

London Goes Back to the Future - What would a Catholic England Look Like?

'History's Ultimate Spies report' by Tracy Borman

The Armada. Trafalgar. Waterloo. The names of these great battles are instantly recognisable to thousands of people across the globe, and were among the key moments of the past 500 years that changed history. The effects of these battles are still felt in Britain today, and the great military heroes who led Britain to victory have gone on to gain iconic status as a result: the swashbuckling Francis Drake, the heroic Lord Nelson and the indomitable Duke of Wellington. All of these men, and more besides, have left their mark not just on the history of Britain, but on its buildings, landscape, culture and traditions through their actions and the evidence is clear in our country's architecture. For example, one of London's most famous landmarks is a statue of Nelson towering above Trafalgar Square, a host of exquisite Elizabethan manor houses such as Hardwick Hall were built in the wake of England's triumph over the Armada, and Blenheim Palace stands as a proud reminder of the Duke of Marlborough's victorious military campaigns.

Important though these moments were, however, the most significant victories in history have been won by the hundreds of men and women who occupied the murky world of espionage. These unsung heroes did not serve their king or queen by wielding swords or bayonets, but by quietly gathering something altogether more powerful: information. In so doing, they were able to foil numerous plots and conspiracies that could have spelt the end not just of the monarchy, but of every aspect of our society, culture and surroundings. The need for secrecy was paramount, which is why many of these spies have remained shadowy figures, denied the glory that was won by the great military commanders.

Exploring what would have happened if these unsung heroes had failed to prevent some of the most famous plots against crown and country reveals just how radically different our world would have been today.

For centuries, the most divisive issue was religion, which sparked wars between countries as well as conflict and rebellion within kingdoms. The Reformation that swept across Europe in the early sixteenth century provoked more deadly hostilities than at any time before in its history. Issues stemmed from Europe's division between the 'old faith' (Catholicism) and the new (Protestantism). Henry VIII's notorious chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, was strongly in favour of the latter because he knew it would enable him to sever England from papal authority and thus get Henry the divorce he craved, and crucial to his success was the complex network of spies that he built up across the Continent. Thanks to their regular reports on the 'secret affairs' of the Pope and his allies, Cromwell was able to steer through a revolution in religion that would have dramatic repercussions for centuries.

But what if Cromwell's spies had failed? Not only would Henry VIII have been prevented from marrying Anne Boleyn (meaning that Elizabeth I would never

have existed), but the Reformation would never have happened – or at least, not in such a radical fashion. The monasteries, which Cromwell destroyed in the Dissolution, would have continued to dominate the English landscape for hundreds of years. The great Yorkshire Abbeys of Fountains and Rievaulx might still be seen from miles around, and the City of London would be surrounded not by skyscrapers but imposing monastic buildings. Neither Henry VIII nor any subsequent monarch (including our current Queen) would have been Head of the English Church. There would have been no such thing as the Church of England anyway because we would still have been governed by the Pope.

It was thanks to her great spymaster, Francis Walsingham, that Henry's daughter Elizabeth I was able to enjoy such a long and successful reign. As a Protestant, the so-called Virgin Queen courted more enemies than any monarch before her, and there were scores of plots to assassinate her and put the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots on the throne. A number of these plots came perilously close to success, and it was only thanks to the sophistication of Walsingham's network that he received intelligence in the nick of time.

But what if his spies had failed to intercept the letters that passed between Mary and the Babington conspirators in 1586? This group of radical Catholics would not have hesitated to execute Elizabeth and crown Mary Queen of England. As well as turning us back into a Catholic country, Mary might have wished to make her mark by having new Scottish-style castles built in the capital. The royals favoured riverside palaces, as the Thames offered the primary mode of transport at the time, and also provided for a good source of water for washing and getting rid of waste. Had Mary Queen of Scots taken the throne, the Thames could still be lined with mighty fortresses such as Edinburgh and Stirling Castle today, instead of famous landmarks such as the London Eye on the Southbank and the Old Royal Naval College.

A similarly dramatic transformation would have taken place if the Armada had succeeded in 1588. Elizabeth I would have been deposed (and almost certainly executed) by the King of Spain, Philip II. As a staunchly Catholic monarch, he would have rebuilt the monasteries and no doubt replaced the Tudor palaces such as Hampton Court with buildings more in the style of El Escorial, his headquarters in Madrid. England would have become a mere satellite of Spain, which would have had a profound impact upon our language, culture and traditions. Instead of fish and chips, our national dish might be paella, and cultural traditions such as the works of Shakespeare might have been lost in place of bull fighting, or other activities with more of a Spanish influence. Taking more influence from Spanish Catholicism might also have meant that English lives were dominated by more regular and prolonged church services.

There would have been an even greater transformation to the cityscape if the Gunpowder Plot had succeeded in 1605. Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators aimed to blow up the Houses of Parliament with King James I and all of his government inside it. They would then place his daughter on the throne. Princess Elizabeth was a Catholic so if Robert Cecil and his spies

had not discovered the plot at the eleventh hour, England would yet again have been returned to the ‘old faith’. Elizabeth was a rather spoilt child and known for her extravagant taste, spending lavishly on fine clothes and jewellery throughout her life. History shows she went on to marry Frederick V, Elector Palatine, who built her a splendid palace with Menagerie and Italian-Style garden. She might have insisted that a fairytale palace was built on the ruins of the Houses of Parliament. James’s son and heir, the future Charles I, would never have been king, which means that the English Civil War would almost certainly not have happened as it was almost wholly Charles’ actions that were responsible for the outbreak of war.

Spies were also crucial to Britain’s campaign against Napoleon Bonapart, Emperor of France, who dominated Europe throughout the early eighteenth century. In order to prevent him from adding Britain to his collection of conquered lands, great military leaders such as Nelson and Wellington sprung into action. The information provided to them by a sophisticated intelligence network was vital in securing victories such as the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo. But without the detailed information that they supplied about the position and movement of Napoleon’s forces, the outcome might have been very different. The Emperor might not only have won these battles, but have gone on to conquer Britain. In place of famous London landmarks such as Nelson’s Column and Wellington Arch would have been buildings such as the Arc du Triomphe, celebrating Napoleon’s victory. Buckingham Palace might have been replaced by the Palace of Fontainebleau, the Emperor’s headquarters near Paris. In the same way that the Armada would have made us subject to Spanish influences, so every aspect of our way of life would have been dominated by France.

Had any of these international threats faced by Protestant England been successful, it is likely that London would cease to be a capital and would instead become a satellite of its new parent country (perhaps Napoleon’s France or King Phillip II’s Spain), and this too would have interesting consequences for a Catholic England. Had this happened, there would have been significantly less investment in London all round, as the Catholic countries would prioritise their own capitals of Paris or Madrid. This means the South Bank might have remained a swampland rather than being developed, there might have only been one bridge over the river Thames, and the Industrial Revolution might not have taken hold to the same extent in England. Without its capital status, London would not have the disposable funds to make the advancements that it did, and might have remained much more agricultural as a result.

These ‘What Ifs’ of history offer a tantalising, and at times shocking, glimpse into how different all of our lives would be had it not been for the efforts of History’s Ultimate Spies.