

THE REAL STORY OF THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

The day before Elizabeth I's funeral a gunpowder mill exploded at Redriffe on the Thames. Thirteen people were killed. This lingered in the mind of the Catholic malcontent Robert Catesby. And, in the BBC's 2017 drama *Gunpowder*, the plot Catesby later put into action still has the power to shock.

Catesby wanted to create a year zero: wiping out the entire political establishment as they gathered for the opening of parliament in 1605. It was here, he said, they had 'done us all the mischief', passing laws that made it treason to be a Catholic priest and imposing ruinous fines on the recusants (refusers) who would not attend Protestant services: It was surely there God willed they should die.

The mad ambition of Catesby's plot can hardly be overstated, and contrary to the complaints about *Gunpowder*'s overblown cruelty and campy, the drama underplays the historical reality. We saw priests disembowelled, but not for long, and not with their 'privy parts' burned before their eyes. We saw the bi-sexual King James flirt with young Herbert, but not him giving the youth a wet kiss during the coronation ceremony.

The drama is also attacked also for inaccuracy and bias. But this fictional account was a paragon of precise truth beside the propaganda and fake history that passes for accepted fact on this period of history.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the real Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths.

The know-it-alls at the water cooler will tell you Catholics were the source of all the religiously motivated treason against Elizabeth and James; that this explains the execution of Catholic priests.

In fact, a generation before a Papal Bull of 1570, had released Elizabeth's Catholic subjects from their duty of obedience to her, Protestants had deployed religious justifications for treason. They argued monarchs drew their authority from the people, so the people had the right to overthrow those of the 'wrong' religion – and that included the 'wrong' kind of Protestant.

James argued in response that kings drew their authority from God and ruled by divine right, while Elizabeth protected herself by ensuring she had no clear replacement, and destroyed her Protestant heir first: Lady Katherine Grey died imprisoned in 1568, nine years before Elizabeth executed her Catholic heir, Mary, Queen of Scots.

It was Robert Cecil who smoothed the Scottish King James's uncertain path to the English throne in 1603. Mark Gattis is tall where Cecil was short, but he gives the

right impression of Cecil's 'full mind in an imperfect body'. Polite and clever he was a deadly enemy to Catholics who called him, "Robert the Devil".

But there were also Protestants who advocated religious toleration for Catholics, and opposed the torture and execution of their priests. Kit Harington's ancestor, Sir John Harington, inventor of the flushing toilet, told King James that he believed that 'mens' minds remain less satisfied of the up-rightness of the cause, where racks serve for reasons'. Gunpowder introduces James sitting on the toilet; an allusion, perhaps, to where such words were sent.

The woman crushed to death in Gunpowder's opening episode after hiding priests, existed a generation earlier. The central act of Catholic worship is the Mass, and it cannot be performed without a priest. So priests still stayed hidden in England, and it was William Waad's business to root them out.

An educated diplomat, Waad did not break into houses himself, or stand on scaffolds, ripping out hearts. He was more spymaster, and the English counterpart to the Spanish inquisitor. In the Middle Ages torture had been illegal and was rarely used, but it was now a particular feature of the Elizabethan regime.

Waad really was involved in the torture of John Gerard, who was hung from a bar in the Tower and questioned on the whereabouts of his fellow priest Henry Garnet. 'I thought the blood was oozing out of my fingers and the pores of my skin' Gerard recalled. When he wouldn't break, Waad told him, 'Then hang there until you rot off the pillar'.

In Gunpowder Gerard escapes the Tower, as he did in life. But the timeline is again twisted. All this happened in 1597, and he shinned down a rope, without any help from Kit Harington's Catesby and company.

Harington – whose mother is a Catesby – plays his late kinsman convincingly as the charismatic but deluded man he was. Those he drew into his plot were, for the most part, fellow Catholic gentlemen and cousins from the Midlands, whose crumbling mansions were reminders of lost power and wealth.

They had no powerful noble leader. Nor did they have foreign support. Where the details in Gunpowder remain fiction, the general point is still accurate. The Spanish would not make toleration of Catholics a condition of the peace they signed with King James in 1604. And this left Catholics facing a dismal future under a persecuting king with children to succeed him.

Yet the motives of the Gunpowder plotters were not only religious. James wanted union with Scotland and the English were determined to keep independent of their 'beggardly' neighbour. They resented the Scots courtiers being enriched at English expense, and Catholics had more reason for this than most. The Scots had had the perk of collecting the fines imposed on recusants.

Peter Mullan's Scottish accent, as the Jesuit Henry Garnet, was entirely inappropriate.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Catholics accepted James as king, and still hoped proof of their loyalty would eventually earn them freedom from persecution. And what was the alternative?

After the gunpowder had detonated under Westminster, the plotters planned to raise a rebellion in the Midlands, capture James's nine-year-old daughter from Coombe Abbey, and place her on the throne. But had they succeeded the numbers killed in parliament would have been small compared the massacres of Catholics that would have followed at the hands of a frightened Protestant majority.

The plotters were prepared to gamble with the lives of these thousands of Catholics rather than be patient and suffer under the status quo.

Guy Fawkes was recruited in Flanders as a clean skin who had not yet caught the eyes of the authorities. Tom Cullen's shaven head is modern but works as shorthand for a battle hardened soldier described as 'highly skilled in matters of war' and who had the expertise gunpowder.

His doom came at the hands of a fellow conspirator, who wrote to the Catholic Lord Monteagle with a vague warning of an attack against parliament. The peer wasn't at dinner with Cecil, as he was in the drama, but he did immediately bring the to Cecil. It was then shown to James, who ordered a search of parliament. Fawkes was caught standing over almost a ton of gunpowder that night, 5 November, 1605.

When James asked Fawkes for his motive Fawkes told him they had wanted to blow him and his fellow Scots back to their northern mountains. He was then tortured to discover the names of his co-conspirators. The difference in his signatures before and after the torture is more horrifying than anything shown on film.

Fawkes never broke, but the end game was already being played out at Holbeach House in the Midlands. On the morning of 8 November the remaining rebels went out into the courtyard, swords in hand, much as Gunpowder depicts. "Stand by me Tom and we will die together" Catesby said to cousin Tom Wintour.

Tom survived the shoot out. He would have been better killed. His execution spared him nothing.

The gunpowder plot would embed in English culture the association of Catholics with treason. Under James's son, Charles I, it was those Protestants known as Puritans who rebelled against their king. But they sold a civil war between Protestants as a war against Popery, and re-defined treason.

After Charles was beheaded, Oliver Cromwell's Puritan army oversaw a genocide in Catholic Ireland. It says something about our historical blinkers that we are now building a memorial outside parliament to a holocaust committed by Germans, while maintaining a statue to Cromwell.

Gunpowder scriptwriter Ronan Bennett has an Irish Republican background, but he does not ask us to feel guilty about what is past. The scene of the burning of a heretic in Catholic Spain, reminds us of there was the horror of religious persecution on both sides. Gunpowder made us question our reflexive prejudices, and should remind us that religious persecution is still with us, from China, to Asia and the Middle East. How is it, that like the Spanish is 1604, we make our treaties and wash our hands of it?

If you would like to know more about the background to the Gunpowder plot, it is covered in more detail in my book *After Elizabeth*, shortlisted for the Saltire History award. You may also enjoy my biography of King James's son Charles I; *White King*, shortlisted for the Historical Writers non Fiction Crown 2018, or contact me via my website, facebook or twitter.