

The political career of Theophilus Hastings (1650-1701), 7th Earl of Huntingdon

By Peter Walker

In recent years some historians have taken a slightly more sympathetic approach to the troubled reign of James II (1685-1688). This article attempts to extend this approach to one of his more controversial supporters, Theophilus Hastings, seventh Earl of Huntingdon, a member of a family that had once been all-powerful in Leicestershire. The rise and fall of Huntingdon coincided with the reigns of the last two Stuart kings, Charles II and James II. Huntingdon had been a Whig and had supported attempts to exclude James, then Duke of York, from the throne, but with the defeat of the Whigs, he returned to the royalist fold. Gaining the favour of Charles II and his brother, he did much to restore the Hastings family's political fortunes, becoming a privy councillor and eventually Lord Lieutenant of Leicestershire, and briefly eclipsing his main aristocratic rivals in the county, the Earls of Rutland and Stamford. He was one of James II's most loyal and trusted servants. Huntingdon has been the subject of some fierce criticism from historians. Yet despite his reputation as a turncoat, Huntingdon proved unwilling or unable to change sides at the Revolution of 1688 and his fall from power was inevitable. He ended his days a Jacobite, openly hostile to the Williamite regime. The Hastings family were destined never to recover their political influence after his disgrace.

The political career of Theophilus Hastings (1650-1701), seventh Earl of Huntingdon, has rarely distracted the historian. Where he receives mention, he is usually dismissed as a lackey of King James II. 'Facile instrument of the Stuarts'; 'uncompromising royalist'; 'turncoat' and 'outright renegade': these are just some of the damning phrases used to describe the Earl.¹ The first two, rather whiggish, verdicts can be explained away by the knowledge that Huntingdon was on the losing side in 1688: epithets like 'turncoat' and 'outright renegade', however, suggest a political inconstancy remarkable even in an inconstant age. On the other hand it could be said that Huntingdon's controversial career characterises the vicissitudes of political life in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. His unlikely political odyssey took him within the period of little more than ten years from the Exclusionist cause to Jacobitism. A superficial reading of the Earl's career might also suggest that he was a

¹ J. Thompson, *The history of Leicester, from the time of the Romans to the end of the seventeenth century*, p. 437. Leicester: J. S. Crossley; Thompson & Son; London: W. Pickering, 1849; J. H. Plumb, 'Political History, 1530-1885', *VCH, Leics.*, 2 (1958), p. 120; J. R. Western, *Monarchy and revolution: the English State in the 1680s*, pp. 120, 215. London: Blandford, 1972.

man who never did things by halves. He first achieved fame, or rather notoriety, during the Exclusion Crisis, and on one celebrated occasion caused a commotion at a dinner hosted by the Lord Mayor of London by insisting on toasting the health of the Protestant Duke of Monmouth, the natural son of King Charles II and the man fast emerging as the Whig candidate to succeed his father, while appearing reluctant to extend the same courtesy to the Catholic Duke of York, the king's brother and heir to the throne. When Huntingdon did eventually raise a glass to the Duke of York, he mischievously added the words 'and confusion to Popery!'² Yet less than ten years later, Huntingdon, now a confirmed royalist and loyal supporter of James II, was to figure in one of the more bizarre episodes of the Revolution in 1688. He was sent by James to help the hitherto loyal Earl of Bath secure Plymouth against the invasion fleet of William of Orange. Bath betrayed James, arrested Huntingdon and the Catholic officers of his regiment and declared for William. But there were rumours, circulated by Bath no doubt, that Huntingdon had tried to poison him and seize the citadel for the king.³ No credence need be given to the poison story: such ruthlessness does not accord with the rather respectable character of Huntingdon as it emerges from his correspondence, and the blackening of the Earl's reputation would have gone some way towards deflecting attention from Bath's rather dishonourable actions.

These two episodes, and there were others equally redolent of melodrama, do no more than suggest the tone of a political career, but they do help to explain why Huntingdon's public life appears so controversial. The charge has been made that he was a turncoat and renegade. It is the object of this article to try to establish whether this was indeed the case, or whether it is possible to discern a consistency in what might at first sight appear to be an inconsistent political career. This will involve examining in some detail the Earl's apparent motives for acting in the way he did, after providing a brief outline of his life and career.

I

The future Earl was born in December 1650. His birth was the occasion of great joy for his parents, Ferdinando, the sixth Earl, and his wife, Lucy. They had been married for 27 years when Theophilus was born, and eighteen months before, in June 1649, the sixth Earl's son and heir, Lord Hastings, had died from smallpox at the age of 19. They must therefore have been relieved to have secured an heir to the Hastings line.⁴ The family into which Theophilus was born was a family in decline. Once the most powerful in the county, the Hastings' position had been eroded during the course of the seventeenth century, partly through debt, a legacy in the main of the third Earl of Huntingdon, who had spent a fortune both in providing for his large family and in the service of Queen Elizabeth I, and partly through the

2 *Correspondence of the family of Hatton being chiefly letters addressed to Christopher, first Viscount Hatton, 1601-1704*, ed. E.M. Thompson, 2 vols, Camden Society, new ser. 22 (1878), 1, pp. 208-10; K. H. D. Haley, *The first earl of Shaftesbury*, p. 560. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968; J. P. Kenyon, *The Popish Plot*, pp. 186-7. London: Heinemann, 1972.

3 For Huntingdon's adventures at Plymouth, see *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the manuscripts of the late Reginald Rawdon Hastings, esq., of the Manor House, Ashby de la Zouche* [hereafter *HMC, Hastings MSS*], 2, pp. 188ff. London: HMSO, 1928. For the poison claim, see Narcissus Luttrell, *A brief historical relation of state affairs from September 1678 to April 1714*, 1, p. 480. Oxford: University Press, 1857.

4 J. Nichols, *The history and antiquities of the county of Leicester*. 4 vols in 8 parts, 3.2, p. 604. London: Printed by and for J. Nichols, 1795-1815. Two other sons had died, in 1639 and 1647, *ibid.*

family supporting the losing side in the Civil War. They had been supplanted first by the Greys, Earls of Stamford, and later by the Mannerses, Earls of Rutland.⁵

The sixth Earl of Huntingdon died in February 1656, so Theophilus succeeded to the earldom at the age of five. His childhood and early manhood were spent mainly at Donington Park and the most important influences on the young Earl must have been those of his mother, his elder sisters and his uncle, Lord Loughborough, who had reclaimed for the Hastings family the Lord Lieutenancy of Leicestershire at the Restoration of Charles II. Loughborough almost certainly played an important part in instilling in Theophilus a sense of the honour and dignity of his position and an early awareness of what the young Earl came to regard as his birthright. The old Cavalier expressed a fervent wish to relinquish the lord lieutenancy in favour of his nephew at some future date.⁶ It was not to be: when Loughborough died in 1667, the lord lieutenancy passed to the eighth Earl of Rutland, understandably since Huntingdon was still a minor.⁷ However, influence in Leicestershire had shifted from the Hastings family to the Manners family, a fact confirmed by history and one that at the time could hardly have been lost on the young Huntingdon: his ambition to return the lord lieutenancy to the Hastings family would be the greatest motivating factor in his political career.⁸

The Earl came of age in December 1671 and took his seat, by proxy, in the House of Lords 14 months later.⁹ In the years following he was not active in politics. He allowed his proxy to be used to support the government and appears to have been generally untroubled by the gathering religious and political storm of the mid-1670s. His unquestioning, if inactive, support for the government probably earned him the reward of the office of *Custos Rotulorum* in Leicestershire, which was granted to him in December 1675 on the death of the second Earl of Denbigh.¹⁰

Huntingdon's first major involvement in local politics came in 1676 and ended in humiliation. On the death of one of the Members of Parliament for the borough of Leicester, the Earl put forward the name of his own candidate for the by-election, but was snubbed by the corporation, which would endorse neither the Earl's man nor the rival candidate, John Grey, a younger son of the first Earl of Stamford. Grey had the support of the Manners' interest in the person of his nephew, Lord Roos, heir to the ageing Earl of Rutland, the lord lieutenant. Grey was elected, spending nearly £800 entertaining the electors in the process. Huntingdon's anger at the success of a scion of the Hastings family's great rivals was barely contained. He threatened the corporation with a writ of *Quo Warranto*, which would have compelled the borough to substantiate the legality of its charter, but the threat came

- 5 Clarendon certainly thought the Hastings family was in decline, or 'decaying', to use his word: Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *The history of the rebellion and civil wars in England begun in the year 1641*, ed. W. D. Macray, 6 vols, 2, p. 473. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 1, p. v.
- 6 Huntingdon Library in California, Hastings Collection of Manuscripts, HA5584, Lord Loughborough to Huntingdon, 17 Sep. 1660. Published on microfilm, *The aristocracy, the State and the Local Community: The Hastings Collection of Manuscripts from the Huntington Library in California, 1477-1701*, Harvester Microform (1986), Reel 6, Box 21 [hereafter 'Correspondence']: copy available Pilkington Library, Loughborough University of Technology.
- 7 Plumb, 'Political History', as n.1, p. 119.
- 8 *Ibid*; see also incorrectly dated draft letter from Huntingdon to James, Duke of York [c. 1677], Correspondence, Reel 13, Box 45, HA6044.
- 9 Huntingdon to James, Duke of York, 3 Feb. 1672/3, Correspondence, Reel 10, Box 35, HA5891.
- 10 First Earl of Stamford to Huntingdon, 14 Apr. 1673, Correspondence, Reel 10, Box 36, HA4326; Huntingdon to Bridget Croft, 14 Apr. 1673, HA5895; Heneage Finch to Huntingdon, 8 May 1675, Reel 11, Box 39, HA3165; Finch to Huntingdon, 2 Dec. 1675, Reel 11, Box 40, HA3166.

to nothing.¹¹ Two years later Huntingdon was firmly in the Whig camp, one of the leading aristocratic supporters of the Earl of Shaftesbury. Apart from the incident at the Lord Mayor's dinner in December 1679, Huntingdon soon made it clear to the Court where his affiliations now lay. He was one of the Whig peers who attempted to have the Duke of York indicted as a papist recusant in June 1680 (and, incidentally, have the king's mistress, the Duchess of Portsmouth, indicted as a common prostitute); he voted to exclude the Duke of York from the throne in the second Exclusion Parliament; he, along with a majority of peers, it has to be said, found Viscount Stafford guilty of treason (a verdict not endorsed by posterity) and so helped to send the hapless Catholic peer to the scaffold; and he was even implicated in an alleged plot to kidnap the king during the Oxford Parliament in March 1681. The king, not unreasonably, had responded by leaving Huntingdon's name off the list of justices of the peace for Leicestershire and Derbyshire in February 1680 and later forbidding the Earl to appear at Court.¹²

Yet very soon after the dissolution of the Oxford Parliament, Huntingdon was beginning to distance himself from his Whig allies. As the tide turned against the Whigs, and Shaftesbury and his followers were driven to more extreme methods of achieving their aims, Huntingdon returned to the royalist fold. However, in the eyes of his former political allies, he compounded his error by embracing the royalist cause with enthusiasm and vigour. From the moment he kissed the king's hand in October 1681 he was a loyal and dependable ally of the Stuart monarchy. Such a *volte-face* aroused adverse comment at the time and helps to explain why the Whigs heaped such obloquy on his name.¹³

Huntingdon's rehabilitation was swift. In December 1681 he was again made *Custos Rotulorum* in Leicestershire, a post he had forfeited for supporting the Exclusionists, and in the following year he was made Captain of the Band of Gentleman Pensioners. In 1683 he became a privy councillor.¹⁴ He repaid such favours by becoming an energetic participant in the royalist reaction of the last years of Charles II's reign, most notably in the major role he played in cajoling the Corporation of Leicester into surrendering its charter in 1684; part of a greater campaign by the government to destroy potential centres of Whiggism and to ensure a more compliant Parliament when the time to summon one should arise. Huntingdon's dealings with the

- 11 R. W. Greaves, 'Parliamentary History, 1660-1835', *VCH, Leics.*, 4, p. 113; draft letter [Lord Roos to ?], 5 Jan. 1676/[7], *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the Manuscripts of his Grace the Duke of Rutland, G.C.B., preserved at Belvoir Castle*, [hereafter *HMC, Rutland MSS*], 2, p. 35; *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons, 1660-1690*, ed. B. D. Henning, 3 vols, 1, p. 297. London: Published for the History of Parliament Trust by Secker & Warburg, 1983.
- 12 *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Calendar of the manuscripts of the Marquess of Ormonde, K. P. preserved at Kilkenny Castle*, [hereafter *HMC, Ormonde MSS*]. New series, 8 vols, 5, p. 340. London: HMSO, 1902-20; E. S. de Beer, 'The House of Lords in the Parliament of 1680', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 20 (1943-45), p. 37; *Cobbett's complete collection of state trials, and proceedings for high treason and other crimes and misdemeanors from the earliest period [1163] to the present time [1820]*, ed. T. B. Howell, 34 vols, 7, p. 1553. London: Printed by T.C. Hansard; Published by R. Bagshaw, 1810; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, Sept. 1, 1680-Dec. 31, 1681* [hereafter *CSPD*], 28 vols, 22, pp. 666-67. London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1921; *Historical Manuscripts Commission, 11th Report, appendix ii, The manuscripts of the House of Lords*, 4 vols, 1, 1678-88, pp. 177, 182. London: HMSO, 1887; *Dictionary of National Biography [DNB]*; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, p. xi.
- 13 *CSPD, 1680-81*, as n.12, pp. 545, 572; *HMC Ormonde MSS*, as n.12, 6, pp. 204, 215-7; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, pp. 173, pp. xi-xii.
- 14 Huntingdon to the Rev John Gery, 18 Nov. 1681, Correspondence, Reel 12, Box 42, HA6001; King Charles II to Huntingdon, 26 Jun. 1682, Reel 12, Box 42, HA1370; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, p. 173.

Corporation reveal much about his thinking at this time: he was anxious to please the Court and to increase his own political stock, and in both he succeeded. The Hastings family had traditionally had an interest in the Borough of Leicester and had gained authority in the town as Stewards of the Honour of Leicester. Even so, the fact that it was Huntingdon and not the lord lieutenant, the ninth Earl of Rutland, who was responsible for ensuring the surrender of the charter suggests that he was able to improve his standing at Court and eclipse, albeit temporarily, Rutland. The latter, as Lord Roos, had exercised the Rutland interest against Huntingdon in the Leicester by-election of 1676/7, and had replaced his ailing father as lord lieutenant in 1677, succeeding to the earldom two years later.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the elections that followed the accession of James II in 1685 were overseen in borough and county by the Earl of Rutland, Huntingdon having to defer to Rutland in the choice of candidates.¹⁶ But James's accession did not stem the flow of honours that came Huntingdon's way. He was made colonel of a regiment of foot, raised during the crisis precipitated by Monmouth's rebellion and kept in being after the threat to the throne had passed, and appointed Warden and Chief Justice in Eyre of the Royal Forests South of Trent, a valuable sinecure.¹⁷ The Hastings family was in the ascendant.

Until James II's reign Huntingdon's career was not untypical of the majority of loyalists who rallied to the Crown in 1680s. These were men who had concluded that a victory for the Exclusionists would sow the seeds of civil war; to them the strengthening of the monarchy was the only way that peace and political stability could be safeguarded. But 1685-86 provides a watershed: thereafter a small group of ultra-royalists, with Huntingdon among their number, began to drift apart from the majority of Tory loyalists, who felt unable to support James's policies, the linchpin of which was the repeal of the Test Act and penal laws, a strategy intended to offer religious toleration for Catholics. Huntingdon appears to have had few qualms about furthering the policies of his royal master. He served on the Commission for Ecclesiastical Causes, the controversial body with which the king hoped to strengthen royal authority over the Church of England; and when in 1687 the Earls of Rutland and Scarsdale, Lord Lieutenants of Leicestershire and Derbyshire respectively, proved unwilling to support the repeal of the Test Act and were both dismissed, Huntingdon succeeded to their lieutenantcies. He had reached his apogee, but he had also probably isolated himself politically from a majority of his fellow Englishmen.¹⁸

- 15 R. W. Greaves, 'The Earl of Huntingdon and the Leicester Charter of 1684', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 15 (1951-2), pp. 371-91; Huntingdon to Gery, 21 Aug. 1684, Correspondence, Reel 13, Box 44, HA6034; *HMC Rutland MSS*, as n.11, 2, p. 41.
- 16 *HMC Rutland MSS*, as n.11, 2, pp. 85-6; Huntingdon to [Mayor of Leicester], 12 Feb. 1684/5, Leicestershire Record Office, Records of the Borough of Leicester, Hall Papers Bound, 1675-1688, BR/II/18/35, No. 180; Nathan Wright to Huntingdon, 2 Mar. 1684/5, Correspondence, Reel 13, Box 45, HA13674.
- 17 *Records of the Borough of Leicester, being a series of extracts from the archives of the Corporation of Leicester: 1603-1688*, ed. H. Stocks, 4, p. 582. Cambridge: University Press, 1923; *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the manuscripts of the Marquis of Downshire, preserved at Easthampstead Park, Berkshire*, 4 vols in 5, 1.1, p. 76. London: HMSO, 1924; Huntingdon to Gery, 19 Dec. 1685, Correspondence, Reel 13, Box 47, HA6051.
- 18 D. H. Hosford, *Nottingham, Nobles, and the North: Aspects of the Revolution of 1688*, p. 66. Hamden, Conn.: Published for the Conference on British Studies and Wittenberg University by Archon Books, 1976; *Calendar of State Papers preserved in the Public Record Office, Domestic series, James II, Jan. 1686-May 1687*, 3 vols, 2, p. 338. London: HMSO, 1964; Earl of Sunderland to Huntingdon, 9 Aug. 1687, Correspondence, Reel 14, Box 49, HA12543; Samuel Saunders to Huntingdon, 19 Dec. 1687, Reel 14, Box 50, HA10669. Huntingdon profited in more ways than one from Scarsdale's fall from grace: he succeeded him as Groom of the Stole and Gentleman of the Bedchamber to Prince George of Denmark, see Luttrell, as n.3, 1, p. 425.

It was Huntingdon who polled the Deputy Lieutenants and JPs in Leicestershire and Derbyshire on the 'Three Questions' concerning support for the repeal of the Test Acts and penal laws and who returned the rather discouraging answers to the king. It also fell to him to oversee the resulting thorough-going purge of the Leicestershire Commission of the Peace. Upwards of 25 justices were put out. The handful of loyalists who remained were joined on the commission, on paper at least, by a disparate group of Catholics, dissenters and retainers of the Earl. Despite the active justices being few in number and the lack of experience of some of the recruits, they coped with their workload. Huntingdon was able to rely on a small group of trusted allies to dispense justice at the Quarter Sessions and generally to keep local government functioning. And despite the heavy strains placed on it, local government did not break down in Leicestershire; nor did it anywhere else. This is significant because it suggests that, given time, James's revolution in local administration might have taken root.¹⁹ At the same time Huntingdon was overseeing another, more thorough, purge of members of the Corporation of Leicester, which culminated in the surrender of the charter of 1684 and the granting of a new charter in September 1688.²⁰ What results these purges might have produced had an election been held, as James II intended, in the autumn of 1688 can only be guessed at, for events overtook the king and his plans. When the election writs were issued in September, writs which, incidentally, empowered Huntingdon to reinstate any former member of the Commission of the Peace who was now willing to serve the king's interest, William of Orange's invasion plans were already advanced.²¹ The day before William landed at Torbay, James sent Huntingdon to join his regiment at Plymouth, leaving Leicestershire and Derbyshire deprived of their lord lieutenant and at the mercy of the king's opponents.²² Huntingdon was imprisoned by the treacherous Earl of Bath and only regained his liberty after James had been driven from the country.²³

The Revolution of 1688 effectively ended the earl's political influence nationally and locally. He was deprived of all his offices and lived out his remaining years under the taint of Jacobitism. Controversy continued to accompany the Earl, however. The way he voted in the Convention, first against a regency, then with the loyalists and finally with the Williamites, confounded friend and foe alike.²⁴ Time has not lessened the mystery of such behaviour, especially since thereafter his loyalty to the exiled king was never in doubt. The Earl's correspondence unfortunately is silent on the political issues of the period. Although he was excepted from the provisions of the Bill of Indemnity in 1689 and the Act of Grace 1690, for his membership of the Commission for Ecclesiastical Causes was not easily forgotten or forgiven, he continued to sit in the House of Lords, and so must have taken the oaths.²⁵ However, he was in

19 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Rawlinson Manuscripts, Concerning Penal Laws and Test 1687, MSS Rawl A 139a, No 120; Rawl A 139b, No 251; L. K. J. Glassey, *Politics and the appointment of justices of the peace, 1675-1720*, pp. 88, 94. Oxford: University Press, 1979; Jaquis to Huntingdon, 13 Jun. 1688, Correspondence, Reel 15, Box 52, HA7791; J. R. Jones, *The Revolution of 1688 in England*, p. 135. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972.

20 Greaves, 'Parliamentary History', as n.11, pp. 117-19.

21 King James II to Huntingdon, 22 Sep. 1688, Correspondence, Reel 15, Box 52, HA7164.

22 Hosford, *Nottingham*, as n.18, p. 110.

23 *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, pp. 188ff, *ibid*, 4, pp. 353-4; *Hatton Correspondence*, as n.2, 2, p. 117.

24 Eveline Cruickshanks, David Hayton and Clyve Jones, 'Divisions in the House of Lords on the Transfer of the Crown and Other Issues, 1689-94', in *Peers, politics, and power: the House of Lords, 1603-1911*, ed. Clyve Jones and D. L. Jones, pp. 86-7. London: Hambledon Press, 1988.

25 Luttrell, as n.3, 1, p. 554; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, p. 214; A. Browning, *Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby and Duke of Leeds, 1632-1712*. 3 vols, 1, p. 469n. Glasgow: Jackson, 1944-51; *Historical Manuscripts Commission, The manuscripts of the Duke of Beaufort*, 12th Report, appendix ix, p. 94. London: HMSO, 1891.

communication with the exiled king at St Germain and soon came under suspicion from the new regime.²⁶ In 1692 he was arrested by the government on suspicion of treason and lodged in the Tower of London. He was implicated in James II's invasion plans and his protestations of innocence were belied somewhat by the fact that his stables were found to be full of horses, 'enough to mount a whole troop of cavalry'. The Earl was released after the Battle of La Hogue had destroyed James's hopes: the evidence against him, though dramatic, was essentially circumstantial, as he had taken the precaution of hiding his arms and burning any incriminating papers before his arrest.²⁷

Huntingdon continued to correspond with St Germain, while in Parliament he was considered a Tory: he voted against the Act of Attainder of Sir John Fenwick, a noted Jacobite implicated in the plot to assassinate William; he refused to sign the Association in favour of William in 1696; and he protested against the Act of Settlement, under whose provisions the crown was destined to pass to the House of Hanover.²⁸ If that were not enough to demonstrate his continued fidelity to King James, his protracted quarrel with his eldest son, Lord Hastings, highlighted on a more personal level his antagonism towards the new regime. Lord Hastings sought and found favour with William serving as a soldier in Flanders. This did not please his father, who bitterly criticised what he considered to be his son's disobedience and betrayal of the loyalist principles he held so dear.²⁹ In Leicestershire Huntingdon's fall from power was total: he was stripped of the Lord Lieutenancy in December 1688, leaving the Earls of Rutland and Stamford to compete for political control of the county and borough of Leicester. The power and influence of the Hastings family had been totally eclipsed long before the seventh Earl died in 1701.³⁰

II

Such a controversial career raises certain obvious questions. Why did a government loyalist suddenly transfer his allegiance to the Exclusionists? Why did this same man, with almost equal suddenness, desert the Whigs and return to the royalist fold? And why was the descendent of the 'Puritan Earl', the third Earl of Huntingdon whose career in Queen Elizabeth's reign had been a byword for doughty Protestantism, able to serve with such apparent equanimity a Catholic king whose aim it was to improve the lot of his co-religionists? In part the answer to these questions, and an explanation

26 Dutch dragoons were billeted in Ashby in March 1690: *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, p. 214. Huntingdon actually asked the government for permission to visit St Germain, where he had been invited by James II to witness the birth of the king's daughter, Louise Mary: *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 4, p. 354.

27 Luttrell, as n.3, 2, pp. 441, 443; Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The history of England: from the accession of James the Second*, 6 vols, ed. C. H. Firth, 5, p. 2176. London: Macmillan and Co., 1913-15; Luttrell, as n.3, 2, pp. 542, 611-13, 629.

28 *A complete collection of the protests of the Lords with historical introductions edited from the Journals of the Lords*, ed. J. E. T. Rogers, 1, p. 129. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875; Luttrell, as n.3, 4, p. 34; *Bishop Burnet's history of his own time: 2. From the revolution to the conclusion of the treaty of peace, at Utrecht, in the reign of Queen Anne, to which is added the author's life*, p. 271. 2 vols. London: Printed by J. Downing and H. Woodfall, 1724;1734.

29 *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, pp. 252-3, 255, 284; 4, pp 357-8.

30 Rutland recovered the Lord Lieutenancy of Leicestershire, but Stamford was made *Custos Rotulorum*, much to Rutland's irritation. Stamford also secured the High Stewardship of the Honour of Leicester, long a preserve of the earls of Huntingdon: Glassey, *Justices*, as n.19, p. 102; Plumb, 'Political History', as n.1, pp. 121ff; Greaves, 'Parliamentary History', as n.11, pp. 119ff; *Complete Peerage*, 12.1, p.22 Luttrell, as n.3, 5, p. 56.

for all the twists and turns of his political career, can be found in recognising the major motivating factor in Huntingdon's life, which was to restore the Hastings family to its position of pre-eminence in Leicestershire, and, after 1667, that meant, in more concrete terms, the return of the lord lieutenancy to the family.

The frustration of Huntingdon's personal ambitions goes a long way towards explaining why the hitherto loyalist Earl became the ardent Exclusionist of the late 1670s. Evidence for this is provided by a draft letter, ostensibly written by Huntingdon to the Duke of York. It was, in fact, written by his mother, the Dowager Countess of Huntingdon, but almost certainly expressed the Earl's views. The letter, which can be dated to the early summer of 1677, is a plea from the Earl to be appointed Lord Lieutenant of Leicestershire and refers to the fact that the then lord lieutenant, the Earl of Rutland, 'is sick and not like to recover'.³¹ In fact, illness had rendered the old Earl of Rutland incapable of performing the duties of lord lieutenant, although he did not die until 1679. However, it was his son, Lord Roos, not Huntingdon who was chosen as lord lieutenant by the king. Since Huntingdon's letter of supplication, in which he clearly sets out his credentials for the job, was ignored, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to speculate that the Earl took umbrage at what he perceived to be a snub and moved towards the opposition camp. Certainly, what evidence there is suggests that Huntingdon had set his heart on the lord lieutenancy. His anxiety to know more about the Earl of Rutland's illness betrays more than just concern for the old man's well-being. And, despite the obligatory protestations to the contrary, it is obvious from a letter to his chaplain, the Rev. John Gery, in the summer of 1677, that thoughts of the lieutenancy were still uppermost in his mind. After Roos had secured the prized post, Huntingdon could not disguise his pique, dismissing his rival with the caustic comment that he, Roos, was 'at the top of his ambition except he expects to be a privy councillor'. A feeling of personal injury in a man can be as great a motivation as political principle.³²

Did Huntingdon have the convert's zeal for Exclusion? If the incident at the Lord Mayor's dinner is anything to judge by, he did. Yet his reputation as a Whig zealot during the Exclusion Crisis is tempered somewhat by his views on the matter expressed in the House of Lords. In the Hastings papers there is a draft, in the Earl's handwriting and dated 15 November 1680, of a speech on the Exclusion Bill. It presents the classic apologia for the Exclusionist cause:

There is not a man in this House...who is for the passing of this bill who is not most zealous for the support of this monarchy and the King in his royal prerogatives. Neither will this divert the succession out of the right line; it is no more than if the

31 The archivist responsible for editing the calendar of the Hastings Correspondence assumed that the letter was written by Huntingdon to James II and dates it some time after 1684 but before 1688 (Correspondence, Reel 13, Box 45, HA6044). Everything, however, points to the letter being written in the early summer of 1677. There is mention of Rutland's incapacitating illness and, although he did not die until 1679, he was succeeded as lord lieutenant by his son, Lord Roos, in June 1677 (*HMC Rutland MSS*, as n. 11, 2, p. 41). It is obvious from the letter that Rutland is not well enough to continue in the post but that his replacement has not yet been chosen. The letter has been drafted by the Dowager Countess of Huntingdon, who has signed a postscript addressed to her son, in which she explains why the letter is expressed in the way it is (so as not to offend Rutland and Roos's friends at Court). The Dowager Countess died in 1679; *Complete Peerage*, 6, p.659. Finally the plea is addressed to 'your Royal Highness', which would suggest that James, as Duke of York, was the intended recipient.

32 *HMC Rutland MSS*, as n.11, 2, p. 41; Huntingdon to Gery, 14 May 1677, Correspondence, Reel 12, Box 41, HA5933; Huntingdon to Gery, 5 Jul. [1677], HA5940; Huntingdon to Gery, 20 Jul. 1678, HA5952.

Duke of York were naturally dead. It is no diminution to the King's majesty, it is to preserve his sacred person, which cannot be safe so long as there is hopes of his [the Duke's] coming to the Crown.³³

In essence the speech propounds the intentions of the moderate Exclusionists: the monarch and his prerogatives were not under attack; the object was to prevent an avowed Catholic ascending the throne and to preserve Protestantism and traditional English liberties, which James's accession would threaten. The parting of the ways for Huntingdon and the Whigs may have been precipitated by Earl's sensing that the tide was turning against them; or even that he felt in some personal danger as the king's grip on the political situation tightened.³⁴ But it is also possible that Huntingdon, as a moderate Exclusionist, could not accept the more extreme methods advocated by Shaftesbury and his allies as their hopes of achieving Parliamentary endorsement for their aims disappeared.³⁵

The Earl's Whiggish phase adds to the confusion over his religious opinions and, more precisely, his attitude towards Catholicism. As early as December 1678, he chaired a committee on the Children of Popish Recusants Bill, a particularly stringent piece of anti-Catholic legislation. Yet this and other anti-Catholic utterances at the height of the Exclusion Crisis are misleading. Huntingdon, while doubtless sharing some of his fellow countrymen's prejudices, does not appear to have been virulently anti-Catholic; nor was he a religious bigot. A series of speeches in the Hastings papers, in the Earl's handwriting and dating from the 1670s, shows this to be the case. He opposed a Bill which would have taken the royal children away from their Catholic parents to be educated by the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Archbishop of York, describing it as being 'contrary to the laws of nature'.³⁶ And on several occasions he expressed opposition to Bills that would have stiffened the already draconian laws against Catholic recusants. He also objected to the test on transubstantiation being added to the Oath of Allegiance and Supremacy in the Bill to exclude Catholics from sitting in Parliament. In one speech he concludes:

Will your Lordships be inexorable? Shall neither the loyalty of the Papists in all times, serving the late King and the King that now is with their lives and fortunes, nor yet their submitting to all the sureties with the greatest modesty and moderation imaginable, move your Lordships if not to indulge them yet at least not to lay heavier burdens on them.³⁷

These are not the words of a fanatical Protestant, nor for that matter, a rigid Anglican.

While allowing that a man's opinion of an alien religious creed may change with changes in his political thinking, it does not fully clarify Huntingdon's position, especially during the reign of James II, when his attitude towards Catholicism was to become equivocal, to say the least. In fact, by 1687 Huntingdon's Anglican friends were beginning to express concern about his commitment to the faith into which he

33 *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 4, pp. 302-5.

34 Having been implicated in an alleged Whig plot to kidnap the king at Oxford, Huntingdon might well have feared for his safety: *CSPD, 1680-81*, as n. 12, pp. 666-7.

35 It was reported in the Public Intelligence of 25 October 1681 that when Huntingdon kissed the king's hand he had told Charles that he had 'found by experience that they who promoted the Bill of Exclusion were for the subversion of monarchy itself'; words which he later denied uttering: *CSPD, 1680-81*, as n.12, p. 545; *HMC Ormonde MSS*, as n.12, 6, p. 204, pp 215-7; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, p. 173, xi-xii; *CSPD, 1680-81*, as n.12, p. 572.

36 *HMC House of Lords MSS*, as n.12, p. 74; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 4, pp. 292-3.

37 Browning, *Danby*, as n.25, 3, p. 129; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 4, p. 294.

was born; and it is fair to say that over the next 18 months a certain haze envelops the Earl's religious affiliations. Some among his friends and relations may have believed he had converted to Rome, or was about to do so. Certainly by November 1688 the Countess of Huntingdon was worried enough to plead with her husband, while he was being held a prisoner by the Earl of Bath at Plymouth, to take the sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England to 'convince the world what your principles are', which may suggest there was some doubt in the matter.³⁸ Two historians, John Kenyon and Maurice Ashley, have described Huntingdon as a Catholic convert, but have offered nothing to substantiate this. Huntingdon is not generally considered to have been a Catholic. To have enjoyed the trust of the king was not proof in itself of a commitment to his religion. James had to rely, and even if his policies had proved successful, would have had to continue to rely, on such Protestant servants as Newcastle, Middleton, Craven, Preston, Dartmouth and Jeffreys, all of whom remained loyal.

Yet the ambiguity of Huntingdon's position is reinforced by two pieces of evidence. First, the document appointing him Lord Lieutenant of Derbyshire in December 1687 released him from the obligation of taking the oaths of Supremacy and Allegiance and subscribing the Tests. This could be seen as suggesting that Huntingdon had become a Catholic, though it was a feature common to other documents issued by the Crown at this date. Moreover, when he succeeded the Earl of Rutland as Lord Lieutenant of Leicestershire in the summer of 1687, his commission did not contain a clause releasing him from the obligation of taking the oaths, indicating that at that stage he was still a member of the established church. Secondly, a letter from two deputy lieutenants in Derbyshire, apparently addressed to Lord Preston, Secretary of State, in November 1688, states that the Derbyshire gentry will not serve a lord lieutenant who has not taken the oaths. This could be construed as implying that the lord lieutenant, Huntingdon, was a Catholic. The letter may have been addressed to Huntingdon and have come into the hands of Preston, who in Huntingdon's absence (the Earl was soon on his way to Plymouth) was acting as a proxy lord lieutenant. It is inconceivable that the question of oaths would have applied to Preston, who was as unswerving in his Anglicanism as he was in his loyalty to King James. However, Huntingdon's own words allow of no doubt in the matter: he wrote, at a later date, that he was 'always steady to the religion of the Church of England'.³⁹ Huntingdon's lack of prejudice against Catholics survived the Revolution, as is clearly demonstrated by his negotiations in the marriage market in 1693. In that year, the Earl attempted to arrange a marriage between his son, Lord Hastings, and a daughter of Lady Bellasis, matriarch of a Catholic family. Such an approach, the Earl wrote, was in itself proof

38 Bridget Croft to Huntingdon, 9 May 1687, Correspondence, Reel 14, Box 49, HA1791; Arthur Stanhope to Huntingdon, 6 Oct. 1687, Reel 14, Box 50, HA12520; Charles Stanhope to Huntingdon, 18 Jul. 1688, Reel 15, Box 52, HA12563; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, pp. 202, 210.

39 J. P. Kenyon, *Robert Spencer, earl of Sunderland, 1641-1702*, p. 161. London: Longmans, Green, 1958; M. Ashley, *James II*, p. 207. London: Dent, 1978; Sir George Floyd Duckett, *Penal laws and Test Act. Questions touching their repeal propounded in 1687-8 by James II to the deputy lieutenants and magistrates of the counties of Bedfordshire*, [etc.], introductory chapter, pp.4-7. London: [Printed by T. Wilson], 1883; *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Seventh Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts*, appendix part 1, Sir F. Graham MSS, p. 412. London: HMSO, 1879. Ironically, one of the writers of this letter, Sir Henry Hunloke, was a Catholic: see a letter from Hunloke to Huntingdon, 14 Jul., 1688, in which he thanks Huntingdon for freeing him from 'the troublesome and chargeable office of Sheriff, wherein I am certain your lordship has done the King good service, for the gentleman that has it, is willing, and much more able to serve his Majesty, in that status than any Roman Catholic': Correspondence, Reel 15, Box 52, HA6949; *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 4, p. 355.

that neither he nor his son was 'prejudiced with violence or animosity towards those of your communion.'⁴⁰ It is not unreasonable to conclude that a man with such a relaxed attitude towards Catholicism, who was also at heart a natural loyalist, might well have found it less difficult to support James's policies than many of his fellow countrymen.

III

It is the contention of this essay that the Lord Lieutenancy of Leicestershire was the prize above all that the seventh Earl of Huntingdon coveted. Not unlike the Earls of Derby in Lancashire and Cheshire, the Earls of Huntingdon had come to look on the lieutenancy as theirs by right; confirmation of their political predominance in Leicestershire which had lasted from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth. It is clear from the seventh Earl's correspondence that he shared the belief that the lord lieutenancy, the hallmark of an aristocrat's political and social pre-eminence in the county community, was part of the Hastings' inheritance. His failure to secure the lieutenancy when infirmity forced the eighth Earl of Rutland into retirement in 1677 helped to push Huntingdon into the Exclusionist camp. During the Exclusion Crisis, Shaftesbury had tried to force Charles II to remodel the Commissions of the Peace in favour of the Whigs, and Huntingdon, despite the ninth Earl of Rutland's political unobtrusiveness, must have perceived a chance to supplant his rival, had the Whigs prevailed.⁴¹ The rout of Shaftesbury and the Exclusionists launched Huntingdon's career in a new direction, first to recover royal favour and then to strengthen his power in the county until he was in a position to challenge the Rutland hegemony. The Tory reaction during the period 1681 to 1685 re-established his loyalist credentials and by the crisis point of James II's reign in 1687, his uncompromising and unquestioning commitment to the royal cause made him indispensable to a king who was fast running out of influential men willing to do his bidding.⁴² With his political fortunes so utterly tied to those of the king, Huntingdon's fall was inevitable once James had been driven from the throne, although his idiosyncratic voting record in the Convention can be seen as possibly an attempt, albeit an ambivalent and ultimately doomed one, to make terms with the new regime. He had gambled for high stakes, and lost; but not without first tasting the fruits of success, in what Plumb has described as the Hastings family's 'brief Indian summer of political influence'.⁴³

40 *HMC, Hastings MSS*, as n.3, 2, pp. 227-8.

41 Glassey, *Justices*, as n.19, pp. 41-5; *HMC Ormonde MSS*, as n.12, 4, p. 505, 5, p. 58.

42 Huntingdon obviously had the measure of his royal master. He wrote to Gery on 31 August 1686: 'I find the King likes those who are most forward to his service,' which though true of most kings was especially so of James II (Correspondence, Reel 13, Box 47, HA6055). It was rather late in the day, at the time of the seven bishops' imprisonment in the Tower in the summer of 1688, that Huntingdon confided his doubts about the king's policies to Sir John Reresby, see *Memoirs of Sir John Reresby: the complete text and a selection from his letters*, ed. A. Browning, p. 449. Glasgow: Jackson, 1936.

43 Plumb, 'Political History', as n.1, p. 119. The seventh Earl's fall signalled the end of the Hastings family's political influence. The eighth Earl died young in 1705, before he was able to build politically on his early promise as a soldier. The ninth Earl, the seventh Earl's son by his second marriage, was a nonentity, who was outshone by his wife, the celebrated Selina, founder of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. With the death of the tenth Earl in 1789, the direct male line of the Hastings family was extinguished: see G. E. C. [George Edward Cokayne], *Complete peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, extant, extinct, or dormant*, 6, pp. 659-60. London: G. Bell & sons, 1887-1898; H. N. Bell, *The Huntingdon peerage; comprising a detailed account of the evidence and proceedings connected with the recent restoration of the earldom*. London: Printed for Baldwin, Cradock & Joy, 1820.

Seen in this way Huntingdon's career takes on a rather Machiavellian aspect. But although his letters often betray a suspicious, secretive, even conspiratorial, mind at work, Huntingdon was in reality neither ruthless nor cunning. The contention that he was driven by one ambition, to return the Hastings family to political pre-eminence in Leicestershire, brings a consistency to most of his actions. In the light of this, labels such as 'turncoat' and 'renegade' seem both inappropriate and unfair. When compared with that of the second Earl of Sunderland, generally considered the most unprincipled and rapacious statesman of his age, Huntingdon's career appears less reprehensible. Sunderland was Charles II's Secretary of State when he voted for the Exclusion Bill, for which disloyalty he was dismissed. Nonetheless he still managed to work his way back into favour with Charles and James, eventually becoming the latter's most influential minister and a Catholic convert. After the Revolution and a period in exile, during which he returned to the Protestant religion, he became the trusted confidant of William: a remarkable metamorphosis.⁴⁴

Huntingdon, of course, was not a man of the same stature as Sunderland; he was, rather, a Restoration politician of the second rank, whose career would have warranted no more than a footnote in history had it not been for the peculiar circumstances of James II's reign. Yet historians have noted the political obscurity of many of Huntingdon's fellow nobles, and perhaps it is not an exaggeration to suggest that Huntingdon outshines the three aristocratic contemporaries whom, arguably, tradition, circumstance or opportunity made his rivals for political power at a local level. Robert Leke (1654-1707), third Earl of Scarsdale, has left barely a mark on history. Despite opposing James II's religious policies, he was soon estranged from the Williamite regime because of his Jacobite sympathies. What little celebrity John Manners (1638-1711), ninth Earl and first Duke of Rutland, enjoys results from an infamous divorce case rather than anything he did in politics. Thomas Grey (1654-1720), second Earl of Stamford, though having a fairly active political career, is described in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as 'an honest and rigid, but somewhat narrow-minded Whig': hardly an impressive epitaph.⁴⁵ Huntingdon by comparison played a more significant role in the troubled final years of Charles II's reign and especially under the extraordinary political conditions of James II's reign, and paid the price accordingly. He took a gamble allying himself with a king whose controversial, even foolhardy, policies offered his supporters the prospect of considerable rewards or total ruin. His continued loyalty to James in his last years suggests that Huntingdon was not a man bereft of principle. Like so many of King James's supporters, he has suffered the opprobrium of posterity merely for being on the losing side.

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44 *DNB*. Sunderland's career is subjected to sympathetic scrutiny in Kenyon's biography, *Robert Spencer, earl of Sunderland*, as n.39.

45 *History of Parliament*, ed. Henning, as n.11, 2, p. 732, 3, pp. 14-16; *DNB*. The obscurity of many of Huntingdon's fellow nobles is mentioned in passing by Hosford, *Nottingham*, as n.18, and by J. P. Kenyon, *The nobility in the Revolution of 1688*. Hull: University Publications Committee, 1963.