



Gunpowder plotters (*act.* 1603–1606) were thirteen Roman Catholic gentlemen who planned to initiate the overthrow of the Jacobean regime by exploding a mine beneath the House of Lords during the opening session of parliament in November 1605, thus killing the king, James VI and I, his principal ministers, and a large and influential part of the English political nation. The term is also rather loosely applied to the plotters' confederates and associates, men and women implicated in some part of the overall design.

Most of those involved in the plot came from recusant gentry families with estates in the English midlands, or in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and many were united by ties of blood and marriage. Robert Catesby, the driving force behind the conspiracy responsible for assembling the inner circle of conspirators, had his principal seat at Ashby St Ledgers in Northamptonshire. His cousin Thomas Winter was the son of George Winter of Huddington, Worcestershire. Two other members of the plot's inner circle, John Wright and Christopher Wright [*see under* Wright, John] of Ploughland Hall, Holderness, were brothers-in-law of another prominent conspirator, Thomas Percy, constable of Alnwick Castle and the trusted confidant of the influential Henry Percy, ninth earl of Northumberland. Both Wrights had also been schoolfellows—at St Peter's School, York—with the plotter whose name is today so closely identified with this treason, Guy Fawkes. Kinship also bound together some of the secondary conspirators, men and women who were brought into the plot either to help finance the operation or for some other logistical purpose, and also a number of those particularly unfortunate individuals who became enmeshed in the futile rebellion that broke out in the midlands after Fawkes was discovered with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder in a vault under the Lords' chamber early on 5 November. Robert Winter and John Winter (*d.* 1606) [*see under* Winter, Thomas], for example, were respectively Thomas's brother and half-brother, while John Grant of Norbrooks (*d.* 1606) was his brother-in-law. Other late recruits to the plot, notably the wealthy Ambrose Rookwood of Stanningfield, Suffolk, and Sir Everard Digby of Gothurst, Buckinghamshire, were recusants who moved in the same small social world, and who were close friends of Catesby. Catesby's servant, Thomas Bate (*d.* 1606), was brought in to help with excavating the tunnel under the Palace of Westminster.

Some members of the group were also united by a shared history of resistance to successive English political administrations. Catesby, Fawkes, Thomas Winter, and Christopher Wright had all been involved in efforts, stretching back into the 1590s, to engineer a Spanish invasion of England and a consequent restoration, through force of arms, of Catholicism as the official state religion. Before the death of Queen Elizabeth, in 1603, their plans had been shared by several other Catholics, among them William Parker, Lord Monteagle. Several of those later implicated in the Gunpowder Plot had also supported Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, in his rebellion of 8 February 1601, and many, including Monteagle, Catesby, and the Wrights, had been imprisoned and fined in the aftermath of Essex's disastrous gamble. The accession of James I led Monteagle and others to reject these dangerous courses and to make their peace with a new government set on ending the long war with Spain. For those disinclined to accept any form of protestant rule, however, the eventual peace treaty between England and Spain, concluded in London in August

1604, was a catastrophic development, forcing them to set aside the easy option of foreign aid. Instead, they came to recognize that they could achieve their goals only by direct action.

But the plotters were not chosen simply for their attachment to Catholicism, or as men sympathetic to Catesby's all-or-nothing thinking. In assembling his team it would seem that Catesby deliberately drew on complementary skills, matching the reflective determination of Thomas Winter to the more instinctive commitment of John Wright, bringing in Thomas Percy, a gentleman pensioner, in order to secure access to the court and a respectable front for the leasing of property in Westminster, while recruiting Guy Fawkes, a professional soldier with mining experience. Fawkes, moreover, could pass unnoticed through the streets of London, for he had long been out of the country, fighting for the Spanish armies in the Low Countries. Catesby's genius for man-management—every surviving plotter recalled his charisma and his easy authority—was limited only by the small pool of potential supporters, for very few people were now ready to risk everything on so perilous an enterprise. By 1605 his radical agenda had lost its appeal within a Catholic community fragmented and demoralized by Elizabethan persecution, relieved at the new peace with Spain, and prepared to give James I time in which to demonstrate his good intentions. Two selections eventually proved unwise. First, however logical, the recruitment of Thomas Percy created tensions in the group, for Percy was another natural leader, and behaved as such, showing occasional irritation at the way in which Catesby took independent decisions. Percy was more than ten years Catesby's senior and, though quick to promise financial assistance, was often absent on estate business; his failure to provide funds sufficiently early in 1605 prompted Catesby to enlist—unknown to Percy—the services of such other backers as Rookwood. The second choice led to catastrophe. When Catesby, driven by his need for money, tried to recruit the thirteenth conspirator, Monteagle's wealthy brother-in-law Francis Tresham, his eloquence for once failed to convince. Tresham wanted nothing to do with the scheme. He tried to bribe the plotters to flee abroad, and—in all likelihood—wrote the anonymous warning letter to Monteagle that led to the discovery of the treason. The letter survives to this day among the state papers in the National Archives.

Though their motives are often dismissed as unrealistic or obscure, the gunpowder plotters aimed pragmatically at a *coup d'état*. In the paralysis that would follow the destruction of Westminster they planned to draw on armed support from the Catholic families of the midlands and to seize James's elder daughter, Elizabeth, then living in the household of John, Lord Harington of Exton, at Combe Abbey near Coventry. The need for funds, which ultimately destroyed the plot, grew out of this commitment to expensive military action. With Elizabeth as their puppet queen the conspirators reasoned, not wholly without justification, that anything might be possible, given the dislocation and turmoil that would prevail across a leaderless country. Fifty years earlier, another group of regional Catholic gentlemen had exploited a political vacuum with striking success, and had placed Mary Tudor on the throne of England, overturning an unpopular protestant regime. But of course the Gunpowder Plot failed. Fawkes was captured during a search of the cellars in Westminster, late on the night before James was due to open parliament. Catesby, the Wrights, and Percy were all killed in open rebellion by the sheriff of Worcestershire, Richard Walshe, and his posse, at Holbeach House, Staffordshire, on the morning of 8 November 1605, while Thomas Winter was wounded by a pike thrust to the shoulder in the same action. Winter, along with many other prisoners and the wives of principal plotters, was brought to London in November, while other plotters, Robert Winter among them, fled into hiding, only to be rounded up over the next couple of months. Following systematic interrogation, eight conspirators—Bate, Digby, Fawkes, Grant, Robert Keyes (custodian of the plotters' house in Lambeth), Rookwood, and Robert and Thomas Winter—were tried in Westminster Hall on 27 January, convicted of treason, and executed in London on 30 and 31 January. They faced the barbaric

death allotted to traitors with equanimity, and in some cases with defiance. Guy Fawkes was the last to die. Francis Tresham had perished a month earlier while being held in the Tower of London, and John Winter was executed near Worcester in April 1606.

When news of the plot travelled across Europe, the pope and every Catholic regime hastened to denounce the wickedness of the design. Friends of the plotters, residing in foreign courts and aware to some varying degree of the conspirators' intentions, were obliged to lie low for a time. Sir Edmund Baynham stayed in Rome, while Sir William Stanley fought off attempts to secure his extradition from Brussels with the help of powerful friends in the court of the archduke. Closer to home, a handful of English Catholic priests either learnt of the plot through the confessional, or were confronted by desperate men in search of spiritual comfort during the midlands rebellion. Most of those most closely compromised by association, including the Jesuits John Gerard and Oswald Tesimond, made good their escape to the continent. The Jesuit superior in England, Henry Garnett, was, however, captured at Hindlip Hall in January 1606. Following interrogation he too was tried for treason and executed on 3 May that year. A small number of noblemen also suffered, not so much because there was any proof of their involvement in the treason, but because suspicious circumstances told heavily against them. The earl of Northumberland, who had dined with Thomas Percy at Syon House on 4 November, was tried in Star Chamber, fined, stripped of public office, and imprisoned for the next fifteen years. Lords Montagu, Mordaunt, and Stourton were all believed to have deliberately stayed away from parliament on 5 November, and suffered varying terms of imprisonment as a result. They were all victims of King James's belief—natural in the circumstances—that mere country gentlemen could not have planned so audacious and wide-ranging a plot without some noble mastermind lurking in the background. Yet James was mistaken: no such ringleader existed. Indeed Catesby despised the English nobility, practically without exception, as 'atheists, fools, cowards'. 'Dead Bodies', he insisted, 'would be better for the common wealth then they' (SP 14/216/126).

This failed Jacobean rebellion has had a remarkable legacy. The endurance of 5 November as a significant date in British history, and in the British social calendar, is due in part to the lurid and dramatic nature of the Gunpowder Plot. In part, however, it results from the magnitude, the sheer bloodiness, of the intended deed. According to modern calculations, the explosion of 18 hundredweight of gunpowder in a confined space would have destroyed a good part of Westminster, along with the principal targets in the Lords. There would have been many innocent victims, and the very buildings, monuments, and records of English history would have been erased along with the king and his agents. Here, indeed, was treason on a new scale, for Catesby, making a pragmatic calculation, appears to have reasoned that, in the escalation of terror following the assassinations of William the Silent and Henri III of France, the death of the king was, on its own, nowhere near enough to guarantee that paralysis in the state that his wider plan required. Over four centuries, memories of the plot have been reinvented, generation by generation, to serve the political and religious imperatives of a particular time. These have highlighted Catholic perfidy, particularly at key moments of religious and political stress: at the time of the Popish Plot (1678), during the Gordon riots (1780), and along the path towards Catholic emancipation in the early nineteenth century. They have also, at times, simply acted as a justification for misrule. At some points in the nineteenth century the London police virtually ceded the streets to the mob on the night of 5 November, with apprentices and others roaming unchecked until the escalation in crime and disorder demanded a fresh crackdown.

More recently, as the heat has gone out of this particular religious debate, as everyday riot has receded in the face of modern law enforcement, and as health and safety considerations have multiplied, the memory of the Gunpowder Plot, or rather the

frustration of the plot, has offered a half-understood excuse for grand, organized spectacle on autumnal nights. Even today, though, the underlying message of deliverance and the excitement of fireworks and bonfires sit alongside the tantalizing what-ifs, and a sneaking respect for Guy Fawkes and his now largely forgotten co-conspirators. The notoriety of the quintessential conspirator, caught with his match and slow fuse on a dark November night, far outshines that of the ringleader, Catesby, and his closest associates.

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Likenesses group portrait, line engraving, c.1605 ([*The Gunpowder Plot conspirators, 1605*]), NPG [see *illus.*]

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