

## WILLIAM MIDDLETON: INNOCENT ABROAD OR GOVERNMENT SPY?

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*This paper is the first of a series to be written about the fortunes of the Middleton family in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a result of research into the extensive Middleton archive held by the Yorkshire Archaeological Society (MD59). Initially our attention was caught by the letters William Middleton wrote to the trustees of his estate between 1578 and 1583 when he had absented himself from his Yorkshire estate for the purposes of travel. Further light was thrown on this period by the account book kept for the same period by his steward, Thomas Robinson. Our imagination was fired when we discovered a letter in the Calendar of State Papers Foreign which indicated that Middleton's outward travels had terminated in a Naples gaol. We decided to explore this episode more fully and to try to determine from known details of his early life the motives that might have prompted his sojourn abroad which extended beyond the three years permitted by his licence and which culminated in his arrest for suspected espionage.*

*For consistency the family name has been modernised as Middleton. References to the Middleton Papers are those at present in use. The archivists have advised that these papers will be recatalogued in the near future and that some or all references may be changed. A key will be kept to show the new numbers where changes are made.*

On 11 October 1578 William Middleton of Stockeld near Wetherby, a Catholic gentleman who owned extensive lands in Yorkshire, set out on horseback to ride to London. He was not to return to his native county for another four years. At first sight it looks as if he intended to go no further than London and his motive for departing was predominantly financial. An indenture of 7 October 1578 states that on the advice of his friends he has determined 'for a time to maike his abode at the cittie of Londonne for the better descherg of his debtes and credit and to thintent that he maie be the moore able to stoore his groundes and demesne of Stockeld.' But this indenture, nominating his stepfather Gamaliel Drax, his uncle Edward Middleton and his kinsmen William Witham and William Ingleby to act on his behalf in all matters pertaining to his estate, seems to indicate that he was anticipating travelling beyond the distance from which he could be easily recalled, or his advice sought. He also arranged an annuity of 40 marks per annum to be paid to his wife, Mary, the daughter of Edmund Eltofts of Farnhill.<sup>1</sup>

The day following his departure, he wrote en route to London from Ledston, the home of William Witham, to the other three attorneys making further arrangements: an annuity of 40s. a year was to be paid to a certain John Normavell, and the same sum was to be remitted to the parson of Spofforth (in which parish Stockeld was situated) for distribution to the poor.<sup>2</sup> About the same time the estate was assessed, a rental being compiled on 1 October,<sup>3</sup> and an inventory was drawn up on 15 October of all the goods and cattle remaining at Stockeld, his principal residence.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Middleton Papers MD59 (hereafter YAS MD59) MD59/5/93.

<sup>2</sup> YAS, MD59/13/Misc/13.

<sup>3</sup> YAS, MD59/19/50.

<sup>4</sup> YAS, MD59/12/86.

By the beginning of November Middleton's man had returned to Stockeld with his horses, presumably to avoid the expense of stabling and feeding them in the capital, and in February 1578/9 his steward sent him £20 by carrier.<sup>5</sup> But on 30 March we find him writing home from lodgings in Holborn urgently requesting the purchase of a young gelding and also the immediate dispatch of £100, even if it had to be borrowed. Sundry unspecified considerations prevented him from returning home. He recognised the problem he was posing his friends but hoped he would be able to recompense them at some future time.<sup>6</sup> The money was borrowed, and some of it was sent to him in London. In either April or May his steward, Thomas Robinson, made the journey to London with two horses.<sup>7</sup>

Middleton must have spent some of the time in London negotiating for a licence to travel abroad. On 9 May a passport signed by the Queen was issued, permitting William, two servants and three horses to go beyond the seas for three years for the purpose of increasing his 'knowledge and experyence'.<sup>8</sup> On 26 May he went shopping at a draper's with Gamaliel Drax and his uncle Richard Lowther, and together they bought goods amounting to £106 13s. 4d.<sup>9</sup> It can be assumed that he left the country soon afterwards as his licence was endorsed at Dover on 2 June 1579. His travels were to take him to Paris, Orleans and Tours in France, and Venice, Padua, Naples and Genoa in Italy.

His preparations raise many questions. What was actually the reason for his departure? Was he really short of money? Was he trying to avoid potential persecution because of his Catholicism? Did he seek further experience and the opportunity to study? Why was he prepared to leave his young wife who had not yet presented him with an heir? Or, the most intriguing possibility of all, was he engaged in another mission? Before attempting to answer these questions it is necessary to look at what we know of the background of William Middleton and the period in which he lived.

William was born at Middleton in Lonsdale on 23 December 1551,<sup>10</sup> the eldest son and heir of John Middleton of Stockeld and his wife Isabel, née Middleton of Middleton in Lonsdale (see Fig. 1). We know nothing about his childhood except that his first years may have been spent at Stubham Lodge until his great-grandfather's death as his father (whose father had predeceased *his* father) was styled 'Of Stubham Lodge' in 1550.<sup>11</sup> Born during the reign of Mary Tudor, William would inevitably have been exposed at an early age to the tenets of the Roman Catholic faith. However, after the death of Mary, his mother at least was not prepared to conform to the rites of the established church. By 1579 Isabel's Catholicism had been noted. The Ecclesiastical Court in York reported that she was not attending her parish church as required by law.<sup>12</sup> The records create the impression of a woman with firmly held views.

His father's family, which a subsequent genealogist was to trace back to the twelfth century, was firmly established by the mid-sixteenth century among the middle ranks of the gentry families of the North of England. Some of William's ancestors had been knighted and two had served as High Sheriff of Yorkshire. While their status was below that of the highest ranking nobility, they were directly linked to this stratum by the formal ties of service, by marriage and by the informal ties of convenience and mutual aid. Over

<sup>5</sup> YAS, MD59/1/Acco/1.

<sup>6</sup> YAS, MD59/13/Misc/14.

<sup>7</sup> YAS, MD59/1/Acco/1.

<sup>8</sup> YAS, MD59/25/77.

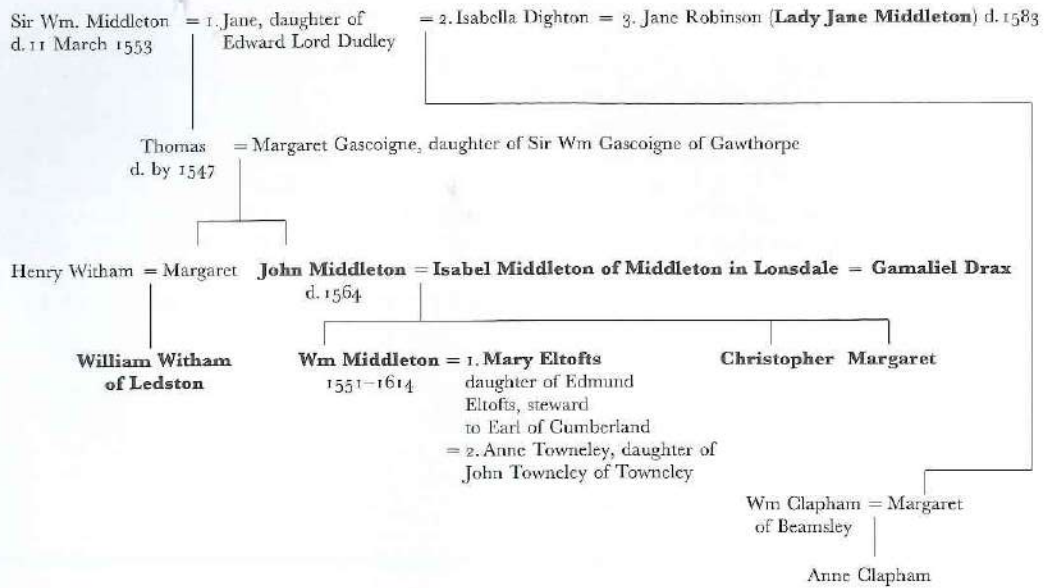
<sup>9</sup> YAS, MD59/19/301.

<sup>10</sup> YAS, MD59/19/10.

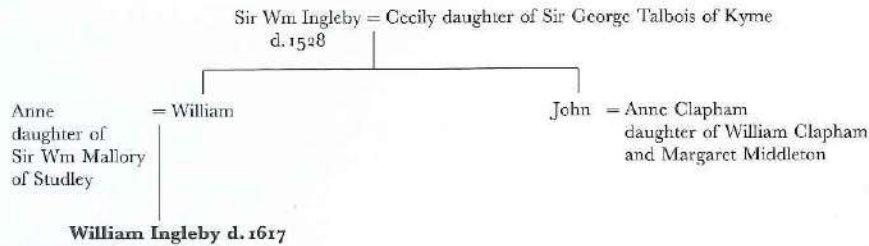
<sup>11</sup> YAS, MD59/16/8.

<sup>12</sup> York, B(orthwick) I(nstitute of) H(istorical) R(earch), H(igh) C(ommission) A(ct) B(ook) 1, p. 75.

The Middletons of Stockeld



The Inglebys of Ripley Castle



The Middletons of Middleton in Lonsdale

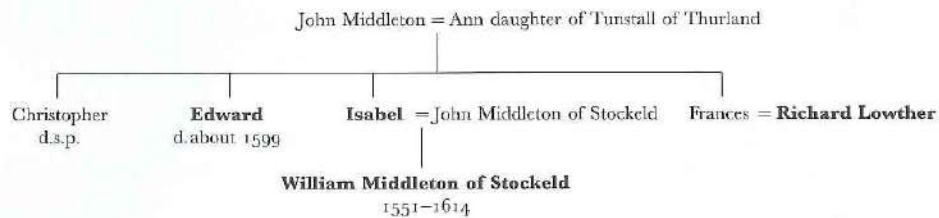


Fig. 1. Simplified versions of the family trees of the Middletons of Stockeld, the Inglebys of Ripley and the Middletons of Middleton in Lonsdale, showing the family connections and, in bold print, the people mentioned in the text.

many generations marriages had welded the Middletons firmly into a complex web of noble and gentry families, and these links also led to mutually advantageous financial transactions.<sup>13</sup>

The estates from which the Middletons' modest wealth was derived were based on the same two centres when William went to London as when his twelfth-century forebears inherited them, but had been augmented over the generations by the acquisition of farm land scattered across numerous neighbouring townships, in addition to small pockets of land many miles away. By the sixteenth century the main focus of the estate was Stockeld near Wetherby in West Yorkshire with a subsidiary centre at Stubham (modern Middleton) in mid-Wharfedale. At Stockeld, conveniently close to the Great North Road and on the edge of the agriculturally rich plain of York, there was a substantial house in an impressive deer park with its demesne farm and additional pockets of tenanted land in nearby Spofforth, Follifoot, Ribston, Brackenthwaite and Linton.<sup>14</sup>

Still in Wharfedale but 18 miles to the west, where the valley is narrower and the land poorer, with steep slopes rising to bleak watersheds north of modern Ilkley, the second focus of the estate consisted of Stubham Hall and demesne, and on the adjacent site of the deserted village of Scalway was Stubham Lodge, surrounded by its deer park; tenants were farming parcels of land in nearby Middleton, Middleton Moorhouses, Ilkley, Wheatley, Beamsley, Nesfield, Austby, Barwick and Askwith. In addition there was land around Otterburn in upper Airedale and at Habton in Ryedale<sup>15</sup> where even at the time of his departure from Yorkshire William was engaged in transactions to extend his holding.<sup>16</sup>

William came into his inheritance when his father, John Middleton, died on 30 November 1564. He was almost 13 years of age and consequently a minor.<sup>17</sup> Because some of the Middleton lands were held in knight service it was immediately apparent to interested parties that his wardship was a valuable commodity and initially his uncle, also William Middleton, attempted to obtain the wardship. A draft document dated 8 February 1564/5 outlines an agreement whereby Thomas Percy, 7th Earl of Northumberland, would sell the 'custody wardshipp and mariage' of young William for the sum of 200 marks.<sup>18</sup> However this sale was not concluded, possibly because of the dispute between the Queen and the Earl of Northumberland concerning the tenure of the Middleton lands.

Wardship in the sixteenth century was not primarily concerned with the welfare of a minor. Arising out of the medieval method of land tenure, land which was held in knight service, usually from the sovereign, but occasionally from a private person, enabled the title holder to demand the rents from the lands of the minor in lieu of his obligations to perform military service. Additionally the title holder or guardian had the power of determining the marriage of the minor in some way beneficial to himself. Since it was impracticable for the sovereign to act personally as guardian to all the wards, wardships were granted or sold, often to the highest bidder.

The disagreement concerning William's wardship between the Earl of Northumberland and the Queen dragged on for several years with the relevant papers being examined in

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Foster, *Pedigrees of the County Families of the West Riding of Yorkshire II* (1874).

<sup>14</sup> YAS, MD59/19/55.

<sup>15</sup> YAS, MD59/19/50.

<sup>16</sup> *Yorkshire Deeds*, ed. Charles Travis Clay, vi, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, 76 (1930), 80-81; MD59/10/Habton/63.

<sup>17</sup> YAS, MD59/7/b.19.

<sup>18</sup> YAS, MD59/7/c.43.

the Court of Wards and Liveries.<sup>19</sup> Not only was there dispute concerning the land tenure; there was also uncertainty concerning the validity of a marriage contract which had been drawn up by John Middleton and Edmund Eltofts arranging a match between their children William and Mary.<sup>20</sup> An arranged marriage of this sort was considered fluid until the boy reached the age of 14 and the girl the age of 12, at which point either could consent or object.<sup>21</sup> Once consent had been given, the young heir was out of ward for his body, that is to say he could not be disposed of in marriage by his guardian. If the heir was still in ward for his body, and wished to abstain from a marriage of his guardian's choice, he usually had to pay dearly for the privilege.

After lengthy disputation in the Court of Wards and Liveries, during which time various neutral persons were appointed as William's custodians, the jury apparently decided in favour of the Earl and the young man joined the Northumberland household as a page. This was financially costly for William. Once the dependants of the estate had been satisfied, the remaining rents from his estate disappeared into the coffers of the Earl (and there is evidence that the appropriation of goods, chattels, cattle and legal documents was conducted in a brutal manner).<sup>22</sup> He might also have had to compensate the Earl for holding to his father's choice of bride. Certainly there is documentation to prove that at least some pressure was brought to bear on William to repudiate the marriage.<sup>23</sup>

There was a further problem consequent on this wardship. William joined the Northumberland household in about 1567 when he was 15 years of age. It was not unusual for boys of his background to further their education in the houses of the nobility and William might have gained by making social contacts which were to be valuable to him later. However, it was unfortunate for William to join this particular household at this particular time. Northumberland, considered one of the leading members of the nobility in the North, was resentful of attempts made by William Cecil (then Elizabeth's principal Secretary of State) to curtail his authority; as a Catholic, and a major lay champion of Catholics, Northumberland was in opposition to the Elizabethan religious settlement. The arrival of Mary Queen of Scots in England, and the snub that he received both from Richard Lowther,<sup>24</sup> who had temporary custody of Mary, and from the Queen's representatives when he claimed he was the most appropriate person to entertain the Scottish Queen, exacerbated the situation, culminating in open rebellion in November 1569. After the abortive Rising of the Northern Earls, William Middleton's name appeared on a list of prisoners in Durham gaol dated 1 January 1569/70 which included many who had been gentlemen and household servants to the Earl of Northumberland. Four of the names had been deleted and William's was amongst these.<sup>25</sup> A letter written by Thomas Radcliffe, third Earl of Sussex, President of the Council in the North, to Sir William Cecil helps to explain the deletion. Sussex was one of the Commanders who rode north in pursuit of the rebels, and in a postscript to the letter, which was written at Hexham at midnight on 22 December 1569, he writes:

This daye Myddelton & Swyowe ij of my l[ord] of North[um]berlandes pages & the on of them his ward & both of them Inherytors were brought to me and bycose Swynouc is my l[ord] of

<sup>19</sup> YAS, MD59/18/69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77; MD59/7/a.14.

<sup>20</sup> YAS, MD59/7/b.18.

<sup>21</sup> Joel Hurstfield, *The Queen's Wards* (1957) pp. 134-35.

<sup>22</sup> YAS, MD59/18/76.

<sup>23</sup> YAS, MD59/18/74,75; MD59/7/b.18.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Lowther was William's uncle by his marriage to Frances Middleton, the sister of William Middleton's mother, Isabel Middleton of Middleton in Lonsdale. Hugh Owen, *The Lowther Family — Eight Hundred Years of a Family of Ancient Gentry and Worship* (Chichester 1990) p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Cuthbert Sharp, *Memorials of the Rebellion of 1569* (1840) p. 129.

Rutla[nds] kynsm[an] I delyvered him to his l[ordship] the other for that the ... was alwydes dylygent obowte me when I was ... l[ord] of North[um]berlandes companye I kepe myself w[hich I] thought good to adv[er]tise you.<sup>26</sup>

The Earl of Sussex was ever mindful of the Queen's need of money. The comment that Swinoe (or Swinhoe) and Middleton were both inheritors is revealing. They were more valuable to the Queen alive than dead, for they could be fined for their offence and it is known that Sussex was suggesting to the Queen at this time that another household servant of the Earl of Northumberland could compound for his pardon for £500.<sup>27</sup>

It is not known how long Sussex kept Middleton with him, but his final comment suggests that he found William a likeable young man. What is certain is that William's wardship, originally granted to the Earl of Northumberland after much dispute, now reverted to the Queen 'by reason of the late offence of the said earl'. William's mother, Isabel, and her new husband, Gamaliel Drax, were granted William's 'manner & lands and tenements' which had been in the possession of the Earl of Northumberland, to have and enjoy 'for the quenes ma[jesties] use untill suche tyme as her majestie shall further determyn for the disposynge of the same'.<sup>28</sup>

### FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

After eight years of wardship during which time the surplus revenues of the estate were appropriated elsewhere, it can be argued that William Middleton's inheritance was in a desperate condition. It is possible that he might have had to compensate his guardian for marrying in a way that was disadvantageous to him. Additionally he might have had to compound for a pardon for his involvement in the Rising of the Northern Earls although his name is not in the lists of those fined and/or pardoned in April 1570 for their part in the rebellion preserved in the Patent Rolls.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from the disadvantages arising out of his wardship, however, it is clear that the estate was at this time heavily burdened by dependants. Not only were there annuities to be paid to two uncles and a brother but there were also two dowagers still living in 1578, William's own mother Isabel living at Stubham Hall with her second husband, Gamaliel Drax, and Lady Jane Middleton, his step great-grandmother living at Stubham Lodge. Both were receiving dower.<sup>30</sup> It would not be surprising, therefore, if, even after six years of administering the estate himself, the young man was in financial difficulties as he had suggested in his letter of attorney.<sup>31</sup>

That there was some further impoverishment is suggested by the accounts kept by his steward, Thomas Robinson, while he was away. The account book opens at William's departure for London on 11 October 1578, and apart from one entry dated 8 November 1582, comes to an abrupt end in April 1582.<sup>32</sup> The accounts, which systematically list receipts and payments for this period, were initially audited after three months by the 'four gentlemen' and thereafter at increasingly longer intervals. Initially it was thought that all the transactions pertaining to the estate had been recorded in this account book,

<sup>26</sup> P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice), SP/15/15/117. It is interesting to note that Sir William Drury, the Warden of Berwick, was expressing an interest in William's wardship in a letter to Cecil written three days before Sussex's letter. *Calendar of State Papers Scottish* III, 1569-71, 26, 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Addenda 1566-1579*, p. 183, 8 January 1569/70.

<sup>28</sup> YAS, MD59/18/77.

<sup>29</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls Elizabeth I 1569-1572*, Nos. 585-1019.

<sup>30</sup> YAS, MD59/18/77; PRO REQ2/199/56.

<sup>31</sup> YAS, MD59/5/93.

<sup>32</sup> YAS, MD59/1/Acco/1.

but a rental of 1583 shows that the rents from the whole estate added up to £224 per annum. Robinson's account records the annual rents fluctuating between £102 and £120 per year and certain rents seem to be omitted altogether. Nor does he record the payment of the dowers or of a substantial part of one of the uncles' annuities. It was concluded, therefore, that some of the rents were being paid directly to the annuitants and for this reason were not showing up in the records. Thomas Robinson was only accounting for money which had physically passed through his hands.

One of the signs that the estate was struggling financially is suggested by the fact that in the first two years there was a backlog of wages to be paid. Some of the servants' wages were as much as a year in arrears and those of Thomas Robinson himself were two years in arrears. After November 1580 wages were paid either quarterly or half-yearly.

Although nothing was done in the first year to repair the infrastructure of the demesne, much was done in the subsequent years in the way of hedging, ditching, repairing the pale and the roofs of outbuildings. It is possible that the estate had been neglected during William's minority, or even spoiled by the soldiery during and immediately after the Earls' rising.<sup>33</sup>

A shortage of ready money at the beginning of the enterprise is also confirmed by the fact that £30 had to be borrowed to send to William in London, but this was possibly not at all unusual since cash came in only at rent time or after the sale of stock or other commodities. William himself recognised this problem when he wrote in January 1579/80 to William Ingleby from Orleans suggesting that his plate be sold if some much needed money were not readily available,<sup>34</sup> a contingency which was happily avoided. In all, over the three and a half year period, a total of £130 was borrowed, although it is important to recognise that these loans were rapidly repaid out of the income from the estate.

These repayments testify to the shrewd management of Thomas Robinson after his master had departed. An examination of the accounts also reveals that after some restocking of livestock and buying of seed, the revenues from the sale of cereals and animals increased over the three years. In the first year of his absence only £75 9s. *od.* was realised from the sale of animals and cereals. In 1579-80 this had risen to £114 5s. *9d.* and in 1580-81 sales totalled £154 5s. *1d.* In the two years 1579-81, £205 18s. *8d.* was collected in fines and gressoms. Possibly these fell due in the normal course of events. What is certain is that, excluding the income from rents which remained static, and the fines and gressoms which were periodic payments, the income from the farming of the estate rose by over 100 per cent in the three-year period.

It is difficult to assess whether William's absence contributed to the successful management of the estate. No accounts are available for the years prior to or after his period abroad to indicate the extra expenses incurred when the family was in residence at Stockeld. One can only conjecture that a certain amount of costly entertaining would be necessary and that the family's largesse to the local community would represent some drain on its income. It has been suggested that as much as a third of the total income of a household could go on domestic expenditure and that it was common practice for a gentleman, intent on retrenchment, to leave his estate for a more frugal life in London or York.<sup>35</sup> It is possible that an overgenerosity had contributed to William's financial

<sup>33</sup> *CSPD Addenda 1566-1579* pp. 181, 281, 289-90.

<sup>34</sup> YAS, MD59/13/Misc/15. This letter was undated but corroborative evidence from the accounts dates it firmly at January 1579/80.

<sup>35</sup> Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500-1700* (1994) p. 289; J. T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry* (1969) p. 151.

difficulties for a contemporary record notes that William Middleton 'alwise kept a good house' which creates an image of liberality.<sup>36</sup>

But while it must be acknowledged that the family would have lived in some style and would have fulfilled its social obligations, it is difficult to see how this extra expenditure could have been substantially more than was spent as a result of his travelling. His own expenses amounted to £446 over the whole period and his wife received £93 6s. 8d. making a total for the pair of them of £539 6s. 8d. When it is realised that the recorded income for the period in question was £1,186 14s. 2d., it is difficult to believe that he went on his travels solely in the interests of economy.<sup>37</sup>

### THE RELIGIOUS QUESTION

In view of his supposed Catholicism, there may well have been an element of fear in William Middleton's decision to leave the country in 1579. It is generally conceded that during the first dozen years of Elizabeth's reign, despite the settlement which established the Church of England, the policy of the Ecclesiastical Commission was indecisive, there being no fully developed strategy to deal with religious offenders. It is likewise acknowledged that the policy to impose really stringent fines was not adopted until 1581 by which time William had already been abroad for two years. Nevertheless, after the Rising of the Earls in 1569, the Papal excommunication of Elizabeth (1570), the Ridolfi Plot (1571), the continuing problem of Mary Queen of Scots and the increasing hostility of Philip II of Spain, there was a growing feeling, encouraged by government propaganda, that all Catholics were potential rebels who would support a foreign invasion. Three acts of parliament of 1571 restricted Catholics in the pursuance of their religion and threatened the punishment of recusants who travelled overseas without a licence. Although the Catholic revival was not to occur until after the arrival from Douai of the first Seminary priests in 1574, from time to time the government took occasion to pursue Catholics of known influence.<sup>38</sup> Even if an individual did not feel the pressure of the law directly, and there is no mention in the records of the Ecclesiastical Commission to suggest that William Middleton had been marked out, the climate must have been such as to make a Catholic sympathiser uneasy. At a local level, the Council in the North sent out a directive in 1572 to all Justices requesting notification of all suspected papists and former supporters of the Rebellion of 1569.<sup>39</sup> Some of the people summoned by the High Commission to answer charges of recusancy came from within William Middleton's own circle of family and acquaintances. His mother, Isabel Drax, his great-grandmother Lady Jane Middleton, his father-in-law Edmund Eltofts were all noted in the records of the High Commission. Through his friendship with the Ingleby family he would have been aware that Lady Anne Ingleby was regularly summoned by the High Commission to answer charges of recusancy.<sup>40</sup>

But while the general situation perhaps created an atmosphere of anxiety and tension, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that William's own religious affiliations at this period are almost unknown to us. It has been assumed that because of his association with recusants known to the authorities in the 1570s and because of the penalties he

<sup>36</sup> Hugh Aveling, 'The Recusancy Papers of the Meynell Family of North Kilvington, North Riding of York 1596-1676', *Miscellanea*, Catholic Record Society LVI (1964), 10.

<sup>37</sup> It was calculated that the unrecorded rents would have amounted to about £503 6s. 8d. for the entire period, giving a grand total of £1,536 14s. 2d.

<sup>38</sup> P. Tyler, *The Ecclesiastical Commission and Catholicism in the North 1562-77* (privately published, Leeds, 1960); Patrick McGrath, *Papists and Puritans under Elizabeth* (1967) p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> PRO, SP15/21/238.

<sup>40</sup> BIHR, HCAB 7, pp. 107, 146; HCAB 9, pp. 13, 44.



suffered later for his recusancy,<sup>41</sup> he must have been Catholic by inclination at this time even though his religious stance as a young man is difficult to trace. Apart from the salutation 'Jesus' or 'Emanuel' at the head of the paper in several of William's letters, there is nothing in the content to suggest a strongly held Catholic faith. Nor does his itinerary through France and Italy suggest that he was making any kind of pilgrimage. He appears to have travelled alone with his servants except for the one occasion in Italy when he refers to his intention to join up with 'good and honest company who mindeth to take the lyke course in travel that I do'.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, he was listed along with sundry English Papists residing in Paris in April 1580, many of whom were Yorkshiremen from gentry families known to the Middletons.<sup>43</sup>

It is possible that after his ill-fated experience with the Earl of Northumberland and before his departure abroad, Middleton played safe and adopted the common practice of occasional attendance at the parish church, whilst continuing to hear the Catholic Mass in the family chapel at Stockeld when the opportunity presented itself. Circumstantial evidence would suggest that he was probably wary and careful not to arouse suspicion, for if he had been a notorious Catholic, he would certainly have found it difficult, maybe impossible, to obtain a licence to travel abroad. Yet he did obtain a licence and everything about his travels seems to have been conducted overtly as far as the authorities were concerned. It was made clear in the document quoted above that some Papists who had not obtained a licence were living secretly in Paris,<sup>44</sup> and certainly William was not one of these. Moreover, he reported back to the ambassador in Paris in 1582 before his return to England, possibly because his licence had expired.<sup>45</sup>

Undoubtedly there is some ambiguity in his position. On the whole it seems unlikely that he went abroad, with the consent of the Queen implicit in the licence, specifically to avoid religious persecution.

#### EDUCATIONAL FACTORS

So did he really go abroad 'for his increase of knowledge and experyence' as his passport claims? Already at the end of the sixteenth century travel overseas was a fashionable thing to do, for many reasons. Apart from deriving benefits to their health at the spas, men went abroad to learn a foreign language, to acquire skill with horses or the sword, to polish up their manners or to better their prospects of employment at home or abroad.<sup>46</sup>

One usually associates the *grand tour*, as it later became known, with young men, maybe still in their teens, accompanied by a tutor. Stoye suggests that a young marriage might be followed by education and travel.<sup>47</sup> But it has to be remembered that by this time William Middleton was no longer young. He was nearly 27 when he left Stockeld, 31 by the time he returned home in 1583. Moreover he had been married for well over ten years although his wife had not yet produced a live heir. On the other hand his youthful education must have been disrupted after the death of his father with the dispute concerning his wardship and marriage, and the subsequent disaster of his sojourn with the Earl of Northumberland. James Ryther, a near neighbour writing a decade later from Harewood to William Cecil (now Lord Burghley), complained of the lack of education of the gentlemen of the area: 'The gentillmen generally have actyve bodies ... but by the

<sup>41</sup> YAS, MD59/25/80.2; MD59/19/566; MD59/24/26.

<sup>42</sup> YAS, MD59/13/Misc/19.

<sup>43</sup> C(alendar of) S(tate) P(apers) F(oreign) 1579-1580 p. 250.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 252.

<sup>45</sup> CSPP 1582 pp. 316, 317.

<sup>46</sup> John Stoye, *English Travellers Abroad 1604-1667* (Yale University Press 1989) p. 63.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

remysse educacion of indiscreet parents they fall to rude pastymes befor they learne cyvill behaviour'.<sup>48</sup> One wonders whether William recognised a lack of education in himself, or whether it was brought to his attention by his residence in the households of the Earls of Northumberland and Sussex. A doodle in his hand on the back of a rental dated 1583, a year after his return, reads: '*L'ingnorance est La plus grand Ennime a siance*'.<sup>49</sup>

William Middleton spent the first six months of his stay in France for the most part at Orleans<sup>50</sup> acquiring the language: a letter written to William Ingleby on 17 January 1579/80 from that town<sup>51</sup> explains that he has stayed there awhile 'for the good lykinge that I had of the plase as the want of language th[a]t w[hi]ch havinge now attayned some understandinge I doe intend ... to p[ro]ceed in my jorneye' and ends with a flourish in French: '... I comend you to thalmightie lequel je supplie me donner le moyen pour recompenser quelque part de vous grande courtoyses d'Orleans le dix septiem de Janvier ...'.<sup>52</sup>

His original intention to proceed into Italy was postponed because of plague. Nor did he carry out his plan to visit Germany where 'troubles' seemed imminent.<sup>53</sup> He appears to have remained in France either at Paris or Tours for a further year. What he was doing at these centres we are not told for unfortunately most of William's letters which have survived deal with arrangements for the transfer of funds. Eventually he was able to travel into Italy, staying at Padua which was the site of the most prestigious university in Italy.<sup>54</sup> But again he gives us no clue as to how he spent his time there. His letters, even when written to his particular friend, William Ingleby, as opposed to the business letters to his four attorneys, contain no description of his activities or his impressions of what must have been an illuminating experience. Maybe he attended lectures; perhaps he simply enjoyed the atmosphere of a university town. He could have been studying the country in which he found himself. A library list dated 1718 which catalogues the books found in a small closet at Stockeld and which covers a period of over a century and a half mentions a book dated 1579 with a Venetian imprint: *Descrittione Di Tutta L'italia*, which suggests that he understood enough Italian to read this book. Guicciardini's *History of Italy* in English translation also dated 1579 reinforces the impression that he was acquiring some background knowledge to his travels.<sup>55</sup>

By September 1581 William was planning to move on. He requested that money be sent by the following January to Venice, and, because of the expense of travelling, proposed to send home one of his men. Contrary to his usual practice, he did not disclose where he proposed to travel but indicated that he intended returning home through Germany by May 1582 when his passport was due to expire. Perhaps significantly there is no mention in this, his last surviving letter, of any proposal to visit Naples.<sup>56</sup>

In the event he saw nothing of Germany and did not return to England until several months after his travel licence had expired. Furthermore he seems not to have hurried back to Yorkshire; his wife was still living with her parents at Knottingley when the final instalment of her annuity was paid in November 1582.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>48</sup> W. J. Craig, 'James Ryther of Harewood and his letters to William Cecil, Lord Burghley', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 56 (1986), 105.

<sup>49</sup> YAS, MD59/19/55.

<sup>50</sup> Orleans University was famous in the sixteenth century for the study of civil law.

<sup>51</sup> YAS, MD59/13/Misc/15.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Conyers Read, *Mr Secretary Walsingham and the Policy of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford 1925), p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> YAS, MD59/12/61.

<sup>56</sup> YAS, MD59/13/Misc/19.

<sup>57</sup> YAS, MD59/1/Acco/1.

## PERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS

So perhaps William was simply reluctant to return home. Maybe there is a more straightforward explanation for his long absence. Although in the face of opposition he had held to the marriage arrangements set up by his father when he was a child (a marriage, incidentally, which strengthened his links with the Earl of Cumberland's household as his wife's father had been Steward to Henry Clifford at Skipton Castle), perhaps the marriage had been less than happy. The absence of provision for a child in the financial arrangements suggests that William was confident that his wife was not pregnant, perhaps because they had not been cohabiting in the period prior to his departure. It seems strange that he should have abandoned his wife for four years when there were no offspring. Duty must surely have demanded that much from him before he fulfilled his quest for adventure and knowledge. His wife was no longer a young girl by the time he left although she did produce an heir for him after his return, the boy who was to become the estimable Sir Peter Middleton.

On the other hand William did not simply abandon his wife as other victims of uncongenial marriages sometimes did.<sup>58</sup> He provided amply for her. Yet he gave her no responsibility for the management of his estate which he entrusted to male friends and relations, nor did she have the care of his young sister Margaret who was boarded with the ageing Lady Jane Middleton. Mary apparently spent the time of his absence either on one of her father's estates or at the home of William Witham, one of William's attorneys.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps she was physically or emotionally frail. It is known that she did not die immediately following the birth of her one surviving child; she was still alive in 1587,<sup>60</sup> but she must have died soon after as William remarried in 1592.<sup>61</sup>

## THE NAPLES EXPERIENCE

When reviewing the concluding period of his absence abroad, in particular William's failure to fulfil his intention of returning through Germany, one begins to wonder whether there was a further undisclosed purpose to his travels. Among the documents in the Middleton collection is a pass dated '6 de gbre 1581' issued by the Spanish authorities in Naples permitting William Middleton and one servant, William Wood, to go armed with a sword inside the city of Naples and in the surrounding region.<sup>62</sup>

No further letters from William survive to throw light on the final year of his journey. But a comment in a letter from Sir Henry Cobham, the English ambassador in Paris, to Walsingham, Elizabeth's Secretary of State, dated 11 September 1582, four months after the expiration of William's passport, opens up an intriguing possibility:

Ther is come unto this [t]owne Mr William Middelton<sup>63</sup> from Naples where he hathe continued for the moste parte in prisonne ever since the laste winter, where (as I understand by him) he was

<sup>58</sup> Heal and Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>59</sup> YAS, MD59/1/Acco/1.

<sup>60</sup> Yorkshire Deeds, ed. Charles Travis Clay vi, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 76 (1930), 152; MD59/7/c.26.

<sup>61</sup> YAS, MD59/25/36.

<sup>62</sup> YAS, MD59/25/4.

<sup>63</sup> There is an earlier mention in the State Papers of another William Middleton who was travelling on the Continent at this time. Cobham mentions in one of his missives to Walsingham on 9 January 1581 that he had arrived at Blois on his way to Spain. This was the son of Simon Middleton of Ingleton near Staindrop (Co. Durham) and he was one of the Earl of Westmorland's followers, entrusted with a letter from Westmorland's wife to her husband. (*CSPP 1581-82* p. 15) The presence of two William Middletons is obviously confusing but the authors believe that the existence of a Neapolitan travel pass in the Middleton of Stockeld archives and the fact that he was late returning home, confirms that William Middleton of Stockeld was the man who was imprisoned in Naples.

examined if he did ap[er]taine either to S[i]r Christopher [H]atton<sup>64</sup> or to y[ou]r honor & if he received any letters from any of you. Furder he was demaunded of Fante<sup>65</sup> and [H]unte. And to what intent he pretended at th[a]t time to repaire unto Malta

This gentilman being released parted fro[m] Naples about the beginnyng of Auguste cu[m]ming from thense on the [g]allys wherein the companys were imbarked the wh[ic]h as he understood, weare assigned to sarve the Duke of Savoye against Geneva. So as at Mr Mydeltons partinge from Genoa those [N]eapolitayne co[m]panys remained in there galles not landed. I suppose the s[ai]d gentilman will retorne presently in to England because his license is expired.<sup>66</sup>

It is significant that William was questioned whether he 'appertained' to Walsingham who had built up a formidable intelligence service which had agents in many European countries,<sup>67</sup> the purpose of which was not only to keep an eye on the military and naval movements of hostile powers but also to ascertain the threat to the throne from English malcontents abroad. Mary Queen of Scots was still alive and continued to provide a focus for those who would have preferred to see her occupying Elizabeth's position.

William may have been an innocent traveller concerned only with his own self-improvement. Nevertheless he could have been seen as potentially useful to the Spanish authorities who clearly interrogated him for their own purposes. Naples appears to have been a dangerous place for an Englishman<sup>68</sup> which makes it even more surprising that William, who had avoided 'troubles' in Germany, should have ventured into a known danger spot.

With this in mind, Cobham's reference to Hunt should be seen in conjunction with William's post-script to his letter of January 1579/80 from Orleans to William Ingleby:

As I desire greatly to know whether your [H]unte be dead or alyve the w[hi]ch if he be levinge you may do me pleasure to [...] cawse him to wryt unto me of his weightie affayres.<sup>69</sup>

This is striking as William's letters are otherwise exclusively concerned with business arrangements. The two references to *Hunt* could have been unconnected in which case it is possible that William Middleton was an innocent victim inadvertently caught up in the prevailing fear of espionage. But the question must be asked: Was this *Hunt* the *Hunt* mentioned in Cobham's missive to Walsingham? If so, what exactly were Hunt's 'weightie affayres'?

If they were of a political nature, it could be that William Middleton was acting as a spy for Walsingham and had been arrested on those grounds. His Catholicism could have been a useful cover at a time when the Spanish Crown (which then ruled Naples) was becoming increasingly hostile to Elizabeth's Protestant government. Was his mission to observe what was going on in Spanish-held territory in the hope of picking up information which might have been useful to those in power in England? Such intelligence might have been general concerning the balance of power in Europe or specific to the perceived threat of a Spanish invasion. Certainly there was much speculation about affairs in Naples. Horatio Palavicino, writing from Fontainebleau to Walsingham on 24 May 1582 (when William Middleton was probably in prison in Naples) expresses this interest:

<sup>64</sup> Sir Christopher Hatton was a favourite of Elizabeth I who became Lord Chancellor in 1587. He supported Leicester in a bold anti-Spanish foreign policy and played a leading part in the trials of Roman Catholic conspirators.

<sup>65</sup> Fante (Faunt) was one of Walsingham's aides, particularly concerned with the prosecution of papists (*CSPD Addenda 1580-1625* p. 174 ff and *CSPD 1581-1590* p. 201, 14 Sept 1584). He was imprisoned in Rome by the Inquisitors (*CSPF 1581-1582* p. 345, Letter from Cobham in Paris 22 October 1581).

<sup>66</sup> PRO, SP78/8; *CSPF 1582* pp. 315, 317.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Johnson *Elizabeth I, A study in power and intellect* (1974) p. 277.

<sup>68</sup> Stoye *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>69</sup> YAS, MD59/13/Misc/15.

These letters [from Italy] further inform me that at Rome they are expecting news from Naples and from Malta, in which places it appears that some Englishmen are Prisoners. Questions have been asked me in this Court also about these particulars from Naples, which makes me think there is suspicion of something, about which I am sure my correspondents cannot speak, and I greatly desire to know what it is.<sup>70</sup>

Another source of danger to the English government was from English Catholic exiles liaising with foreign powers to plot the overthrow of Elizabeth and her regime. William was well placed to infiltrate such groups in the hope of acquiring information about treasonable activities. The English government was also interested in learning the names, pseudonyms and whereabouts of priests trained abroad for the mission at home. His Catholicism would have enabled him to obtain confidences from England's political and religious enemies, but to divulge them to the persecuting authorities in England would surely have been a betrayal of his beliefs, family and friends. In the light of his subsequent recusancy this seems out of character unless he was under some pressure. It is conceivable that he was under an obligation to the administration which seemingly had excused his involvement in the Northern Rising of 1569. As has been stated above, he had come under the protection of the Earl of Sussex after the collapse of the insurrection: was this a debt which required honouring and did William feel that in some extreme way he had to prove his loyalty to the Crown?

### CONCLUSION

With the evidence available it is impossible to determine William's precise motives for going abroad. Certainly the period of wardship, the accounts and William's own letter of attorney indicate that financial considerations might have played an important part. His steward, Thomas Robinson, seems to have worked hard to increase the profits of the demesne farm though there is little to intimate that either William or his wife exercised any strict economies. Middleton's urgent requests for money and his suggestion that his plate could be sold if necessary, while displaying an awareness of the problems facing his steward, call to mind a young man who was either very determined or very desperate. On the other hand the estate was not seriously impoverished during his tenure, despite the financial penalties that he later endured.<sup>71</sup> His friend Thomas Meynell, writing after his death, said of him:

He was my Inward and deare friend, and dyed at the age of 63. [A]lthough twoo p[ar]ts of his lands were seized about Recusancie, yet he ... left his eldest sonne inn as good estate as his father left him. Moreover he gave unto his second sonne of a second wife at least 500*li* per annum of good Inheritance.<sup>72</sup>

Although friendship might have caused Meynell to exaggerate somewhat, documentary evidence confirms that William preserved his inheritance and expanded his estate for his sons. This was an achievement which began during his four years' absence.

It is likewise difficult to assess the educational benefits he derived from his travels. Undoubtedly he acquired some French but whether he used it to pursue a course of study at one of the European universities or whether he sought to expand his experience and learning in the less structured university of life is unknown. At this distance in time and with the scant evidence available it is not easy to determine the character of our protagonist. Yet the delight in his recent acquisition of French expressed in the letter

<sup>70</sup> PRO, SP78/7 The original is in Italian. We have therefore used the calendared version. *CSPF* 1582 p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> YAS, MD59/19/566; MD59/25/80.2; MD59/24/26.

<sup>72</sup> Aveling *op. cit.*, p. 10.

from Orleans,<sup>73</sup> the evidence of the library list and of one of his letters<sup>74</sup> that he could perhaps read Italian, his scribbled note that ignorance was the enemy of knowledge, his later insistence that his son should be well educated<sup>75</sup> indicate the value he placed on education. Above all, his self-deprecating and evasive response to Henry Spiller in 1612 when required to take the Oath of Allegiance: '... there be some matters conteyned in the said oath which to my weak understanding (being altogether unlearned) seeme something obscure ...'<sup>76</sup> suggest that after his travels he was certainly not one of the boorish ill-educated sons of the northern gentry that James Ryther so deplored.<sup>77</sup>

From a religious point of view there is no evidence to suggest direct persecution at this time but it could be that there were disquieting signs that the net was tightening around the recusants so that it seemed prudent to absent himself for a while.

Nor can one establish one way or another the state of his marriage. On the one hand he honoured a marriage made for him by his father even when he had the opportunity to renege on the agreement. On the other hand he left his wife for four years, albeit well provided for financially. If he wrote any personal letters, they have not survived and his letters to his attorneys contain no reference at all to his wife.

Human motivation is rarely clear-cut. Maybe all the above factors had their part to play in his decision. It has not been possible so far to trace William's whereabouts in the years between the Rising of the Northern Earls in 1569 when the last reference to him suggested that the Earl of Sussex had acted, for a short time at least, as his protector, and June 1573 when he appears to have been back at Stockeld.<sup>78</sup> These were probably crucial years in the young man's development, but whether William returned home for the duration of his wardship, or whether he entered the household of Sussex or another great noble cannot be established with any certainty. Knowledge of these years, so far not forthcoming, might help to throw light on the tantalising idea that William had been employed by Walsingham as a spy.

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<sup>73</sup>. YAS, MD59/13/Misc/15.

<sup>74</sup>. YAS, MD59/13/Misc/19.

<sup>75</sup>. YAS, MD59/7/c.15.

<sup>76</sup>. Cliffe *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>77</sup>. Craig *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>78</sup>. YAS, MD59/12/8.