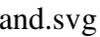


Francis Walsingham

Allegiance: England 

Rank: Spymaster

Operation(s): Throckmorton Plot, Babington plot, Spanish Armada

Born: 1532

Died: 6 April 1590

Religion: Protestant

Alma mater: King's College (Cambridge), University of Padua

Sir Francis Walsingham (c. 1532 – 6 April 1590) is usually remembered as the "spymaster" of Queen Elizabeth I of England. Walsingham is frequently cited as one of the earliest practitioners of modern intelligence both for espionage and for domestic security. He oversaw operations which penetrated the heart of Spanish military preparation, gathered intelligence from across Europe, and disrupted a range of plots against the queen, securing the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. Walsingham was one of the small coterie who directed the Elizabethan state, overseeing foreign, domestic and religious policy, and the subjugation of Ireland. He worked to bring Scotland and England together. Overall, his foreign policy demonstrated a new understanding of the role of England as a maritime, Protestant power in an increasingly global economy. He was an innovator in exploration, colonization and the use of England's potential maritime power. He is also a convincing prototype of the modern bureaucrat.

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Early years

Francis Walsingham was born at the Walsingham family seat, Scadbury Park near Chislehurst, Kent to William Walsingham and Joyce Denny. His father died the following year, and later, his mother married Sir John Carey, a relative by marriage of Queen Anne Boleyn.

Walsingham studied at King's College, Cambridge from 1548 with many Protestants but as an undergraduate of high social status did not sit for a degree. In 1550, he travelled abroad, returning two years later to enroll at Gray's Inn. Upon the death of Edward VI and accession of Catholic Queen Mary, he fled to continue his studies as a law student at

the University of Padua. Between April 1556 and November 1558, he visited Switzerland. He cultivated contacts among the leading Protestant statesmen on the continent.

Serving Elizabeth I

When Elizabeth I ascended to the throne in 1558, Walsingham returned to England and, through the support of Sir William Cecil, was elected to the House of Commons for Banbury in 1559 and then Lyme Regis in 1563. He also married a widow, Ann Carleill, who died two years later leaving Walsingham the care of her son Christopher. In 1566, he married Ursula St. Barbe, widow of Sir Richard Worsley, and they had a daughter, Frances. Walsingham's other two stepsons, Ursula's sons John and George, were killed in a gunpowder accident in 1567.

In the following years, Walsingham became active in soliciting support for the Huguenots in France. In 1569, Cecil assigned Walsingham to unravel the Ridolfi plot, his first government role. Walsingham also had links to Earl of Leicester, to Nicholas Throckmorton and to the second tier of Protestant officials now serving the Queen.

In 1570, the Queen chose Walsingham to support the Huguenots in their negotiations with Charles IX. Later that year, he succeeded Sir Henry Norris as ambassador to France, seeking to prosecute a close alliance between England, Charles IX, the Huguenots, and other European Protestant interests in support of the nascent revolt of the Netherlands, provinces of the Spanish Crown. When Catholic opposition to this course resulted in the death of Coligny and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, his house in Paris became a temporary sanctuary of Protestant refugees, including Philip Sidney. He returned disappointed to England in April 1573. But he had established himself as someone the Queen could trust. A century later his dispatches would be published as a portrait of "the Complete Ambassador".

After his return, Walsingham was appointed joint principal secretary ("of state": the phrase was not used at this time in England) with Sir Thomas Smith, succeeding Sir William Cecil. Smith retired unexpectedly in 1576, leaving Walsingham in sole charge.

Elizabeth called him her "Moor", perhaps due to his complexion or a preference for sombre clothes. She put up with his blunt, often unwelcome, advice because she valued his competence and industry, his passion for her security, and his grasp of foreign affairs.

On 1 December 1577, Walsingham received a knighthood. He spent the years between 1574 and 1578 consolidating his control of the routine business of the English state, foreign and domestic. This included the substantial rebuilding of Dover Harbour, and the coordination of support for Martin Frobisher's attempts to discover the north west passage and exploit the mineral resources of Labrador. Walsingham was among the foremost promoters of the career of Sir Francis Drake and was a major shareholder in his 1578–1581 circumnavigation of the world. Walsingham's participation in this venture

was calculated to promote the Protestant interest by provoking the Spanish and demonstrating the vulnerability of their Pacific possessions.

He was sent on special embassies to the Netherlands in 1578, and again in 1581 to the French Court, suggesting both the Queen's high confidence in his abilities, and also that she knew how to exploit his standing as a committed Protestant statesman to threaten the Catholic powers.

Between 1578 and 1581, Walsingham was at the forefront of debate on the attempt by a group at court to encourage the Queen to marry the Duke of Anjou, heir to the French throne. Walsingham passionately opposed the marriage, perhaps to the point of encouraging public opposition. Walsingham canvassed the variety of consequences of a Catholic French consort of a Queen now past the age of childbearing, and with no clear successor. He believed that it would serve England better to seek a military alliance with France against Spanish interests, and the debates in council raged around the viability of an independent England against the increasing threat posed by Spain, and by the forces of international Catholicism which were undermining the unity of the French state.

Walsingham advocated direct English intervention in the Low Countries, and eventually, after the deaths of both Anjou and William of Orange in 1584, English military intervention was agreed at the Treaty of Nonsuch in 1585.

From 1585 to his death, Walsingham was deeply engaged, working closely with Cecil (later Baron Burghley), in preparing England for the war with Spain that could no longer be avoided. He also worked to prepare for the arrival of the Spanish Armada, in particular by victualling the navy, organising a domestic county militia, and fostering the Protestant aggression of the Bond of Association.

Walsingham secured in 1584 the overthrow of a non-aligned government in Scotland after years of reverses since the 1578 overthrow of the pro-English Regent Morton. Walsingham himself visited the Scottish court in 1583. This lurch towards Anglo-Scottish Protestant amity was at first tentative, but proved to be stable and to pave the way to the succession of James VI to the throne of England.

These were years of tension in policy towards France, with Walsingham sceptical of the unpredictable Henry III, while the flamboyant English ambassador in Paris, Edward Stafford, argued the case for building on Henry's good intentions. Stafford was compromised by his gambling debts and was in Spanish pay and passed vital information to Spain.

Espionage

In the realm of counter-espionage, Walsingham was behind the discovery of the Throckmorton and Babington plots to overthrow Elizabeth I, return England to Catholicism and place Mary, Queen of Scots on the throne.

In November 1583, after months of surveillance, Walsingham had Throckmorton arrested. He extracted, under torture, Throckmorton's confession — an admission that he had plotted against Elizabeth with the Spanish ambassador, Bernardino de Mendoza, and others. The plot, which may not have been known to Mary, called for a two-pronged invasion of England and Scotland along with a domestic uprising. Throckmorton was executed in 1584, and Mendoza was expelled from England.

Although Mary was not prosecuted, Walsingham became so concerned about her influence that he was determined to hold her responsible for any further conspiracies. Babington's Plot was the result of that determination. Walsingham drew deeply on his spies among the English Catholic community, and abroad, on whose divisions he was adept at playing. The uncovering of the Babington plot, which is unusually well documented, is a compelling piece of counter-espionage, and stretched the policing resources of the Elizabethan state to the limits, with Walsingham's private secretaries carrying out surveillance in person. This led to Mary's execution in 1587, for which Walsingham had worked since before his advent to power. He was an active participant at her trial. He briefly experienced his share of the Queen's displeasure after the execution of Mary, which the queen claimed not to have sanctioned, due to Elizabeth's desire to distance herself from this action.

Prior to the attack of the Spanish Armada, he received a large number of dispatches from his agents from mercantile communities and foreign courts. Walsingham's recruitment of Anthony Standen in particular represented an intelligence triumph, and Standen's dispatches were deeply revealing. However the close security enforced by Philip II meant that Walsingham remained in the dark about the Spanish strategy and the planned destination of the Armada. This, plus his naturally bold spirit, lay behind his encouragement of the more aggressive strategies advocated by Drake in particular. The Cadiz raid in 1587 wrought havoc on Spanish logistics, and Walsingham would have repeated this the following year if more cautious counsels had not prevailed.

In foreign intelligence, the full range of Walsingham's network of "intelligencers" (of news as well as secrets) may never be known, but it was substantial. While foreign intelligence was part of the principal secretary's duties, Walsingham brought to it flair and ambition, and large sums of his own money. He also cast his net more widely than others had done hitherto, exploiting the insight into Spanish policy offered at the Italian courts; cultivating contacts in Constantinople and Aleppo, building complex connections with the Catholic exiles. Recent detective work by John Bossy has suggested that he recruited Giordano Bruno, although this remains controversial. Among his minor spies may have been the playwright Christopher Marlowe, who seems to have been one of a stream of false converts whom Walsingham planted in foreign seminaries for gathering intelligence and insinuating counter-intelligence. A more central figure was the cryptographer Thomas Phelippes, expert in deciphering letters, creating false handwriting and breaking and repairing seals without detection.

Legacy

Walsingham arguably was the first English statesman fully to embrace the challenges of the post-Reformation diplomatic world and the new European threats and alliances it offered. Meanwhile, closely linked to the mercantile community, he actively supported the most ambitious trade promotion schemes, including the Muscovy Company and the Levant Company. He supported Davis' voyages to the north west frontier, and sought to follow Drake's circumnavigation with a military-diplomatic mission to the Far East to be led by his beloved stepson, Christopher Carleill.

In other affairs, Walsingham acquired a Surrey county seat in Parliament which he retained until his death, but he was not a major parliamentarian. In 1584, he was part of the committee that considered letters patent granted to Sir Walter Raleigh. He nominated some of his servants to prominent positions. He also received the appointments of Chancellor of the Order of the Garter and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

As an advisor on whom Elizabeth depended during the central part of her reign, Walsingham received large sums of money from the Queen over the years. He spent his wealth prodigally in the service of the Queen and the Protestant cause. Elizabeth knew this, warning that he would not prosper, and regretting his lack of self-interest. He obtained land grants, grants for the export of beer and cloth, and leases of customs in the northern and western outposts. His primary residences, apart from the court, were at Seething Lane by the Tower of London, at Barn Elms in Surrey and farther afield at Odiham in Hampshire. Nothing remains of any of his houses.

Francis Walsingham died on 6 April 1590, leaving great debts, in part arising from his having underwritten the debts of his son-in-law and colleague, Sir Philip Sidney. But the true state of his finances is undocumented and may have been less dismal than regularly alleged, and he pursued the Sidney estate for recompense, and had carried out major land transactions in his later years. His daughter Frances received only £300 annuity. However, she married well, to the Earl of Essex, and Walsingham's widow lived comfortably until her death. After his death, his friends reflected that poor bookkeeping had left him further in the crown's debt than was fair, and a compromise was eventually agreed upon with his heirs. His public papers were seized by the government and his private papers, which would have revealed much, not least about his finances, were lost.

Walsingham attracts controversy still. Catholic apologists, from the Victorian era onwards, have sorted through the various conspiracies he investigated to portray a ruthless, devious man driven by an excessive love for intrigue. His use of agents provocateurs is uncontested, but was regarded at the time as legitimate.

He regularly features in the wilder conspiracy theories particularly regarding the authorship of Shakespeare and the death of Christopher Marlowe, whom he predeceased.

Walsingham's interests

His chef was noteworthy. He patronised musicians, and was an avid falconer. He does not seem to have built houses of note. He patronised scholars, theologians and preachers.

Walsingham in fiction

- In Anthony Burgess' novel *A Dead Man in Deptford* about the life of Christopher Marlowe, the protagonist is shown fatally caught up in the webs spun by Walsingham.
- The film *Elizabeth* gives considerable, although historically inaccurate, prominence to the espionage skills of Walsingham (portrayed by Geoffrey Rush). The film overstates Walsingham's influence, showing him triumphing over Burghley, and paints him as a Machiavellian, irreligious and sexually ambiguous politician. It inaccurately suggests that he himself murdered Mary of Guise, or personally had her killed. Rush reprised his role as Walsingham in the 2007 sequel, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*.
- Walsingham was played by Stephen Murray in the BBC series *Elizabeth R* (1970).
- Walsingham was portrayed by actor Patrick Malahide in the HBO miniseries *Elizabeth I*
- Walsingham appears as Christopher Marlowe's taskmaster in the BBC Radio 4 comedy series *The Christopher Marlowe Mysteries*.
- Walsingham and his fictional niece appear in *Lucy's Blade* by John Lamshead
- Walsingham provided the basis for Sir Nicholas Fury in Neil Gaiman's comics miniseries *1602*
- Sir Jack Wilton in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier* is the analogue of Walsingham in the "Glorianan Era". Wilton is also stated as being the first "M."
- In Samuel Blumenfeld's *The Marlowe-Shakespeare Connection: A New Study of the Authorship Question* (McFarland, 2008), playwright Christopher Marlowe's connection to the spymaster Walsingham and his cousin Thomas Walsingham is detailed.



“Sir Francis Walsingham” by John De Critz the Elder