

CAPTAIN BISHOP OF THE [?]: THE MILITARY CAREER OF GEORGE BISHOP

George Bishop was a leading Quaker from 1654 to his death in 1668. Although he is not known to have essayed oral ministry, he was a prolific pamphleteer, and for some time maintained at Bristol the sort of secretariat and information centre for which his previous career had well qualified him.¹ For it is generally accepted that he was the Captain George Bishop who had been responsible for counter-intelligence and security surveillance under the Republic until being forced into retirement in 1653.²

Bishop's transition to Quakerism is well documented, not least in reports to his successor, Secretary Thurloe.³ By November 1654 Burroughs and Howgill were writing to Margaret Fell about meetings in 'Captain Bishop's house' in Bristol, and next year Fox met him 'with his sworde by his syde'.⁴ All these links make the identification certain, as does Bishop's own later testimony.⁵

Bishop's formal appointment to his central intelligence role dates from 1650, but Aylmer notes that he was already reporting to the Council of State in May 1649.⁶ In fact the record goes back a little earlier still: in May the Council was acknowledging a previous report; in April they had instructed him to apprehend some suspect persons; and in March they had appointed him to a commission of enquiry into the management of the Forest of Dean.⁷ This was the beginning of the relationship: the Council of State was itself a new body in a newly fashioned Republic and it was still inclined to call him Robert. But although he was based in Bristol, his position was recognised as going beyond the duties of a regimental officer: just after appointing him as Secretary of the Committee for Examinations on £200 a year, the Council was considering 'what has been expended by him in carrying out some public services and what shall be paid him'.⁸ It is then a reasonable inference that Captain Bishop was operating at least semi-officially as an intelligence officer from the inauguration of the Republic in 1649 if not before.

But questions remain about the path which led to this position. There has been doubt about his origins, which is readily cleared up. But what he was doing between leaving Bristol in 1643 and taking up his post in 1650 is more of a mystery. When did he become Captain, in what unit and what service had he seen?⁹ Making fuller use of Bishop's own memoir¹⁰ and with a little new evidence, this article sketches a solution which seems to make sense of all that is known.

Origins

When Alymer wrote *The State's Servants*, he was still toying with alternative George Bishops.¹¹ But in the first sentence of his *Manifesto*, Bishop claims Bristol as his native city.¹² So we can eliminate the Wiltshire lad who became a stationer in London. That leaves two Bristol George Bishops, both apprenticed in the 1630s. Both these qualify as having been, in Bishop's own words. 'very young when the differences began between the late King and the Parliament',¹³ so resolving Alymer's uncertainty over Bishop's life in the 1630s. Given his later role as purveyor of beer to the troops in Ireland,¹⁴ we may with some confidence prefer the one who was apprenticed to his father Thomas Bishop brewer in 1631 and gained the freedom of the city on that score in 1649¹⁵ over the other who was apprenticed pewterer in 1634. A normal seven year apprenticeship would have concluded in 1638, but Bishop was very likely still in his teens.

Bishop's memoir goes to say that he sided with Parliament, left the city in July 1643 when it was taken by Rupert and returned again when the city was retaken by Parliament.¹⁶ He gives no indication of what he was doing in the interim. We may presume that he went to London along with the other refugees. Alymer wondered if he may have been the George Bishop who was in partnership with the stationer and publisher Robert White.¹⁷ But this sounds more likely to be the Wiltshire stationer referred to above. White's partner edited *Parliament's Post* in Late 1645, when our Bishop, according to his own account, had re-entered Bristol. And for what it is worth, the rather crude triumphalist prose of *Parliament's Post* seems different from our George Bishop's tone.¹⁸

Naseby

The first publication attributed to the military George Bishop is his report on the battle of Naseby.¹⁹ It is by 'GB a gentleman in the Army' on the title page, and subscribed George Bishop, but without rank. This would be consistent with his having been a Lieutenant or Ensign, as these ranks were not generally used as titles outside the military context whereas Captain was, then as now. Moreover, Captain was the lowest rank over which the Houses of Parliament had concerned themselves in the setting up of the New Model: below this level, Fairfax was allowed to make or approve appointments on his own.²⁰ So Bishop may have been a junior officer, although unmentioned in the official lists. 'Gentleman' might also be consistent with his being a civilian attached to, or as we might say embedded in, the Parliamentary force. But his account is directed to Lieutenant Colonel Roe, Scoutmaster General for the City of London,

implying a place within the military intelligence network, even at this stage.

Bishop's account is an overview of the battle which includes the initial disposition of Fairfax's force. This does not agree with Streeter's tableau in Josiah Sprigge's *Anglia Rediviva*, but that does not make it inauthentic.²¹ The narrative does not suggest that the writer was personally engaged in the battle. Bishop refers to the gallantry of 'the officers' in the third person. He heard Fairfax speak to the wounded Skippon and eventually helped the latter to a house and to dress his wounds. This would not be an appropriate action for a young officer with troops under him unless detailed to it by a superior. He also conversed with Skippon in a manner respectful enough but suggesting some acquaintance; and his next paragraph, from 'our Headquarters' gives a quick account of the concentration of Parliamentary forces upon Leicester, which is not the sort of intelligence likely to be available to a junior regimental officer.²²

Taken altogether, the indications suggest an intelligence officer on the staff of Skippon, who was the General of Foot, or possibly even of Fairfax.²³ After this battle, Skippon himself remained *hors de combat* for some time, but his regiment took part in the siege of Bristol in September. A place in the general staff however would be rather more consistent with Bishop's having 'returned again when the city was retaken by the Parliament' – a rather bloodless phrase if Bishop had been engaged in the storming of it.²⁴

Bristol

By 1646, Bishop seems more closely involved with Skippon and his garrison at Bristol. His memoir states that when Skippon was governor of Bristol 'I was in command under him, my very loving friend'.²⁵ This is confirmed in a new item of evidence. In June 1657, one Hugh Davy claimed the ex-serviceman's right of setting up business without being a freeman from the Mayor & Aldermen of Bristol and cited a certificate of Bishop's of 30 April 1655 testifying that Davy had been 'under my command and in the regiment of Maj Genn Skippon the Governor of Bristol the 12 February 1645 [ie 1646 NS] to the 26th day of September 1646'.²⁶ In neither certificate nor memoir does Bishop give his rank, but the company was the basic unit of management out of battle, so his 'in command' should imply Captain at least. By this time then Bishop was a regimental officer. If he had been so at Naseby, it is easy to suppose that Skippon, no longer a field commander with official staff, had found a regimental post to keep a useful aide by him.

The dating of Davy's certificate is interesting. We cannot tell

whether it describes the term of his service or only of Bishop's knowledge of it. But an end in September 1646 coincides with Skippon's leaving Bristol in order to attend the obsequies of his old commander and patron, the Earl of Essex.²⁷ If Bishop was by way of an aide and staff officer to Skippon he might have accompanied him, and perhaps remained with him through much of 1647, when Skippon was first governor of Newcastle, and then re-engaged as a field commander in time to act as a mediator in the early stages of the confrontation between the Army and the Parliament.

Skippon's regiment was also posted to Newcastle early in 1647.²⁸ But by 1648, Skippon himself was back in London directing counter-insurgency measures. Given that, before the second Civil War, Bristol was being reported as a hotbed of 'malignancy', Skippon might have been glad to have Bishop returned to, or remaining in, Bristol.²⁹ This seems at any rate to make a plausible link between Bishop's role in 1645 and 1646 and his subsequent emergence in the state security service.

I should also surmise that Bishop was one of those involved in the petition from Bristol to Parliament and to Fairfax, in September 1647, which presented the Army-Leveller programme of that time rather than anything dear to Bristol interests, and the similarly radical one of 1648, which claimed to be from the same source.³⁰ The wording of the first carefully avoids claiming that the petitioners were freemen of Bristol, and two of the four men who presented the second petition were Army officers in Bristol.³¹ Bishop, officer and Bristolian though not yet freeman, fits the profile well. He was already proclaiming his radical views in another forum.

Putney

There is no other mention of Bishop in the official records until the autumn of 1647, when the Council of the Army met at Putney. On 29th October there was a famous discussion about the franchise and property: A Captain Bishop intervened to suggest that they should listen to a letter from the preacher John Saltmarsh in case 'God doe manifest anything by him'.³² On November 1st there was an even more momentous debate on how far God permitted or enjoined the Army to strike against the King and the Lords – a prelude in effect to Pride's Purge. Bishop's contribution here was uncompromising: they could not preserve the Kingdom *and* the Man of Blood, its king.³³ Captain Bishop was also on the list of those who signed a declaration that they had never intended to oppose the sending propositions to the King.³⁴

This Captain Bishop is never given a first name in the Clarke

papers but is generally taken to be George. His stance at Putney is clear. But what was his standing? The Council of the Army consisted of 'those general officers of the Army (who have concurred with the Army...) with two commissioned officers and two soldiers to be chosen from each regiment.'³⁵ Skippon himself was present, though apparently silent. No Captain Bishop is listed in any capacity, but Skippon's regiment is thought by Firth to have been represented only by a single officer, Major Cobbett.³⁶ It would seem open therefore to suppose that Bishop may have attended as Skippon's aide or as the other commissioned agitator from his regiment, or as both, with confusion between the roles standing in the way of his clear identification in either.

Contacts

But we should not press the association with Skippon too far. Bishop claimed that he had himself been responsible for securing the Governorship of Bristol for Colonel Fleetwood, and deprecated Fleetwood's being superseded by Skippon.³⁷ He had further endeavoured to get Fleetwood elected as MP for Bristol in January 1646 and had remonstrated with Skippon over the election in which Fleetwood was not returned.³⁸ Fleetwood was already notorious as a supporter of religious Independents and sectaries,³⁹ and was to become a member of the Wallingford House group who attempted in 1659 to revive the old Republic.⁴⁰

These representations imply that George Bishop had the ear of those in high places, apart from Skippon. This impression is reinforced by his account of his labours to mitigate the post-war compositions imposed on some Bristol notables. He pleaded their case with Fairfax himself (who had agreed the terms of surrender on which the Bristol men hoped to rely), with Cromwell and other generals and with the central committees for sequestration and composition, and to Parliament.⁴¹ Now it is certain that the Bristol malignants were very slowly and lightly dealt with, and that Alderman Hooke especially received a mysterious pardon.⁴² Possibly Bishop claimed too much for his own efforts, but the picture which one gets, albeit distressingly short on dates, is scarcely that of a routine regimental officer. It is however consistent with his being the sort of man who would be communicating directly with the Council of State in 1649.

Conclusions

My overall reconstruction therefore runs like this. When Bishop left Bristol in 1643, he went to London and engaged himself in the Parliamentary cause, not as a soldier but as a collector and analyst of information, and became an agent of the Scoutmaster General of London. Skippon, who had strong links with the London militia, took Bishop on his staff when he was made General of Foot in the New Model Army, probably with some military rank below that of Captain. When Skippon found himself at Bristol, he took the opportunity to keep Bishop by promoting him to a Captaincy in his own regiment. But Bishop remained essentially an intelligence officer, known as such to those in high command. In the time of the second Civil War, he made a natural transition to counter-intelligence and national security.

Bishop attended the Putney meetings of the Council of the Army either as the second commissioned agitator for Skippon's regiment or as aide to Skippon – or both. So by the time he was actually appointed as Secretary under the Commonwealth, he had recommended himself by a combination of active intelligence work, zeal for the cause of religious republican radicalism and personal acquaintance with the Army leadership. The sword which George Fox remarked upon may never have been drawn in anger, but the pen had been active for a decade before he turned Quaker publicist.

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A revised version of the article appeared in *The Regional Historian* No 10 (Spring 2009) pp 10-14.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *The West answering to the North* (1657, Thomason E.900/3) shows him in this capacity.
- 2 Possibly because Bishop was too ideologically motivated for an increasingly pragmatic regime, or perhaps because he was simply reckoned less competent, various kinds of work were re-assigned to Scott or Thurloe until Bishop resigned: J Peacey 'Commonwealth England: A Propaganda State?' *History* 91.2 (2006), 176-199, p.178. It would be constructive dismissal today.
- 3 J Martin 'The Pre-Quaker Writings of George Bishop' *Quaker History* 74.2 (1985) 20-27: 26.
- 4 A R Barclay (ed) *Letters of Early Friends* LXXXVI; *The Journal of George Fox* ed N Penney 2 vols, Cambridge 1911: I p.185.

- 5 *A Manifesto Declaring what George Bishop hath been to the City of Bristol* np 1665 (Wing/B2999) p.16.
- 6 Gerald Aylmer *The State's Servants: The Civil Service of the English Republic, 1649-1660* (London, Routledge 1973) 272-4; R Greaves & R Zaller (eds) *Biographical Dictionary of British radicals in the seventeenth century* (3 vols Sussex Harvester 1982) I 67.
- 7 *Calendar of State Papers Domestic* (CSPD) 1649/50 149; 75, 3 April 1649; 19 May 1649; 3 April 1649; 54, 26 March 1649.
- 8 CSPD 1650 443, 26 November 1650.
- 9 He is not to be found in any military or regimental histories. There was a Captain George Bishop in Ludlow's regiment but this was not engaged at Naseby (see below) and this officer seems to have been with his regiment in Ireland in the early 50s when Bishop was at Whitehall: Aylmer *State's Servants* p.273. Bishop is not among the names considered for captaincies in the New Model Army in 1645, let alone appointed so: Ian Gentles 'Choosing of Officers for the New Model Army' *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 57 (1994) 264-285. Maryan Feola *George Bishop: Seventeenth-century Soldier turned Quaker* (York, William Sessions 1996) has very little to say about his soldiering.
- 10 *Manifesto* p.1.
- 11 Aylmer *State's Servants* p.272.
- 12 *Manifesto* p.1.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 CSPD 1649/50 p.453, 25 December 1649; p.459 29 December.
- 15 Bristol Record Office (BRO) 04352/5 Register of Apprentices 1626-1640 f. 192; BRO F/Au/1/23 Mayor's Audit Books 1648/9 f. 276.
- 16 *Manifesto* p.1.
- 17 Aylmer *State's Servants* 272-3.
- 18 A passage is quoted in J Raymond *The Invention of the Newspaper, English Newsbooks 1641-49* (Oxford, Clarendon 1996) p.40.
- 19 *A More Particular and Exact Relation of the Victory* London, 1645 (Thomason E.288/38). That it was published by R Coate renders it unlikely that the author was part owner of a publishing business.
- 20 Mark Kishlansky *The Rise of the New Model Army* (Cambridge, CUP 1979, 1983 edn) p.47.
- 21 Streeter (if he can be believed, as Ian Gentles qualifies in *The Civil Wars* ed J Kenyon & J Ohlmeyer, Oxford, OUP 1998, p.142) has Waller's and Pickering's regiments by Skippon's on the left of the infantry front line and Pride, Hammond and Rainborough as the

second line; while Bishop (p1) has Pride, Hammond & Rainborough alongside Skippon. But his account is far more compact than Sprigge's and he may have elided the initial disposition into the critical part of the action where these second line regiments pitched in to support Skippon's stand against the Royalist infantry.

- 22 *More Particular Relation* p.3.
- 23 'Staff seems a sadly neglected area of investigation. Even the interesting article 'Command & Control' by David Blackmore (*English Civil War Times* 57, pp 19-25, unfortunately cropped of its references) does not deal with the immediate entourage of a general in battle. But we can tell that apart from life-guards, there would be a trumpeter and a standard bearer – with backups perhaps, and a handful of men, up to at least to the rank of ensign, for running messages.
- 24 *Manifesto* p.1.
- 25 *Manifesto* p.8.
- 26 BRO 04471/1 Book of Orders, Memorials & Transactions of the Mayor and Aldermen 1653-1660 f##.
- 27 For Skippon between 1645 and 1649, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB).
- 28 *House of Lords Journal* vol 8 (1802) 22nd and 26th January 1646/7; *ibid* vol 9 27th May 1647.
- 29 *The Designes and Propositions of the Lord Inchequin ... the proceedings of the Royalists at Bristol, etc* London 1648 (Thomason E.441/2); CSPD 1648 pp54-56 (1 May 1648).
- 30 *Two Petitions of divers Freeman of England, inhabitants in the city of Bristoll – signed with many thousand hands.* London 1647 Thomason, E. 405/23 dated 'Sept 4'); *A Letter from sixteen gentlemen of Kent ... And also the Remonstrance and Petition of divers honest inhabitants of the City of Bristol* London 1648 (Thomason E.477/1 dated '16 Dec').
- 31 Major Samuel Clark who did not become a freeman of Bristol till 1652; and Captain Norris who was in the garrison: H Nott & E Ralph (eds) *The Deposition Books of Bristol II 1650-1654* (Bristol Record Society XIII, 1947) p.49. The other two were James Powell, a Councillor since 1646 and to be City Chamberlain in 1651 and a Mr Robert Stapleton, whom I have unable to trace.
- 32 *The Clarke Papers* ed C Firth (reprinted London, RHS 1992) I p.340. John Saltmarsh was Fairfax's chaplain, a champion of religious liberty who just after this was to remonstrate with Cromwell over the suppression of the Levellers.
- 33 *Clarke Papers* I 383.

- 34 *Clarke Papers* I p.416 Nearly all the signatories below the rank of Major are listed as agitators on pp 436-439. The exceptions, apart from Bishop, are Capt Cox, who may have been from the London trained bands (I p 153) and Capt Disney.
- 35 Cited in M Kishlansky *The Rise of the New Model Army* p.342 n 87.
- 36 *Clarke Papers* ed Firth I 436 n 1. In view of Bishop's advocacy, see below, we may note that the second agitator from Fleetwood's regiment is also nameless.
- 37 *Manifesto* pp 1-2.
- 38 *Manifesto* pp 17-18.
- 39 *ODNB*
- 40 Indeed , Bishop, with Thomas Speed, addressed a letter to him and two other members of this group in 1658 on behalf of some Baptists condemned in Nevis: British Library, Stowe MS 189 f 64.
- 41 *Manifesto* pp 5-7. 10-11. He was still pursuing the business when he got to Whitehall 'in the nature of a Secretary of State' (p.16) ie late 1650, but at this stage his access to the corridors of power is no surprise.
- 42 J Latimer *Annals of Bristol in the seventeenth century* (Bristol 1900) pp 202, 215-6.