deep wells of hatred and fear of Catholics at all levels of society.

But granted this, how can fear be measured? Merely to list assaults on Catholics would achieve little for these cases were remarkably few in the seventeenth century. Repressive legislation passed by the government is easy to catalogue but tells little of popular attitudes, and the enforcement of that legislation was too dependent upon formal administrative processes for it to be informative about public opinion. A different approach is however possible. From time to time English towns and villages were swept by panic fears of "Catholic plots" — most of them imaginary — to rebel and massacre Protestants. The most celebrated example is the Popish Plot, and evidence of similar rumours during the 1688 Revolution has been published. These were not, as has been supposed, the product of

1 I wish to thank Mr. Robin Briggs, Mr. E. P. Thompson and Dr. J. E. C. Hill for their valuable criticisms of this article. I am also grateful to Dr. Carol Z. Wiener for permission to read her article "The Beleaguered Isle. A Study of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism" before it was published in Past and Present, no. 51 (May 1971).


a particularly credulous decade for such panics can be found throughout the century. At least seven would have occurred in the lifetime of a man who saw the Civil War begin. Sussex panicked over a rumoured Catholic uprising in 1596, Hampshire and Monmouthshire in 1605 (both independently of the Gunpowder Plot), several Midland towns in 1613, and parts of the North near Durham two years later. Towards the end of 1625 a remarkable spasm spread from the south-east coast to the Midlands passing thence to the North and West. Northamptonshire and Bristol were shaken by local alarms in 1630 and 1636 respectively. On every occasion no rebellion had in fact taken place: fear and prejudice supplied its essential fabric.

This article will try to indicate the scope and origins of the fear of Catholics by examining a concentration of similar alarms during a relatively brief period, the English Revolution. Out of the study there should emerge more information on the relationship between anti-Catholicism and politics, and some conclusions to add to our understanding of popular attitudes and of crowd behaviour during the seventeenth century.

II

As a historian and as a politician the judgements of Edward Hyde earl of Clarendon were cool and perceptive, so that although this assessment of 1642 is startling he is unlikely to have exaggerated.

The imputation raised by Parliament upon the King [he wrote], of an intention to bring in, or of conniving at and tolerating, Popery, did make a deep impression upon the people generally... Their [the Papists'] strength and number was then thought so vast within the kingdom... that if they should be drawn together and armed, under what pretence soever, they might not be willing to submit to the power which raised them, but be able to give the law both to King and Parliament.

Brit. Mus., Lansdowne MSS., Burghley Papers, 82, fo. 103.
S.P., 16/6/41, 57, 60, 87, 88; 16/7/37, 39; 16/10/4, 42, 48; 16/12/74; J. Bruce (ed.), Letters and Papers of the Verney Family (Camden Soc., lvi, 1853), pp. 119, 120.
The Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire (London, 1905-27), i, p. 319 and n.
Several other prominent royalists expressed disquiet over Catholic support for the King when the Civil War began and Charles twice publicly banned papists from his army. The Royal advisers had ample cause for anxiety: concern over the loyalty of Catholics was deep and widespread. Between the meeting of the Short Parliament in 1640 and the battle at Edgehill late in 1642, panics over supposed Popish conspiracies took place in the five largest cities of England — London, Norwich, Bristol, Newcastle and York; there were alarms in at least three dozen other towns and villages ranging in size from Colchester, Oxford and Salisbury, to hamlets such as Pudsey and Bingley in Yorkshire, and Beaumaris in North Wales; besides numerous other disturbances where the location cannot be established precisely because the source refers only to a county. Only three English counties — Huntingdon, Durham and Westmorland — have left no trace of sharing the general anxiety over papists. Even in Wales, where the source material is much thinner, there is evidence that in at least six of the twelve counties Catholics were regarded with deep suspicion.

During the 1630s alarms were few and scattered, and no concentration is evident until the early summer of 1640 after Charles had dissolved the Short Parliament and resumed war against the Scots. Rioters in London during May 1640 included among their targets the Catholic Queen, her priests, the Papal Agent and sundry recusant gentry and peers. Just out of the capital in Chislehurst, Kent, after a body of men estimated at thirty to forty in number was reported entering a Catholic’s house, two searches had to be made before the J.P.s were satisfied that “the rumour and noise in the county was great, and the fear of the people greater without any cause”. Equally “causeless” was a series of panics which convulsed Colchester...
a few days later during the Whitsun holiday period. Some “Irishmen” were seen wandering in town; it was assumed that they were deliberating which quarter would burn best; the watch was called out and searched unsuccessfully for them; rumours then spread of papists assembling at two recusants’ houses just outside the town; and the episode concluded only after a crowd had visited these houses. Rumours spread in Oxford that recusants were meeting for purposes unknown at a city inn, more anxiety was reported from the North Downs of Kent, not far from Chislehurst, and word passed in London of Charles’s supposed intention to use an Irish army to restore order in both of his unsettled kingdoms.

More disturbing to the government than these alarms however were the disturbances which shook the morale of army officers as more units marched north against the Scots. The news which led to rioting in London caused mutiny and murder among troops commanded by Catholics. Two officers were beaten to death in Berkshire and Gloucestershire (and their killers sheltered by the local population), a third in Herefordshire was only saved by some local trained bands, and the Catholic son of a Secretary of State wrote to his father of his soldiers’ resolution to murder all their popish officers. From Berkshire, Wiltshire and Northamptonshire, desertions and mutinies were reported; pressed soldiers led anti-Catholic rioting in Newbury and Cirencester; and news of further military disorders came from Essex and Hertfordshire.

These affrays died out as the troops came closer to the enemy, and the next outbursts of panics and disturbances coincided with the next political crisis. By September 1640 the army had given way and the Scots were in Newcastle, a Council of peers had been called and had given Charles no comfort, and mass petitions were circulating in London calling for another Parliament. And as in May-June an excited population found popish enemies devising its ruin. Near Rye a wagon observed entering a Catholic's house was believed to contain arms, and people seen in the fields nearby became “armed men drilling”.

18 Ibid., 16/458/12, 13.
20 P.R.O., S.P., 16/457/58, 460/5, 46; Letters of Lady Brilliana Harley, p. 95.
22 P.R.O., S.P., 16/467/104.
by armed men spread among the citizens from a recusant household and "much distracted and disquieted the Common sort of people". The capital was particularly disturbed, with reports of two separate regicide plots by papists; references to "the great concourse" of Catholics in London where, secure in the city's size and anonymity "they have more means and opportunity of Plotting"; a wary vigilance exercised over the supposedly numerous Irish living within the walls; stories retailed of English and Spanish Catholics meeting together in secret; and other less detailed rumours circulated about popish devices to destroy Protestantism.

By the time the political temperature rose once more, as Pym and his allies in the first weeks of the Long Parliament attacked the King's policies and ministers, wild rumours were abroad in several towns. Lichfield was full of rumours concerning the large numbers of "hatchets and such instruments of death" being acquired by papists. As often happened in these panics the timing, agents, and mode of execution were precisely stated. Local Catholics were to do the deed, and their signal was to have been the next fast day ordered by Parliament. The same exactness is evident in an alarm from York where Irish soldiers brought into the town by the Earl of Stafford were to have equipped themselves from a specially stocked papist armoury before falling on Protestants. In Berkshire and in London more tales were current about Catholic arms deposits; in Gloucestershire recusants were reported to be collecting weapons; and the Marquis of Worcester's neighbours had the temerity to visit and search Raglan Castle for the stables and armouries which local rumour insisted were hidden deep in the cellars. At the same time several reports of conspiratorial behaviour by Catholics came from the West Midlands.

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Ibid., 16/467/38, 468/44.


Ibid., p. 28 and n. 36.

T. Bayly, Witty Apophthegms Delivered at Several Times ... By King James, King Charles, The Marquis of Worcester ... (London, 1658), pp. 85-7. Bayly was for long in personal attendance upon the Marquis and the bulk of the book is devoted to Worcester's wit.

discussed during the first month of the Parliament, and the House of Commons after looking into the Scottish war concluded that

In Lancashire [there had been] 1500, in Ireland 8,000 Papists in Arms, and many thousands in South-Wales and North-Wales well paid and provided for by the Earl of Stafford, Earl of Worcester and others: and did use to go Masse at the Sound of the Drum."

These fears passed for the moment, but were to recur during the crisis over Strafford’s execution in May 1641, and with a brief lull during the summer they continued for the rest of the year and into the first months of 1642. Their credibility was increased by the number of real conspiracies uncovered in this year of plotting. The First and the Second Army Plots, Charles’s negotiations for foreign support against his subjects, a savage rebellion in Ireland, and the attempted coup against the Five Members made suspicion of the other plots appear reasonable and protective measures seem mere prudence. Riots took place outside the Queen’s apartments in Whitehall on the 8th and 9th of May, stimulated partly by the known links between some of her courtiers and the army plotters (Pym having released details of the First Army Plot on the 5th of May). Fly-sheets urging attacks on Catholic embassies and the timely discovery of a letter containing details of a papist plot gave a clear lead to popular suspicions that court pressure might influence the King to reprieve Strafford. When news of the Army Plot, the Commons’ Protestation of 5th May, and the London riots reached the provinces they were frequently combined with local fears concerning recusants. Some Lancashire priests were privy to the Army Plot, it was said. Citizens of Portsmouth were anxious about the religion of some ships’ crews in the harbour and were alarmed by the sudden arrival of gunpowder sent from London to the port. They were already concerned over the loyalty of the town’s governor Lord Goring. Hull was another port subject, it was thought, to Catholic intrigues for its control. Among several towns and villages in Wiltshire, Leicestershire, Buckinghamshire and Lancashire the news

from London was followed by anxieties about local Catholics. In Gloucestershire and Shropshire, Catholics were said to be collecting arms and assembling in the woods, and a report spread that at Basingstoke the Catholic Marquis of Winchester had arms for 1,500 men. During the summer it was remarked that a number of Catholics were selling lands and goods to obtain ready cash, and when the Queen determined to travel to Spa for her health and safety a link between these activities was suspected:

therefore 'tis likely they [the Catholic vendors] may have a designe of some danger in this journey of the queenes.

In vain a group of leading Catholic gentry petitioned Parliament that their religion contained nothing to prevent their being faithfull to their prince, and to the liberties of their country, for they utterly abjure that doctrine that the assassination of princes can be justified, or that faith is not to be observed with all sorts of people.

The House of Lords laid it aside "to be considered of some other Time". This was in July 1641. The House never subsequently found time to consider it. Not long after the plague recess of August to September came news of the Irish rebellion.

Differing little in design and execution from the rumoured conspiracies in England, discovered and all but prevented in circumstances no less dramatic, the rebellion and its attendant massacres for some time made it seem mere prudence to consider all Catholics actual or potential traitors, their every word and deed to be tested for conspiracy. Parliament ordered sweeping security measures and these, together with the news from Ireland were the immediate cause of what followed. Rumours spread in Norwich, Guildford and later in London that papists had tried to fire the town. Troops
of armed Catholics were reportedly uncovered: a band of forty in London, and a few days later another group only recently arrived in the capital from Lancashire. Buckinghamshire was alarmed when an armed recusant was captured bearing letters which he had carried through Lancashire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire; these he destroyed when captured. From Kent and Dorsetshire the House of Commons heard of anxieties about recusants' arms; searches of recusants' houses became too numerous for individual enumeration; and Protestants became so panicky that the accidental discovery of some forgotten county arms in Oxford led to "some rumour concerning a designe of Papists upon us". Catholics shifting house excited suspicion; in Bedfordshire and Berkshire "frequent assemblies" in "mysterious manner" had the same consequence. Twice more came reports from Portsmouth of great fears that Catholics were in league with the town's governor to seize the port for a French or Irish invasion. Protestants in Staffordshire suspected a popish plan to attack them when they were gathered defenceless in church: "they were in such fears . . . [that] they durst not go to Church unarmed".

Three weeks after the Irish rebellion fears of a Catholic uprising swept through eight towns and villages in the West Midlands. Warnings were sent from Lichfield and Ashby-de-la-Zouche to Leicester; Kidderminster transmitted the panic to Bridgenorth nearby; at Ludlow, Bewdley and Brampton Bryan the night of 19-20th November was spent "in very great fear" with the inhabitants awake and the watch in the streets. Another panic was carried through some West Riding towns early in 1642 when a band of Irish refugees was mistaken for invading popish rebels. A state of fear and confusion reigned at Bradford, Halifax and Pudsey as they heard of the marauders' progress: they had "come as far as Rochdale and Little-

41 L.J., iv, pp. 417-8, 426; Coates, D'Ewes' Journal, p. 163.
42 Coates, D'Ewes' Journal, pp. 200-1; C.J., ii, pp. 372-3; A Worthie Speech . . . in the Commons . . . by Mr. John Brown (London, 1641, Brit. Mus., Thomason E.200, no. 9); C.J., ii, pp. 312, 378, 387, 396, 403, 455; P.R.O., S.P., 16/488/68.
borough and the Batings” and would shortly descend on Bradford. These events may have contributed to a panic in Bingley — only six miles from Bradford and little more from Pudsey — during the same period. Four recusant gentry, locals said, fled the district after their plan to blow up a church and its congregation had been discovered.

Late in December 1641 Newcastle, Hull and Berwick (twice) appealed to Parliament for protection against Catholics, in Liverpool Protestants fearfully awaited a sudden assault by Catholics, and the Privy Council instituted an inquiry into a panic over a popish uprising involving the castle at Conway and the neighbouring town of Beaumaris. At the end of 1641 Lancashire towns were ordered to arrest on sight all strangers, Catholics wandering abroad, or men riding at night, and nerves were so taut that in January 1642 a skirmish took place outside Chester with several Protestant and Catholic dead on each side.

By early summer 1642 panics connected with the Irish rebellion had disappeared. For Catholics however this calm lasted only until August-September when, with King and Parliament raising and despatching their first armies, political crisis once more drew attention to the popish peril. Spasmodic alarms over papist uprising were heard — in Bristol and Southampton for example — but on this occasion popular as well as official concern was expressed in the form of impromptu punitive expeditions searching Catholic houses (with occasional looting) for arms. After catching a local Protestant as he left to join the King in August 1642 the townspeople of Colchester began a series of searches involving at least nine Catholic houses nearby. The Catholic Lady Rivers fled from Gifford’s Hall to Long Melford, thence to Bury St. Edmunds and finally to London driven successively out of each refuge by an anti-Catholic crowd. As news of the Colchester disturbances reached the Essex port of Maldon roving bands of townsmen and sailors attacked and searched

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recusants in villages up to twenty miles away. Parliament soon — and unexpectedly — had to act to safeguard the property of Catholics and other royalists from popular confiscation. Anxiety over and searches for Catholics' arms continued for several weeks over a large part of England particularly in the North and West — in Lancashire, Yorkshire and Staffordshire; Monmouth, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Somerset; Pembroke, Cornwall and Devon; and in Hampshire, Cambridgeshire and Kent.

But then the panics ended. A few minor alarms occurred early in 1643 but, despite the confusion and defeats of war, the open presence of Catholics in the royalists' army, Charles's negotiations to add Irishmen to his forces, and the most strenuous efforts of Catholic-baiting parliamentary propagandists, the alarms of 1640-42 did not revive during the war period. Reports of plots against parliamentary garrisons abounded between 1643 and 1646, but only twice were Catholics mentioned among the conspirators and none of the plots was explicitly described as popish. When some M.P.s were mysteriously summoned out of a London church in mid-1643 alarmed speculation naturally followed, but there was no talk of a Catholic threat. Instead it was said that "surely the Danes were in Kent, and would presently be in London". The first months of fighting exposed the true weakness of English Catholicism — in terms of numbers, arms, organization and crusading spirit — which decades of peace had hidden. Open war also clarified the line between friend


and enemy: Catholicism was no longer a lurking peril in an unprepared land but an identifiable section of the opposing army. When peace came popery began once more to be thought a danger. Not however in the same way as before. Catholics would not be thought capable of open rebellion again until their evident weakness in the 1640s had been forgotten by a new generation which saw them tolerated and encouraged by the court. The fear of Catholics in the later 1640s and 1650s took the form of talk about “papists” (especially Jesuits) “in disguise”, and the disguise most commonly employed was sectarianism. Every recognizable sect was at some time accused of cloaking popery be its members Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Brownists, Familists, Seekers, Anabaptists, Ranters, “Vanists”, or any variety of religious individualist. Though often couched in hysterical tones the belief was not itself always irrational. Little was clearly known of the beliefs of most sects and when, like the Quakers, their members refused the oaths of allegiance and supremacy the reason was often taken to be a conflicting loyalty to Rome and not conscience over all oaths. Some sects betrayed their “popish origins” by preaching justification by works and not by faith alone, or weakened Protestant respect for Scripture by asserting that it did not contain God’s complete and entire revelation. A wild variety of competing sects confused Protestants, bred conflict in the state, and displayed to advantage Rome’s unity and orderliness. For most writers this alone was sufficient proof of the sectaries’ Catholic origin.

This “explanation” of Protestant heresy shows how widely the fear of Catholicism struck for it is found in puritan and Anglican, Parliamentarian and royalist alike. Bishop Bramhall of Derry and


"Cal. S.P. Dom., 1656-57, p. 123, a report to the Council of State on J.P.s in Dorset who had incited people against Quakers.

later Primate of Ireland informed Archbishop Usher that in 1646 over one hundred Catholic priests were sent to England to play the part of Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists etc. some joining Parliament's army, others leaving for the King's camp, each group corresponding with the other to deepen England's miseries.\textsuperscript{88} The servants of Oliver Cromwell were no less credulous than those of Charles Stuart, spreading a tale in 1658 that many Quakers and Seekers were Jesuits trying to spread confusion and disorder to prove that England needed the correction and authority of "the arch-shepherd of Rome".\textsuperscript{89} Richard Baxter discovered fleeting common ground here with the royalist Sir Justinian Isham, and the anti-puritan satirist John Taylor.\textsuperscript{90} Since the Levellers threatened disorder in the commonwealth they too were seen as agents or dupes of the all-powerful Roman clergy.\textsuperscript{91} Most remarkable of all was a story heard by John Winthrop Jnr. in 1659 that the Jesuits had not only succeeded in deposing Richard Cromwell, but in the guise of Quakers were negotiating the purchase of Whitehall "to settle there, in time, a Jesuites Colledge".\textsuperscript{92}

III

This account of anti-Catholic alarms during the English Revolution is not exhaustive.\textsuperscript{93} Its purpose is to indicate the nature of the fears, to show how their rhythm matched the ebb and flow of political crises, and to demonstrate that the fear of Catholic rebellion was real and intense. But it was the immense shadow and not the substance of English Catholicism which frightened Protestants, for by the early seventeenth century recusancy was remarkable chiefly for its weaknesses. Committed Catholics may have been as few as 2 per cent of the population, and even the Papal Agent in the 1630s put the figure no higher than 5 per cent.\textsuperscript{94} Equally important was the loss of morale

\textsuperscript{89} Vaughan, \textit{The Protectorate of Cromwell}, ii, pp. 309-10.
\textsuperscript{91} W. Haller and G. Davies (eds.), \textit{The Leveller Tracts} (Gloucester, Mass., 1964), pp. 281, 343, 374.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{The Winthrop Papers} (Collections of the Massachusetts Hist. Soc., 4th ser., vii, 1865), p. 503, 5 June 1659.
\textsuperscript{93} For further references see Clifton, "The Fear of Catholics", \textit{passim}.
following the failure of the missionary attempt to reconvert England which had absorbed the energy and self-sacrifice of active recusants for a generation. Reduced in numbers, resigned to defeat, Jacobean Catholicism was further weakened by recurring factional disputes. How could so small a minority have cast such a fearful shadow? Part of the answer seems to lie with the Protestants themselves. None of the generation which fought the Civil War had lived through the genuine Catholic conspiracies of the 1580s and 90s, and even for the middle-aged the last serious papist plot in 1605 was a distant memory of childhood. Their beliefs about Catholicism arose to some extent from news of the Thirty Years' War but perhaps more from what they were told in sermon and pamphlet. Protestants created a stereotype of popery and the nature of this image and its connection with the panics, must be considered.

A full study of the literature of anti-Catholicism is beyond the scope of an article, but a sample from the most popular works can be considered. For brevity this will be confined to the Book of Homilies representing what the majority of the population in rural parishes heard as the teaching of the State Church; the sermons of William Perkins, John Preston and Richard Sibbes, three of the puritan preachers most popular in the early seventeenth century; John Foxe's Acts and Monuments of the Christian Reformation, in literature perhaps the book most read in England after the Bible and influential beyond this as the source for a host of Rome-baiting pamphlets; and finally the sermons of several priests and laity who deserted Catholicism for the Church of England and who publicly justified their action.

In a largely illiterate population priority must be given to the sermon as the main vehicle for advice and exhortation. The Homilies and the puritan sermons chosen here dealt extensively with Catholicism but the political as opposed to the moral and spiritual dangers of popery attracted remarkably little attention. The Book of Homilies, as befitted the teaching of an established Church, stressed the Pope's interference with the obedience owed by a subject to his ruler: "all . . . under him are free from all burdens and changes of the Commonwealth and obedience toward their Prince", and the point was reiterated at length in the "Homily against Disobedience and Wilfull Rebellion". Emphasis fell not so much on the disloyalty of native-born recusants as upon the conflict between prince and prelate and it is unlikely that this contributed very directly to suspicion of Catholic neighbours.

"Sermons or Homilies appointed to be read in Churches (London, 1817), pp. 104-5 "Sermon of Obedience"; p. 50 "Sermon of Good Works"; pp. 436-7 "Sermon for Whitsunday".
The other major anti-Catholic theme developed in the Homilies received marked attention from the puritan preachers. This was an attack on Rome from moral and theological grounds. Catholicism was presented as the corruption of Apostolic Christianity, depraved because for centuries it had permitted man to cover the Gospel's basic simplicity with the corrupt promptings of his fallen nature. Rome's elaborate ritual and complex theology, its devotion to saints, relics and the Virgin, its appetite for power and indulgence of sin, all stamped it as a religion not inspired by God but essentially made by man for his own comfort. Like the homilists, Perkins, Preston and Sibbes found in Catholicism's devotion to images — of the Trinity, the saints or Mary — a crude idolatry identical to that of the Romans. Sibbes in particular explains the reasonable concern underlying the total and apparently hysterical opposition to the smallest changes made by Archbishop Laud. "Nothing", he wrote "in Popery [was] so gross but [it] had small beginnings, which being neglected by those that should have watched over the Church, grew at length insufferable". By precisely such small accommodations to man's indolent and comfort-loving nature Rome had eventually perverted Christianity. For some puritans the issue in the 1630s was thus not whether Laud was deliberately leading England towards Rome, but rather that by relaxing the curb upon man's instincts he would even unintentionally begin a moral and spiritual drift the inevitable end of which was a religion directed entirely to the comfortable satisfaction of man's appetites — like Catholicism. Clerical taste for power might however accelerate the slide. The "humanizing" of religion had been encouraged by the Catholic clergy to gratify this appetite:

If you ask the reason that raised popery to be so gaudy as it is, they saw the people of the world fools (sic), and knew that children must have baubles, and fools trifles, and empty men must have empty things; they saw what pleased them and the cunning clergy thought, we will have a religion fit for you. Little in this could stimulate among Protestants an over-sensitivity to Catholic plotting. The same is true of the treatment of millenarianism, a topic not considered in the Homilies probably because of its complexity and dangerous potentialities. Recent work has shown

— Ibid., pp. 226-8 "Sermon on Idolatry".
— Sibbes, Works, ii, p. 42.
— Perkins, Complete Works, i, p. 399.
that interest in eschatology was not confined to small extremist
groups but can be found in the most reputable puritan writers.\(^7\)
Perkins and Sibbes both wrote at length on the Revelation of St. John,
identifying the Anti-Christ as the Papacy (and not the Turk, pagan
Rome or a mythical beast as suggested by other commentators);
attempting to relate to some disaster each of the seven vials of wrath
poured out upon the world, the better to forecast its end; and seizing
upon St. John's words to confirm the remarkable fact that God had
indeed suffered the Papacy to deceive most of Europe for many
centuries.\(^8\)

The effect of such writing upon relations between Catholic and
Protestant in England is difficult to judge. It assured the latter of
ultimate victory while warning of the peril from Anti-Christ's last
throes. But even in the hands of a writer as ferociously opposed to
Rome as Henry Burton — who analysed the Revelation specifically
to shake Protestants from their lethargy — the subject probably
hindered the growth of principled toleration of Catholics more than
it increased the actual fear of local recusants.\(^7\)

A further source of the popish stereotype was pamphlets and
sermons by ex-Catholics. While these probably enjoyed less
circulation than the works discussed above, they cannot be neglected
because they provided Protestants with supposedly authentic pictures
of the enemy camp. Moreover these ideological refugees were
writing to acquire new friends and patrons and therefore reflected
most carefully Protestant conceptions of popery. Narratives by five
authors published between 1612 and 1638 provide an adequate guide
to the genre.\(^7\) Their authors' world had changed little since the
Reformation. In *The Foot out of the Snare* John Gee wrote (allegedly
from personal knowledge) of a friar who urged his hearers to approach
him with sympathy for friends in Purgatory and a generous attitude
to the money in their pockets:

> At the very instant of the money's thrown in (sic), and clinking in the Bason,
the soule should leap out of Purgatorie.\(^7\)

Not all stories of popish malpractices retailed in these pamphlets

\(^8\) W. Perkins, *Lectures upon the first three chapters of Revelation ...* (London,
1604); J. Sibbes, *The Beasts Dominion over earthly Kings ...* (London, 1639).
\(^7\) R. Sheldon, *The Motives of Richard Sheldon Priest for his iust ... renouncing
of Communion with the Bishop of Rome* (London, 1612); J. Gee, *The Foot Out
of the Snare* (London, 1624); J. Wadsworth, *The English Spanish Pilgrim
(London, 1629); H. Yaxlee, *Morbis et Antidotus* (London, 1630); T. Abernethie,
*The Abjuration of Paperie* (Edinburgh, 1638), reprinted in London 1641.
\(^7\) Gee, *Foot out of the Snare*, p. 27.
drew so obviously on Luther's Germany but their basic themes are unmistakable. Catholicism was a system of lies, superstition and fraud practised by priests upon a gullible and ignorant public. Lay anti-clericalism appeared repeatedly: priests lived as parasites upon Christians by subjecting body and mind to a double tyranny of confessional and Latin prayer. By comparison treatment of the political danger from English Catholics was brief and general. Their connections with Spain, their flirtation with regicide, the implications of the Papacy's deposing power were mentioned, but the authors dwelt for preference upon Rome's doctrinal perversions and the moral failings of its adherents.

Homilies, puritan sermons, and recantation pamphlets therefore tended to present Catholicism as an offence to true religion rather than a threat to its very existence. The political dangers from popery were far more evident in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of the Christian Reformation.* The work grew from a Protestant hagiography into a powerful interpretation of English history. The first and most implacable of Rome's enemies, destined to play the major rôle in the destruction of Anti-Christ, England was marked for special attention from the Papacy. To the martyrdoms of the Lollards and the Marian Protestants later editions of the work added the efforts to depose or assassinate Elizabeth, the Armada and the Gunpowder Plot. In context these were seen as part of Rome's patient campaign to destroy the Elect Nation. *Acts and Monuments* not only kept fresh the memory of the 1580s and '90s but also taught Englishmen to project into the future the violent pattern of the past. But even here some caution is necessary. By its very nature this intensely patriotic work guided attention to the danger from abroad, the enmity of Rome and its Continental allies. While the disastrous consequences of rule by an English Catholic were also stressed, the disloyalty of home-bred papists was not central to the argument, nor was it treated at length. At worst they were considered the cat's-paw of the real enemy.

Until a full study is made of the literature of seventeenth-century anti-Catholicism the conclusions of this section must be tentative. But they indicate that the stereotype of Catholicism owed more to popular memory of Elizabethan history and to Protestant defeats on the Continent in the 1620s than it did to the creative efforts of writers and preachers. The latter worked to increase Protestant hatred of Rome but their chosen method was to highlight popery's

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moral and doctrinal bankruptcy, paying less attention to the Catholic fifth column. At a more general level however historical experience and propagandist writing combined to construct the axiom that Rome's fundamental purpose was to destroy Protestant England. The following sections will show how this belief influenced panics.

IV

Contemporaries speculated readily upon the causes of the alarms. Their explanations usually derived from one outstanding feature, the regular coincidence of anti-Catholic disorder with political crisis. From the dissolution of the Short Parliament, the Scottish successes of 1640, and the beginning of the Long Parliament to Strafford's trial, the rebellion in Ireland, the Five Members affair, and the outbreak of war, rumours of papist conspiracy accompanied each phase of the revolution. Since the Commons in all its declarations asserted that popery was a major issue — sometimes the major issue — separating it from the King repeated panics at crucial periods seem too convenient to be accidental. The Secretary of State, Sir Edward Nicholas, observed

ye Alarime of Popish plot* amuse and Afright ye people here, more than anything, and therefore that is ye Drum that is soe frequently beaten upon all occasions.\textsuperscript{7}

In a few cases clear evidence exists that the drum was deliberately beaten. One device was to arrange for the discovery of a letter containing details of a "papist conspiracy". Thus in June 1640 a letter came to a royal secretary alleging the existence of another gunpowder plot, and in May of the following year Pym read to the Commons a letter addressed to the Catholic Lady Shelley. "Found by accident" it asked her for more money and (imitating a celebrated passage in the letter which revealed the 1605 plot) boasted "we shall destroy the wicked brood before they are aware".\textsuperscript{8} A month later Captain Venn offered the House a letter thrown into his window which showed a Catholic design against Parliament and the City. The unknown author was disappointed: "in respect that noe name was subscribed it was rejected ... as a f[orge]ry".\textsuperscript{9} In October 1641, and January 1642 other letters appeared concerning "great designes"

\textsuperscript{7} "The Private Correspondence between Charles I and his Secretary of State, Sir Edward Nicholas", in Memoirs Illustrative of the Life and Writings of John Evelyn ... [and] the Private Correspondence between King Charles I and ... Sir Edward Nicholas, 2 vols. (London, 1818), ii, Part II, p. 46.


\textsuperscript{9} Brit. Mus., Harl. MS. 163, fo. 740 v.
against the city of London. The “dying confession” of a London Catholic hinting at a popish plot laid in the vicinity of Coleman Street was probably a variation on this theme. Preachers contributed to anti-Catholic riots in the army on at least two occasions in the summer of 1640.

Careful attempts were therefore sometimes made to excite alarm over Catholics. It is however doubtful whether Parliamentary radicals or their supporters created the whole wave of panics. No final proof of this is possible but several considerations cast doubt on the general validity of the “parliamentary plot” thesis. Just over one half of the disturbances took place outside London. The political advantages of rumours in the capital are clear but how could Pym profit from tension in remote areas of Lancashire, obscure Yorkshire hamlets, or tiny fishing villages in Cornwall or Wales? Several alarms originated with or were spread by men who in the Civil War were royalists: they presumably believed in the tales and were not the accomplices of radicals. Thomas Bulkeley of Anglesey was one of the most important landowners of North Wales, a friend of Archbishop Williams and fought to the last for the King. Yet in November 1641 he circulated a rumour that local Catholics, encouraged by the rebellion in Ireland, were about to massacre Protestants. In the same year the Earl of Derby, whose services to the King led him to the block after the war, claimed that he was “inforced to keep a guard about his house for fear of the Papists”. The eminently conservative Sir Roger Twysden of Kent deplored the trend for the House of Commons to overreach its constitutional powers, but when the object was to discover Catholics he turned a blind eye “though I knew some saw an ill sequile might ensue”. Other royalist M.P.s willing to countenance anti-Catholic fears by reading to the House constituents’ letters and petitions on the subject included

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85 P.R.O., S.P., 16/468/37, 100; Brit. Mus., Harl. MS. 162, fo. 379 v.
Sir Hugh Cholmondely, Alexander Carew and William Pleydell. Equally puzzling is a point made earlier, the sparseness of panics once the war began. This was precisely the time when parliamentarians needed support most urgently and had they inspired earlier fears they should logically have redoubled their efforts. Finally it must be emphasized that the fears of the 1640s and ’50s were not isolated examples of hysteria. They belong to a long tradition of Protestant distrust of Catholics: earlier panics in 1596, 1605, 1611, 1613, 1615, 1625, 1630 and 1636 have been mentioned, and more rumours of popish conspiracy accompanied the Fire of London, the Exclusion crisis and the 1688 Revolution. Such regularity suggests not successive generations of well-trained agitators but a very basic political attitude in the mass of the Protestant nation, an attitude brought into play by specific and recurring circumstances.

One such circumstance may have been economic crisis. Well before the riot of June 1640 for example the mayor of Colchester believed that the town was becoming un governable. Plague had dislocated the cloth industry so that the poor rate, although trebled, could not support the destitute, while hardship was increased by the town’s having to billet half the trained bands of Essex. Anti-Catholic disturbances recurred here two years later when political uncertainty led to a recession in trade. Weavers, sailors and their families left Colchester and Maldon to search recusants’ houses in a dozen Essex villages. The mayor of Colchester was this time in no doubt that unemployment caused the riots. The people were giving out speeches and threatening to plunder all the Papists in that County, which (they conceived) were the causes of all these troubles and disturbances and distractions in the Kingdome, and were the occasion that they, their wives and children were brought into great want and extremity (by the great decay of trading) and for that they have plotted the ruin of this Kingdome.

Earlier in 1642 unemployed Londoners had blamed their distress upon papists, threatening to confiscate their property for poor relief. Petitions to Parliament during the winter of 1641-2 from

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88 P.R.O., S.P., 16/458/83.
six clothing and fishing towns of the South-West urged exemplary action against Catholics as the first step to economic normality.**

Popular talk that papists were to blame for the recession of 1641-2 probably derived from proposals made in Parliament during December 1641 to deprive bishops and Catholic peers of their votes in the Lords on the ground that they were obstructing Bills necessary for the nation's well-being. But economic distress was connected with only a small proportion of anti-Catholic disturbances during the 1640s and where it was a factor the result was more often an attack upon Catholics than fear of them. During the war years taxation and hostilities kept the economy depressed yet few panics occurred, and even fewer took place during the years of harvest failure 1647 to 1649. None of the other seventeenth-century panics were linked to harvest or trade fluctuations, and the crises in the cloth industry such as the Cockayne fiasco after 1614 produced no visible effect upon Protestant-Catholic relations. The state of the economy had only an occasional and fortuitous influence upon anti-Catholicism.

Puritanism had equally little direct impact although some disturbances took place among dissenting congregations or in specifically puritan areas. The Presbyterians at Pudsey who panicked early in 1642 had been tutored by the formidable Elkanah Wales and according to one member were in a highly emotional state from his sermon when the rumour reached them.** Richard Baxter had worked for several years in Kidderminster and Bridgenorth, scene of a major panic in November 1641. An equally noted puritan Sir Robert Harley M.P. also lived nearby at Brampton Bryan, and by sending a warning letter from London was the immediate cause of the alarm.** The mayor of Colchester had been in trouble with the Court of High Commission shortly before the June 1640 riot there, and the 1636 disturbance in Bristol may have taken place at a meeting of the "Preciser Faction".** Again however the correlation between puritanism and panics is too occasional for dissent to have been a significant influence: too many alarms occurred during the revolu-

** Lister, Autobiography, pp. 6-7; for Wales see E. Calamy, The Nonconformists' Memorial, ed. S. Palmer, 3 vols. (London, 1803), iii, pp. 444-5.
tionary decades — and at other times in the century — among average members of the Church of England.

A common factor of a different kind can however be found in the background to the panics mentioned here. Talk that the Spanish had captured Calais from England coincided with the 1596 alarm in Sussex. The “great confluence of Recusants” into London in 1610 which caused Parliament to “Doubt some imminent Danger” occurred just after the assassination of Henry IV. Two years later the marriage of Princess Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine was accompanied by talk of papists receiving a shipload of pistols from Spain and by alarms in the Midlands. During the 1625 disturbances England was preparing for war for the first time in twenty years. Opposition was beginning in Bristol in 1636 to the liturgy proposed for Scotland and either as a consequence of this, or for some other reason unknown, local people “had been [watching and] warding the whole country over.”

A drift towards revolution and civil war accompanied panics between 1640 and 1642. Common to all these alarms over Catholics was some form of crisis or political disaster, sometimes present but often predicted for the future, and involving anything from foreign affairs to relations between King and Parliament. The generalized warnings of preachers and writers had their effect here: if it was assumed that England’s destruction was the overriding purpose of all Catholic powers then it was logical to look for popish designs behind every defeat suffered by the Elect Nation. Hence the frequently disproportionate anxiety felt over relatively minor reverses. Not the incident itself but the result to which it pointed was the cause of alarm.

Prolonged contact with the stereotype of Catholicism also explains the assumption that papists were responsible for the Civil War. Protestants did not suddenly seek a scapegoat in 1641 as conflict grew between the King and the Commons. For some time before Catholics had been blamed for the Scottish troubles, not merely because of their favour and supposed influence at court during the 1630s, but also because every Protestant was educated to expect popish policy to aim at creating divisions between prince and subject. A large part of the much-recited “Homily against Disobedience and Wilfull Rebellion” was taken up with this point and among puritans

"See above notes 5, 8, 12; Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 34218, Fane Papers, fo. io v.

Richard Sibbes also dealt thoroughly with it. When in 1640 the political storm centre moved south from Scotland to the English Parliament Catholic policy seemed near its ultimate goal: a kingdom divided was helpless before its foreign enemies.

Anxiety over national politics was the indispensable background for panics but local and particular factors must be introduced to explain the transition from mere uneasiness to a conviction that local Catholics were actually in rebellion. Here Edward Hyde supplies the key. Though he believed that Parliament deliberately provoked anti-Catholic fears, he observed that

in this progress there sometimes happened strange incidents for the confirmation of their credit.

These “strange incidents” can be found in virtually all the panics of the period. Thus the 1596 disturbance was preceded by reports that “often tymes many persons in suspicious sort” had been seen about recusant gentry’s houses in Sussex. During the 1625 alarms the number of visitors received by some Buckinghamshire Catholics was said to exceed “those which fore-ran the attempts, of the Spanish invasion and the Gunpowder Treason”. There is a suggestion here that in times of tension Protestants customarily linked unusual conviviality among their recusant neighbours with preparations for revolt.

Very similar events preceded the alarms of the 1640s. Observant neighbours of a well-known Catholic knight noticed in November 1640 that

as much meat is dressed in Sir Basil Brookes’ daily as three cooks can make ready, and it is not seen or known who eats it.

A Staffordshire gentleman supposed locally to be a papist bought in 1642 the greatest part of the provisions brought into any market near, and much more than can be expended by his domestic family.

From Carlisle came a report that

it is generally observed that the Papists in these parts never kept greater families than they do at present, which is much to be feared.

A report of the House of Commons early in 1641 on the supposed Catholic army gathered in Lancashire and Wales by Strafford and

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88 Sermons or Homilies, Part 6, esp. pp. 554-5; Sibbes, Works, vii, pp. 26 ff.
89 Clarendon, History of the Rebellion, i, p. 328.
90 Brit. Mus., Lansdowne MS. 82, fo. 103; Letters of the Verney Family, pp. 119, 120.
92 Ibid., 5th Report, p. 13.
93 L.J., iv, p. 579.
others carefully noted that Catholics had been buying up large stocks of corn at the time.¹⁰⁴

Unusually large consumption of food might indeed be an indication that something was stirring in the Catholic community — though not necessarily a conspiracy. For example in 1628 the Jesuits held a large assembly in London at a time when the Arch-priest was trying to draw from them some recognition of his authority. Their presence was betrayed by the amount of food taken into the house, and by the number of lights seen burning after dark.¹⁰⁵

At times Catholics may have been making purchases more alarming than food. In London, Lichfield, Sheffield and Wolverhampton as well as unspecified areas of Staffordshire and Kent warnings spread in 1641 that papists had recently acquired pistols, gunpowder, swords and even axes.¹⁰⁶ There is no confirmatory evidence that recusants were in fact arming themselves but in such a turbulent year as 1641 there may have been some who took this precaution, or who at least re-fortified their houses. It is clear that Protestants were desperately aware of the need for arms. The Scottish wars had depleted many county magazines and after the Irish rebellion concern over self-defence rose to a new pitch. Nehemiah Wallington expressly attributed that rebellion’s success to “The unprovidedness of the protestants in Ireland to defend themselves”, and another memorialist observed that the Irish news alarmed many “and constrained them to whet their swords”.¹⁰⁷ The mayors of Berwick, Carlisle and Pembroke wrote anxiously to Parliament about their weaponless condition, and petitions on the same subject came from Yorkshire, Dorset and Devon.¹⁰⁸ These led to Parliament’s order in March 1642 that Catholics in Hampshire, Dorset, Devon, Somerset and North Wales

be not suffered to have greater store of ammunition than their neighbouring
Protestants, that thereby the just feare of each county in that behalf may
be removed.¹⁰⁹

By the purchase of food or arms, or by allowing a Protestant to
see all their family and servants gathered together Catholics risked
inadvertently starting panics. Most frequently however fears were
prompted by reports that Catholics were meeting together more
frequently than usual, "whereby" as an Oxfordshire petition sagely
warned "they may know each others' minds, and so be enabled to
put in execution these dangerous designes".¹¹⁰ Again, anxiety over
this symptom of conspiracy was not new: it can be found repeatedly
in 1625 when England resumed war with Spain. Between 1640 and
1642 a more immediate peril raised the familiar bogey over most of
England. Reports came from London, Berkshire, Suffolk, Surrey
and Kent; the Midland counties were affected; and so were parts of
the North and West.¹¹¹ In time of grave tension few actions by
Catholics were above suspicion. If they sold land to get cash in hand,
neighbours wondered what the money would be used for. Those
who shifted house to a place of greater security either near the sea or
under the shadow of greater Catholic gentry or aristocracy were
assumed to be concentrating for an uprising. The arrival of strangers
in or near a town was disturbing particularly because of a Dublin report
that shortly before the 1641 uprising "great Numbers of Strangers
were observed to come into the Town". And should an English
Catholic, even after this disaster, attempt to go about his business
normally there were some who observed that papists were "merrier
than ever", doubtless a portent that "there was some new designe in
hand . . . ."¹¹² A spiral of fear and tension was easily created. In a
time of tension the Catholic minority felt suspicion and intolerance

¹¹⁰ The Humble Petition of . . . the County of Oxfordshire (London, 1642,
Brit. Mus., Thomason 669, f. 4, no. 112).
¹¹¹ Clarendon, History of the Rebellion, i, p. 327; Brit. Mus., Harl. MS. 164,
fo. 324 v; The Humble Petition of the County of Berkshire (London, 1642,
Brit. Mus., Thomason 669, fo. 4, no. 128); C.J., ii, pp. 372-3; P.R.O., S.P.,
Portland MSS., p. 69; The Letters of Lady Harley, p. 105; L.J., iv, p. 86;
G. Ormerod (ed.), Tracts Relating to . . . Lancashire, (Chetham Soc., ii, 1844),
pp. 324-5; Strange News from Staffordshire, (London, 1641, Brit. Mus.,
Thomason, E.149, no. 25); Coates, D'Ewes' Journal, p. 300; Brit. Mus., Harl.
¹¹² The Verney Papers, p. 106; C.J., ii, p. 411; P.R.O., S.P., 16/458/12, 13;
Lister, Autobiography, pp. 6-8; Brit. Mus., Harl. MS. 162, fo. 353; L.J., iv
p. 413; Coates, D'Ewes' Journal, p. 146.
building up against them. Some might consult with recusant friends and leave the district. Others might resolve to brave the matter out obtaining cash, arms and extra food. What Protestants would see was a flurry of unusual activity among papists. The stereotype of Catholicism was drawn upon to interpret this behaviour and talk of a "conspiracy" followed.

Panics were however more than simple conjunction of national tension and local novelties in Catholic behaviour. Despite their small numbers nationally there were parts of England where recusants possessed sufficient strength for an uprising to be within the bounds of possibility. Early in 1642 an M.P. for Dorset, referring to George Lord Digby a suspected Catholic, told Parliament that what made his county

so fearful and to apprehend the danger with such vehemency is the greatness of his authoritie with us, his larg revenues and multiplicity of tenants who are for the most part Recusants, and impertuous resisters of the Protestant religion: and not only so, but also by their multiplicity of Armor, muskets and other ammunition, every particular man having greater and larger store than any neighbouring Protestant thereunto adjoyning, there being within ten miles distance [of Digby's manor at Sherborne] ... Evill Bruns-wicke, Bedminster and other villages within the compendium of his lordship's demeans; above seventy households of Roman Catholicks. 111

At Garstang in Lancashire 230 persons took the Commons' 1641 Protestation to "maintain the religion established against Popish innovations, and to protect the freedom of Parliament", but 288 openly refused it. 114 Several villages in Lancashire and Yorkshire are described by their historians as "almost completely Catholic". 118

Recusants were not spread evenly over the countryside, but tended to collect in groups or pockets. Nearly a century of intermittent persecution had eroded priests from villages, small towns and scattered hamlets, forcing a retreat to safer bases in the houses of recusant gentry, where they could pass unnoticed as servants, tutors or relatives. The faith survived about these houses; in areas not reached by priests it slowly died out as new generations received neither sacrament nor instruction. Persecution created a strong

113 A Worthis Speech ... by Mr. John Browne (London, 1641, Brit, Mus., Thomason E. 200, no. 9).
sense of common identity between the householders and their dependent servants, tenants and tradesmen, an identity reinforced at times by conscious exclusion of Protestants from the community. When presented for recusancy Lord Vaux of Harrowden “did claim his house to be a parish by itself”. The potential danger of this pattern of settlement had long been clear to the government. In 1594 the Privy Council heard a proposal that in time of national emergency, prominent recusants should be confined not within their own lands but elsewhere, so that power of Catholic communities might be curbed. Despite its administrative difficulties, Parliament discussed the idea again in 1641.

Recusant gentry were watched so carefully by their neighbours because the mental world of the latter led them to think of conspiracies on an essentially local scale. A national uprising by papists to overthrow the government was highly improbable but to people whose world seldom extended beyond the parish or county what mattered was the behaviour of local recusants. Hence their ready alarm over apparent trivialities, hence their fixed suspicion of some Catholic families. Fears centred repeatedly upon one particular Catholic house or individual Catholic. In 1625 papists meeting secretly at the Suffolk house of Lady Gage alarmed her neighbours; in January 1642 at the request of two Cambridgeshire Members the Commons ordered her house to be searched; and in August of the same year the local population carried out a further search without the blessing of Parliament. The house of Lady Rivers at Long Melford was visited regularly by Jesuits in the 1630s who also stayed occasionally at the town of Acton only four miles away: early in 1642 searches were carried out in both places. Agnes Watson of Ampthill, Bedfordshire also sheltered several priests during the 1630s. Accusations that he had apostatized to Catholicism were made against the incumbent of Ampthill in 1641, and when the Commons dismissed these renewed charges were made a few months later that “ther weree

116 Wallington, Historical Notices, i, p. 225.
latelie about an 100 papists seen at Watsons' house". Searches for Catholic arms were made at Colchester on several occasions between the town's panics of 1640 and 1642, and in Norwich — another town frequently prey to alarms — a prominent Catholic was repeatedly in trouble with local officials and Parliament. The Arundells of Cornwall, the Somersets of Monmouth, and the Ropers of Kent were other well-known Catholic families whose names steadily became associated with conspiracy.

Alarms were particularly common among towns or villages where recusant gentry lived in the countryside nearby, just beyond the urban boundary. Colchester, Rye, Norwich and Chester; Portsmouth, Berwick, Newcastle and Southampton; Amptill, Bingley, Sherborne and Hull — in each case the panic was over papists not living in the town or village but just outside it; known to the town but not familiar with it, or the townsfolk with them. Hence the paradox that for years Catholics could live peacefully with Protestants and then be transformed overnight into potential murderers. Though essentially local in character the panics did not involve close neighbours. And when an alarm did centre upon foreign Catholics each part of England knew which nationality it feared and why. The North of England tended to be anxious over papists coming from Scotland; the West and North-West looked out across the Irish Sea; and in the South geography and history prompted thought of a Spanish or sometimes a French invader.

Among foreigners the most feared were Irishmen and their presence (usually as migrants looking for work) could occasionally trigger off local panics as in Colchester and London in 1640. They did not however cause widespread alarm until the Irish rebellion in November 1641. Then for several months the North, West and South-West of England were swept by tales of invasions by murdering Irish sometimes with, sometimes without, the support of English papists.

121 P.R.O., S.P., 16/458/12, 13; ibid., 16/467/90; Notestein, D'Ewes' Journal, pp. 213, 229.
In Beaumaris, Conway and Holyhead, Liverpool, Milford Haven and Pembrokeshire an attack by the joint Catholic forces was hourly awaited. In Bristol the grim experiences of refugees caused the townspeople to watch in Armes day and night to prevent the surprizing of the City by the Irish rebels ... which is within twenty foure houres saile of ... Ireland.\[1\]

Alarming rumours frequently owed much of their effect to the attitude of men in positions of local responsibility who first heard them — mayors and Justices of the Peace, or influential landowners holding no public office. Their attitude to a rumour was crucial because their reaction could crystallize and confirm popular fears. The panic at Colchester in June 1640 arose at least in part from the mayor’s willingness to credit an allegation made by a high constable’s search which found no armed men but did discover “twelve beds warm”. An armed skirmish between Catholics and Protestants in Lancashire resulted directly from the mayor of Chester’s anti-Catholic precautions, and other mayors in Pembroke, Rye, Carlisle and Berwick reflected and increased popular fears by taking action against local Catholics.\[117\] A panic in the West Midlands spread rapidly because authorities in Kidderminster, Bridgnorth, Lichfield and Ashby-de-la-Zouche sent warning to neighbouring towns, and a few London constables gave colour to a common anxiety by arresting 36 Catholics on a charge of conspiring to burn down the city.\[1\] In past crises such men as these had sent the Privy Council reports of “great and unaccustomed resort to the Houses of Papists” and executed orders to disarm Catholics.\[1\] When no orders came from the royal government in 1640-2 they acted on their own initiative.

The marked sense of legitimacy which informed their actions — deriving from Statutes, Proclamations and Privy Council instructions concerning the Catholic danger — could also inspire direct action by the lower classes when their local governors took no precautionary

\[1\] Wallington, Historical Notices, ii, p. 57.
\[100\] Rushworth, Collections, i, pp. 194-5; P.R.O., S.P., 16/7/37; 16/10/4, 42, 48; 16/12/70, 74; Cal. S.P. Dom., James I, 1611-18, ed. M. A. E. Green (London, 1858), pp. 302, 393.
measures. Believing that the town authorities were too slack and "would suffer their throats to be cut" by papists, a Southampton cobbler gathered together a band to disarm recusants in the countryside nearby. This was in August 1642 when the precept and practice of Parliament and its supporters probably inspired this action. On at least two occasions apparently unruly crowds possessed an authenticated warrant for their proceedings. Rioters in Colchester in late 1642 justified their attacks on papists by reference to "an order of Parliament". A strong sense of communal responsibility, coupled with individual initiative working within a known tradition and legitimated by that tradition, was an essential adjunct to the alarms.

The very local nature of English society influenced Catholic panics in another way by limiting their spread. Most alarms were confined to one locality, and of those which spread few travelled far. In one of the larger disturbances an alarm in the West Midlands moved from Kidderminster to the hamlet of Bewdley three miles away, then 13 miles up the Severn valley to Bridgnorth, from where it travelled 23 miles to Ludlow. Warnings of a Catholic uprising — sent independently of each other — reached Leicester from Ashby-de-la-Zouche and Lichfield, 18 and 30 miles away respectively. The Yorkshire panics over Irish refugees covered 25 miles, involving Bradford, Halifax, Pudsey and possibly Bingley. This restricted distribution contrasts sharply with a similar phenomenon of mass panics in France's "Grande Peur" of 1789. In that year rumours that gangs hired by aristocrats were massacring peasants swept from village to village over entire provinces. The more limited transmissions of alarms in England reflects in part the larger role of local causes here — variations in the numbers or behaviour of Catholics meant that a rumour convincing in one parish lacked credibility in another — but it also stems from a basic difference between the two societies. England offers no parallel to the large bands of vagrants, semi-beggar semi-bandit, which tramped the French roads every summer. In 1789 revolution in Paris prompted anxiety over an aristocratic reaction and the vagrants were transformed into its agents. Wherever they went alarm spread before them. In England the sudden appearance of strangers sometimes produced an

2 Hist. MSS. Comm., 5th Report, p. 43; Albion, Charles I and the Court of Rome, p. 341.  
alarm, and when they were refugees from the Irish rebellion there was inevitably nervous speculation over local Catholics, but vagrants seldom or never travelled in large bands and were never mistaken for a popish army.

Rumours in England were occasionally carried by traders and, according to the Privy Council, by beggars and the unemployed who in tymes of suspition or trouble may by Tales and false Rumours distract the peoples minds although no examples of the latter have been found in the 1640s..Warning letters sent from London to the countryside (especially from M.P.s to their friends or relatives) explain the spread of some alarms, and the correspondence of gentry families shows another agency. After 1640 news of alarms was mainly spread by pamphlets and newspapers which circulated in London but rarely outside it. As a result Londoners — but almost nobody else — heard a considerable proportion of the alarms of the whole country. This probably contributed to the large number of panics, nearly one half, which originated in the capital. It undoubtedly explains Parliament’s preoccupation with the Catholic danger. In addition to stories carried in the press, M.P.s received a torrent of petitions, warnings and informations concerning popish malpractices most of which were referred to the “Committee for the Popish Hierarchy”. If a pamphleteer recounting only a fraction of the total of alarms could describe 1641 as “the yeare of the discovery of plots”, how much more so did it appear to men who heard of suspicions and panics in literally dozens of communities. To comprehend the contemporary meaning of Parliament’s inflammatory references to Catholicism in

184 E.g. at Colchester (P.R.O., S.P., 16/458/12, 13), or Pudsey (Lister, Autobiography, pp. 6-8), or in London (P.R.O., S.P., 16/467/90; C.J., ii, p. 26; Notestein, D’Ewes’ Journal, pp. 213, 219).


188 A Copy of the utter sent by the Queen ... Printed at London in the yeare of the discovery of plots, 1641 (London, 1641, Brit. Mus., Thomason E. 164, no. 15).
the Protestation of May 1641 or the Grand Remonstance one must recall this daily flow of complaint and fear.

Parliament's difficulties were increased by its dependence upon professional priest-catchers, the pursuivants. Theoretically paid by the government for their captures, they soon tapped the easier money to be obtained by blackmailing recusants who harboured priests. Catholics paid willingly until the 1630s when Charles’s more indulgent attitude made protection money seem unnecessary. They petitioned the King in 1637 and in two inquiries which followed Catholic priests gave evidence against the agents paid by the government to arrest them. Denounced by their victims, censured, discouraged and disavowed by their employers, pursuivants had good reason to welcome a new and more credulous paymaster in 1640. They fostered Parliament's suspicions and on one occasion gave crucial confirmatory evidence in a case which triggered off a series of panics in the Midlands. Before long however their new masters were becoming as suspicious of them as the royal government had been, and after stimulating Protestant anxieties for nearly two years they faced in December 1641 a Parliamentary inquiry into abuses charged against them. It is perhaps significant that from then onwards panics in London (though not in the country as a whole) showed a marked decline.

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During the English Revolution the fear of Catholics had political significance for three years only, between 1640 and 1642. Once the war had exposed their weakness recusants became unimportant: newspaper reports of proceedings at the Treaty of Uxbridge in 1645 reported no provisions against the popish peril which had convulsed their readers four years earlier. At the time when it was of consequence the political rôle of anti-Catholicism cannot be assessed by trying to disentangle its influence upon particular situations. Though it was deeply felt the fear of Catholics never became a controlling factor in any single crisis because alarms were essentially

local, never national. No one "conspiracy" between 1640 and 1642 was as sensational as the Gunpowder or Popish Plots, nor was there a nation-wide phenomenon for tension to focus on such as the vagrant bands in France. The panics had a political impact which is best seen at a more general level. This article has argued that their number and vividness demonstrate a popular and deeply felt conviction that papists were persistently conspiring to massacre Protestants. This conviction can only have worked to the grave disadvantage of a King who tolerated papists at court, was married to a popish Queen, received the first papal representative in England since the Reformation, and stood ultimate guarantor to Laud's "romanizing" policies. Charles's proclamations banning Catholics from his army, and even more the instant and widespread assumption of royal complicity in the Irish rebellion,\(^{143}\) show how strongly the monarchy was associated in the popular mind with papist interests. The attempts on Elizabeth's life, the Gunpowder Plot (and Henry IV's assassination shortly after) created a traditional identification of Catholicism with regicide, and it is deeply significant that after two alarms in 1640 panics never involved supposed conspiracy against the King's life.\(^{144}\) As a victim he was replaced by the Protestant population itself, a transition expressing public awareness that for the first time since the Reformation England had a ruler whose views on Catholicism seemed to differ markedly from those of the majority of his subjects. In his repeated references to popish influences at court Pym was therefore playing upon anxieties felt by the whole nation. The depth of Protestant fears described here gives life to the common observation that anti-Catholicism helped Pym to hold a majority about him as Parliament was driven to increasingly illegal expedients in 1641-2. That panics occurred so frequently among ordinary villagers and townsfolk also explains Parliament's strong following among the common population whose position made irrelevant talk of personal liberties and security of property. Massacre by papists on the other hand concerned them closely.

Fear of Catholics resulted basically from an assumption that they wished to change by force the Protestant character of the State. It was thus essentially political in character and was accompanied by


\(^{144}\) With the exception of William Prynne who believed that the Jesuits had executed the King in 1649: see W. Lamont, Marginal Prynne (London, 1963), pp. 138-41.
no concern over disturbance to the social order such as Lollardy had inspired two centuries before. At the centre of rumours of popish conspiracy were Catholic gentry and aristocracy like George Lord Digby and the Marquis of Worcester, not lower-class artisans and traders who comprised the bulk of the Lollards. Anti-Catholicism could conceal a form of social friction but it rarely took shape. In the interest of social order it was important that measures against popish gentry should be carried out by their Protestant equals and not by the rabble. When the crowd did take the initiative Parliament at once ordered its supporters off.

Fundamentally political in character, and involving all ranks of society, these panics may supply a guide to the largely unknown political world of those who existed only to be ruled. The regular coincidence of alarms with political tension has already been noted. No less significant is the way the issues at stake in each crisis between 1640 and 1642 were reflected in the theme of each group of anti-Catholic disturbances. In June and again in November 1640 physical and verbal attacks on papists in the army accompanied popular and Parliamentary concern with those responsible for the Scottish war. From the beginning of the Long Parliament until Strafford’s attainder, denunciation of the government’s past indulgence towards recusants formed part of a broader attack on the King’s recent policies and upon the advisers responsible for them. The Irish rebellion gave rise to fears of similar conspiracies in England. Attacks on Catholics in the autumn of 1642 took the form of searches for arms, reflecting the concern of parliamentarians and royalists alike to disarm opponents as quickly as possible. The evidence is not conclusive but taken together it indicates that serious occurrences in national politics may have been understood at popular level in terms of a papist/anti-papist dichotomy, i.e. that fear of Catholics supplied the basis of the popular political vocabulary. Such a view would help to explain not only the host of local panics over Catholics and the assumption that the Civil War was substantially a papist creation, but also the nation’s credulity during the Popish Plot and the remarkable readiness of Somerset weavers to begin a rebellion for the “Protestant Duke” against a popish King in 1685.

University of Warwick Robin Clifton

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