
The Case of Eleazar Edgar: *Leicester's Commonwealth* and the Book Trade in 1604

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SCHOLARS HAVE LONG OBSERVED that the Catholic libel known as *Leicester's Commonwealth* circulated extensively in manuscript. The tract, originally titled *The Copy of a Letter, Written by a Master of Art of Cambridge*, consists of a fictional—and highly scurrilous—conversation among the scholar who supposedly wrote the letter, a gentleman, and a lawyer about Queen Elizabeth's favorite Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester.¹ After its first printing in 1584 (likely in Rouen, after which copies were smuggled into England), *Leicester's Commonwealth* was not printed again until 1641.² Yet over ninety full or partial manuscript copies survive, suggesting that the book was, as H. R. Woudhuysen writes, “one of the most widely circulated prose tracts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.”³ Despite

1. *The Copy of a Letter, Written by a Master of Art of Cambridge* (1584), STC 5742.9.

2. See D. C. Peck, introduction, *Leicester's Commonwealth: The Copy of a Letter Written by a Master of Art of Cambridge (1584) and Related Documents*, ed. Peck (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), 5–32.

3. H. R. Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts, 1558–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 149. The count of extant manuscript copies is from Peter Beal, *Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts 1450–1700 (CELM)*, www.celm-ms.org.uk/introductions/AnonLeicestersCommonwealth.html, accessed 7 August 2019.

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the considerable number of extant manuscripts, however, scholars have found few explicit reports of the book's scribal dissemination.⁴

This note records a neglected report of the tract's circulation in manuscript. In November 1604, the Stationer Eleazar Edgar admitted that he had procured a "written copie" of *Leicester's Commonwealth* for an unnamed gentleman.⁵ His testimony helps us address what Earle Havens and Elizabeth Patton have recently called a "lacuna" in scholarship on the dissemination of early modern Catholic texts. As Havens and Patton point out, "the specific material circumstances surrounding the distribution, circulation and popular consumption of these English Catholic books have remained largely undocumented and undefined."⁶ Just as poorly documented is the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean Stationers' trade in prohibited religious polemic.⁷ In fact, there survive from that period only a few accounts of members of the Stationers' Company distributing either manuscripts or illegal books. I describe here a case of a Stationer trafficking in both: a scribal copy of a banned book.

The examination of Eleazar Edgar, dated 12 November 1604, is preserved in a single handwritten sheet among the State Papers (transcribed in the appendix to this essay). After an eight-year apprenticeship, Edgar was admitted a freeman of the Stationers' Company in June 1597. He does not seem to have owned a bookshop until 1609; at any rate, he was certainly working in another Stationer's shop at the time of his testimony.⁸ Other

4. See Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 148–49.

5. The National Archives of the UK (TNA), SP 14/10A, f. 34^r. Throughout, I capitalize the word "Stationer" to distinguish members of the Stationers' Company—which, by the late sixteenth century, dominated the London book trade—from other book producers and distributors, also called "stationers."

6. Earle Havens and Elizabeth Patton, "Underground Networks, Prisons and the Circulation of Counter-Reformation Books in Elizabethan England," in *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory and Counter-Reformation*, ed. James E. Kelly and Susan Royal (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 169.

7. But see, e.g., Nancy Pollard Brown, "Paperchase: The Dissemination of Catholic Texts in Elizabethan England," *English Manuscript Studies, 1100–1700*, vol. 1 (1989): 138–39; and Alexandra Walsham, "'Domme Preachers'? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print," *Past and Present* 168 (2000): 87.

8. *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London; 1554–1640 A.D.*, ed. Edward Arber, 5 vols. (London and Birmingham, 1875–94), 2:163, 718; Gerald D. Johnson, "John Trundle and the Book-Trade 1603–1626," *Studies in Bibliography* 39 (1986): 185n11. Edgar is best known for a book that he never seems to

than a brief entry in the *Calendar of State Papers*, I have found no reference to the document. Examinations, also known as depositions, were “essentially the verbatim evidence noted by an examining magistrate or equivalent officer.”⁹ Asked where he had been on the previous Saturday “about 9. or. 10. of clock at nyght,” Edgar “sayd I thought I went with a gentlemen man from my maisters shop about that time to deliver him D. Billsons booke of Christes sufferings. which was at a workmans house towards the ~~scout~~ ~~the~~ ~~door~~ ~~of~~ east end of paules. I gave him likewise a written copie that his master had desired me to get for him called Leisters commonwealth.”¹⁰

Although the context of Edgar’s examination remains largely obscure, the document offers several suggestive hints. The examining officer was Sir William Waad, clerk of the Privy Council and later lieutenant of the Tower of London. Waad spent much of his life investigating conspiracies and hounding religious dissidents; by 1599, he was known for “keep[ing] the Papistes in awe.”¹¹ It’s not clear why he wanted to know where Edgar had been on the previous Saturday, or whether he knew or suspected that the Stationer had dealt a copy of the infamous Catholic libel *Leicester’s Commonwealth*. In the second half of the examination, Edgar confesses that he had previously gone to Ireland to escape the heat of a libel case. But that case—resolved two years earlier, in 1602—evidently had nothing

have published: on 3 January 1600, he entered in the Stationers’ Register “A booke called *Amours* by J D. with *certen oy* [other] *sonnetes* by W S.” (*Transcript*, 3:153). Scholars have speculated that “W S.” may be William Shakespeare and that “J D.” could be the epigrammatist John Davies or even John Donne. See Katherine Duncan-Jones, introduction, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Duncan-Jones, rev. ed. (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 3–5; and R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 108–9n4.

9. J. A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550–1750*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999), 52.

10. See *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of James I, 1603–1610*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (London, 1857), 166. Edgar goes on to suggest that he has misremembered the date: “being since better advised,” he recalls that he was actually going about other (more innocent) business on that Saturday night. But he still admits to providing *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, so, while the date may be off, there is no reason to doubt his testimony.

11. TNA, SP 12/271, f. 172^v. See Gary M. Bell, “Waad, Sir William (1546–1623), diplomat and administrator,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28364>, accessed 4 August 2019.

to do with religious politics but instead concerned a rivalry between a friend of Edgar's and a goldsmith for a wealthy woman's hand in marriage.¹² While we know very little about Edgar's activities before 1604, Waad's investigations and interrogations are much more thoroughly documented. In 1603 and 1605, Waad helped unravel several alleged plots to depose or assassinate the new king, James VI and I. Around the same time, he was also pursuing illicit Catholic books and presses, including an operation devoted to "the Printing of Papisticall bookes" in Ireland.¹³

The Irish connection is particularly intriguing. Before admitting that the libel case was what took him to Ireland, Edgar offers a different explanation for his travels: "that I had the earle of Desmonds *lettres* in my commendation & that I went thither ^{^for^} preferment." The Irish nobleman James Fitzgerald, fifteenth Earl of Desmond, was the son of the Catholic "archrebell" Gerald Fitzgerald.¹⁴ Although his father's rebellion was quashed in 1583, James spent nearly his entire adult life in the Tower. He was finally freed and created earl in 1600, and he died just one year later.¹⁵ Edgar's connection with Desmond is otherwise undocumented, but the earl seems to have played some role in Catholic literary circles. Around 1600, Ben Jonson, then a Catholic, composed an ode to "my best-best loved" James, Earl of Desmond.¹⁶

Yet there is no evidence that Edgar was himself a recusant. And while he did procure a prohibited Catholic pamphlet on that November night in 1604, he also provided an authorized Anglican text. Along with the "written copie" of *Leicester's Commonwealth*, Edgar gave the gentleman's man "D. Billsons booke of Christes sufferings"—that is, *The Survey of*

12. John Hawarde, *Les Reportes del Cases in Camera Stellata, 1593 to 1609*, ed. William Paley Baildon (London, 1894), 152.

13. Hatfield House, Herefordshire, Cecil Papers (CP) 112/4. See also CP 188/93, 190/88, 191/1.

14. William Cecil, *The Execution of Justice in England* (London, 1583), D3^r, STC 4902.

15. Anthony M. McCormack, "Fitzgerald, James fitz Gerald, fifteenth earl of Desmond [called the Queen's Earl, the Tower Earl] (c. 1570–1601), nobleman and prisoner," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/9563>, accessed 23 August 2019.

16. Ben Jonson, *The Underwood*, ed. Colin Burrow, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, gen. eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7:139, l. 63. See Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 148–49.

Christ's Sufferings for Man's Redemption: and of His Descent to Hades or Hell for our Deliverance by Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester. John Bill entered Bilson's *Survey* in the Stationers' Register on 21 May 1604, and it was printed by Melchisedech Bradwood for Bill the same year.¹⁷ When Edgar sold it in early November, then, the book was fresh off the press. *The Survey* is a hefty tome of theological polemic defending the controversial Anglican doctrine that Christ's sufferings on the cross and descent into hell are to be taken literally and not figuratively. Bilson's orthodox Protestant polemic and *Leicester's Commonwealth* might seem an unlikely pair. One was a printed book, the other "a written copie"; one was "[p]erused and allowed by publike Authoritie," as the title page professed, while the other had been banned decades before; one was a defense of Anglican doctrine, the other a salacious Catholic libel.¹⁸ Yet the Stationer offers both. If Edgar's testimony is any indication, a gentleman interested in religious controversy could go (or, in this case, send) to a legitimate bookseller for all sorts of polemic, seditious or otherwise.

It is not until the early 1620s that we find a detailed account of this trade in scribal copies of forbidden books. Sometime after the publication (and attempted suppression) of Thomas Scott's *Vox Populi* in 1620, an anonymous informant wrote to the secretary of state, George Calvert:

Althoughe such bookes as vox populi, and other suche as daylie tooe audaciouslie are dispersed, are forbidden and ought by noe good subiect be intertained or openly divulged, yet (as I am lykewayes credible given to vnderstand) there bee dyuers stationers soe soone as they heare of anie such bookes, as haue noe publicke authoritie they indevor vpon whatsoever condicion to gett them in their hands, and hyres some younge ffellowes, to transcribe them, & sells them to suche Nuefangle persons as will not spare anie charges for acqueiringe such trashe as infatuats the foolish vulgar with a misprision of lest-actions, and with which they ought not to medle.

This I take to be the cheefe cause of the soe common dispersinge of such bookes.¹⁹

The final sentence is something of an overstatement. As Alastair Bellany points out, stationers (whether members of the Company or otherwise)

17. *Transcript*, 3:262; Thomas Bilson, *The Survey of Christ's Sufferings for Man's Redemption: and of His Descent to Hades or Hell for our Deliverance* (London, 1604), STC 3070.

18. Bilson, *Survey*, ¶1r.

19. TNA, SP 14/118, f. 139r.

were not the “cheefe” means of dispersing manuscript copies of libelous and topical political material in early Stuart England. These texts spread through all sorts of other scribal channels: among friends and relatives, within institutions like the universities and the Inns of Court, and through semi-professional news networks.²⁰ Stationers, however, did sometimes sell such books in the 1620s—and Edgar’s examination shows a Stationer offering one such book a decade and a half earlier.

There are several possible explanations for Edgar’s predicament in November 1604. First, he may have had a penchant for getting into trouble. The rest of the examination, as mentioned above, indicates that he was also a person of interest in a Star Chamber libel case. Accused that his trip to Ireland had to do with “a libel against one Roper. *which* was called in question in the starre chamber,” Edgar confesses that “it was not I that made it though in some sort I was privie to it, & having vndone my self in these troubles I thought good to absent my self ~~th~~ till my frends had taken some order with Roper.”²¹ Second, it’s possible, although implausible given the tract’s enormous popularity, that Edgar genuinely did not know that procuring a copy of *Leicester’s Commonwealth* could land him in trouble with the authorities. The examination concludes with a plea for pardon that seems to imply as much: “if he have ~~d~~ offending in providing that booke of Leisters *commonwealth* he desireth humbly pardon.” That “if” could suggest that Edgar was claiming ignorance, however disingenuous the claim may have been.

But I think a third explanation is most likely: what Edgar did was not especially taboo or even unusual for a Stationer in 1604. “Good evidence from the 1620s,” Bellany writes, “suggests that stationers eager for quick profits systematically produced manuscript copies of banned political works.”²² The evidence from before 1620, however, is much sketchier. One of the most suggestive earlier accounts comes in a November 1609

20. Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85–III, esp. 93.

21. Edgar doesn’t name these friends, but John Hawarde’s report of the sentencing (dated 16 June 1602) reveals the libeler to be a certain “Martin, stationer” (Hawarde, *Les Reportes*, 152).

22. Bellany, *Politics*, 93. Some of that evidence is described in Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 73–79; Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip*

letter from the informer William Udall. According to Udall, the bookseller Ferdinand Ely “buyeth and selleth all prohibited bokes, and stohn bokes.” A search of Ely’s shop turned up “that vile boke of Queres coppied out”—a scribal copy of the pseudonymously published *Prurit-Anus*, a salacious Catholic satire.²³ Yet although Udall calls him a “stationer,” Ely was not a member of the Company but instead dealt in secondhand books, including “Popish” and other illegal texts.²⁴ Eleazar Edgar, by contrast, was a member of the Stationers’ Company and, by November 1604, was already publishing the works of the political and religious orthodoxy. Among the first books he entered in the Stationers’ Register, in April 1603, were two treatises by England’s brand new king: James’s *The True Law of Free Monarchies* and *Demonology*.²⁵ Later that month, he entered (although does not seem to have published) a book narrating “the treacherous practise” against James’s life allegedly plotted by the Scotsman Francis Mowbray, and in 1604 he published *Satan’s Sophistry Answered by Our Savior Christ*, a collection of sermons by the late Anglican divine William Perkins.²⁶ Based on his output up to (and after) November 1604, Edgar looks more like an instrument of state propaganda than a purveyor of so-called “Popish” or “vile” books.

There’s not enough evidence to say whether Edgar’s dealings were the exception or the norm for members of the Stationers’ Company in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Testimony from later dates, and particularly from the 1620s, suggests that his transaction was not entirely

Sidney, 48–51; and Bellany and Thomas Cogswell, *The Murder of King James I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 289–91.

23. British Library, Lansdowne MS 153, f. 17, transcribed in P. R. Harris, “The Reports of William Udall, Informer, 1605–1612,” *Recusant History* 8, nos. 4–5 (1966): 264. On *Prurit-Anus*, see Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder*, 145.

24. Harris, “Reports,” 264; John Gee, *The Foot out of the Snare: with a Detection of Sundry Late Practices and Impostures of the Priests and Jesuits in England* (London, 1624), Tr, STC 11704; Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 49.

25. *Transcript*, 3:231; King James VI and I, *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (London, 1603), STC 14410; James, *Demonology, in Form of a Dialogue* (London, 1603), STC 14365.

26. *Transcript*, 3:232, 248; William Perkins, *Satan’s Sophistry Answered by Our Savior Christ, and in Diverse Sermons Further Manifested* (London, 1604), STC 19747.5. On Mowbray’s alleged plot, see TNA, SP 12/285, f. 59^r; SP 52/68, f. 68^r; and SP 52/69, f. 45^r.

atypical, if a little ahead of its time. And it's possible that by 1604 *Leicester's Commonwealth* wasn't quite as illicit as a newly composed Catholic or Puritan libel. In any event, Edgar's examination is a valuable data point and case study. Further research is needed, but the case of Eleazar Edgar suggests that the "underground networks" through which seditious Catholic books circulated were neither as far underground nor as uniformly Catholic as scholars have suggested.²⁷

APPENDIX²⁸

12th November 1604

being asked by ~~the~~ Right worshipfull Sir William Wade where I was on Saturday was a seven night about 9. or. 10. of clock at nyght. I desired. advise with my self in regard I could not suddenly remember. being demanded presently againe I sayd I thought I went with a gentlemans man from my maisters shop about that time to deliver him D. Billsons booke of Christes sufferings. which was at a workmans house towards the ~~sou~~the d~~o~~re of east end of paules. I gave him likewise a written copie that his master had desired me to get for him called Leisters commonwealth but being since better advised I remember I was on that night sent by my master to a bookeseller in ~~paul~~ the blac<k> friars. whither I went, & after my returne I went to the barbars. & from thence to a bookebinder that works to my master into Aldersgate street. / & so home about half an howre befor 9. a clocke / being likewise asked when I had bene in Ireland. I answered that I had the earle of Desmonds *lettres* in my commendation & that I went thither ^for^ preferment, but I stayd not there above 7. moneths. being charged that I went thither about a libel against one Roper. which was called in question in the starre chamber. but it was not I that made it thoughe in some sort I was

27. See Havens and Patton, "Underground Networks"; Havens, "Notes from a Literary Underground: Recusant Catholics, Jesuit Priests, and Scribal Publication in Elizabethan England," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 99, no. 4 (2005): 505–38; and Mark Rankin, "Richard Topcliffe and the Book Culture of the Elizabethan Catholic Underground," *Renaissance Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2019): 492–536.

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28. In this and other transcriptions of scribal sources, I have expanded abbreviations in italics; silently lowered superscripts; preserved strikethroughs; marked interlineal insertions with caret symbol (^); and supplied indecipherable or missing characters in angle brackets (< >).

privie to it, & having vndone my self in these troubles I thought good to absent my self ~~th~~ till my friends had taken some order with Roper. being asked whither I went abrode any more that night or early in the morning towards the south dore ~~of~~ or towards the east. he sayth he did not to his remembrance / & for this former matters he hath his pardon, & if he have ~~d~~ offending in providing that booke of Leisters commonwealth he desireth humbly pardon. Eleazar Edgar

*Examinatur per W Waad*²⁹

29. Waad's signature is written vertically along the left-hand margin of the page.