

VICTIMS OF POWER THE LISLES (16TH CENTURY)



Very different from the chaotic era of the Pastons, during which a nobleman can send a private army to seize an estate, is the era of the Lisles, to which the first two Tudors have brought something like stability. The violence that now threatens the upper class is the stroke of the headsman's axe, which awaits those who earn the King's disfavour. Like a modern dictator, Henry VIII can pursue his political and personal goals with paranoid fanaticism regardless of the claims of friendship, gratitude or justice.

The Lisle letters cover only seven years, but these are the years in which this King, using Thomas Cromwell as his instrument, repudiates the Pope's authority, establishes himself as ruler of the English Church, abolishes the monasteries, and makes martyrs to control the religious life of his subjects. Retaining Catholic theology and ritual, he puts to death Protestant reformers and papal zealots alike.

Hence, the letters are invaluable to historians, and many of them provide glimpses into the lives and daily needs of the upper classes, as well as a notion of the fear visited on them by those in authority. We learn of the clothes a young boy or a maid of honour requires; of the wines, foodstuffs, hawks and hounds given to those in a position to confer benefits in return; of the ornamentation of a horse's harness; of the friendly relations between the English Lord Deputy of Calais and his French neighbour, the Seneschal of Boulogne; of the lives of children educated away from their families; and of how Henry VIII debates theology with a heretic. Yet it is glimpses we are given rather than the fuller pictures of scenes and events created by Pliny the Younger.

Although the time span of the letters is too short for the succession of generations and the accompanying clash of close relatives that is such a memorable feature of the Paston correspondence, a number of characters portray themselves and each other with memorable clarity, and the cor-

respondence conveys the atmosphere of terror that prevails. It consists of the personal papers of Viscount Lisle, governor of Calais, England's only possession in France. These are seized when Thomas Cromwell, who has ruthlessly imposed the King's will on the religious practices of his subjects, has endangered himself by manoeuvring to promote the Lutheran creed. In a vain attempt to save his neck, he tries to frame Lisle as a traitor who wishes to restore the Pope's authority in England. Cromwell is executed, but after two years' imprisonment in the Tower of London, Lisle receives news of his release; only a few hours later he dies a natural death.

The central characters of the letters are Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle; Honor Grenville, his second wife; John Husee, their principal agent; and Thomas Cromwell, the King's right-hand man. Lord Lisle, an illegitimate son of Edward IV, is an improvident man who hopes through petitions and lawsuits to rescue himself from chronic indebtedness. Too easygoing to be sufficiently cautious, he receives advice from Husee to be more careful about the company he keeps and even to be his own secretary to escape the attention of informers. His amiability in the face of all the jockeying around him for posts in the colony is such that one is surprised by the note of indignation in his letter to a Flemish commander strenuously objecting to the detention of an English subject and to the confiscation of the man's papers. More characteristic of his manner is the dignified tone in which he complains when he has been unjustly criticized.

The marriage of Lord Lisle and Honor Grenville is a second marriage for both partners, and each has children by an earlier spouse. Their friend Sir Francis Bryan writes one letter to both Lisle and his wife "because ye be both but one soul though ye be two bodies," and indeed the tenderness of Lady Lisle's letters to her absent husband (even a short parting is painful for her) is more memorable than her earnest concern for her daughter's advancement at court.

Without the untiring services of their devoted retainer John Husee, the Lisles would fare ill much sooner in these dangerous times, when a nobleman can keep a "fee'd man" in a fellow peer's household. Husee labours unceasingly for his employers, attempting to borrow money for Lord Lisle, promoting his acquisition of a dissolved abbey, forwarding his lawsuits over disputed estates, and even having garments, spices and dishes sent to him in Calais. Writing from England, he knows how to hold back news more safely delivered by word of mouth "considering that this world is queasy"; he explains, "if I should write it might chance that I thereby might put myself in danger of my life ... there is divers here that hath been punished for reading and copying with publishing abroad of news; yea, some of them are at this hour in the Tower and like to suffer therefor." The manner of Husee's letters is usually neat, clear and factual, but strong emotion

can break through, as when either of the Lisles accuses him of neglecting their business and when he condoles with Lady Lisle on the discovery that her longed for pregnancy is an illusion. Once he admonishes the debt-ridden Lord Lisle, "Alas, that your lordship, which can so well exhort other and give them as good and as wholesome counsel as any man living ... should now fall in this sudden agony, to the discouraging of those which bear you their entire wit! What will there be said when your lordship, being ever called the pleasantest-witted in the world, should so suddenly be changed?" Occasionally he risks a barb in his exasperation at the prevarication of a powerful man: Sir Richard Riche, the lawyer whose perjury probably brought Sir Thomas More to the block, "is full of dissimulation," and the mighty Cromwell is one who will do Lisle "little good" though he "promise much."

The shadow of Thomas Cromwell's cunning broods over the Lisle letters. As the decade advances, the reader sees how he keeps the Viscount in thrall, using the latter's neediness to hold him like a fish on a line. In 1533 he rebukes Lisle for bothering the King with minor matters; by 1536 his accusation that Lisle has failed in his duty to his sovereign elicits the Viscount's lament that this "is the greatest heaviness that ever fortun'd unto me"; a year later, he writes kindly, almost apologizing for the harsh tone of his letter of the previous week addressed to the whole Calais Council. That letter concerns papistical tendencies in the colony, but Cromwell himself needs to tread cautiously in the area of religion, for he favours the new Protestant heresies that the King likes no more than papal authority. However, he does not tread cautiously enough, and in 1540 he is beheaded. Lady Lisle, more devout than her husband, has a strong attachment to the old religion, and Husee guardedly warns her against "long prayers and offering of candles" and too much outspokenness in matters of faith. Cromwell is distinctly misogynist, and when he thinks that Honor's influence is the source of "papistical fashion" in Calais, he upbraids Lisle for heeding the "fond flickerings" of women.

The Lisles' children and their education in England, France and Flanders figure much in the correspondence. Mary Basset falls so in love with France that she exclaims, "I should be right well content, if that I could often see my lady my mother, never to return to England"; her brother John, reports Husee, is commendably economical, and her brother James ambitious and demanding. Other notable characters include Lady Lisle's stepdaughter, Jane Basset, who, like a Dickensian poor relation, utters muted complaints while dependent on others for her shelter; the mariner John Cheriton, who pleads as he relates his recurrent misfortunes stemming from wars and roguery; and the priest Gregory Botolf, who concocts a foolish plot to seize Calais for the French.

One letter that stands out for the ease and polish of its style is written to Lord Lisle by Antony Barker, an Oxford scholar engaged to instruct young James Basset. Its smooth continuity and unusual conciseness are accompanied by a sensitivity to language that allows him to write differently yet respectfully of a child: where others can refer to "Mr. James" and "my master, your son," Barker can speak of "little Mr. James Basset" and "that sweet babe." Sadly, however, there is a less congenial side to Antony Barker. After praising his pupil, he prays that, "God continue" the French in their "very sharp execution of heretics," a sentiment which allies him with his contemporary More, author of some of the most famous letters of the time.