

Abbot Edmund Ford, secret agent

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Hugh Edmund Ford (1851-1930), first abbot of the English Benedictine monastery at Downside in Somerset, had a reputation, especially in monastic circles, as a scholarly and reforming monk. He is much less well known than his contemporary confrères, Cardinal Aidan Gasquet and Abbot Cuthbert Butler, lacking Gasquet's public profile and Butler's list of much-respected publications. Ford's considerable political and diplomatic skills were honed in the promotion of a monastic reform movement which transformed the English Benedictine Congregation. He travelled widely on monastic business and also on account of his always delicate health. More surprisingly, in 1918, he acted as an agent for the British government on a mission to neutral Switzerland, where the Benedictine abbey of Einsiedeln provided a refuge for many Germans displaced from Rome when Italy entered the Great War in 1915. Ford made use of the various ecclesiastical networks available to him, including the Benedictine Confederation centred on S. Anselmo in Rome and connections made through the school at Downside. This article places Ford in these and other Catholic networks and demonstrates how they were put to use in the Allied cause during the First World War.

Keywords: Benedictines, Diplomacy, Einsiedeln, Espionage, First World War

In 1814 a community of English Benedictine monks, exiled from Douai, in Flanders, settled at Downside, Somerset, where they established a monastery and boarding school. The priory at Downside was subsequently raised to abbatial status in 1899, with the then prior duly becoming its first abbot. This was Dom Edmund Ford (1851-1930) [Fig 1], whose papers were preserved in the Downside archives but not made accessible for readers until 2018, after being catalogued by Alice Morrey, a PhD researcher at the University of Bristol, who first recognised their potential significance.¹ Only then did material come to light of which Ford's biographer, Dom Bruno Hicks (1878-1954), the fifth

* The author wishes to thank Steven Parsons (outreach officer, Downside Abbey), Sarah Hargreaves (University of Liverpool Library) and Rod Holt for their assistance in the preparation of this article, a version of which was read online on 6 July 2021, prompting valuable recollections from Dom Leo Maidlow Davis and other members of the Downside 'family'.

¹ Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, Downside Abbey Archives (hereafter DAA).



Figure 1. Photograph of Abbot Edmund Ford, Downside Abbey Archives, Photograph Collection, Abbot Edmund Ford, 32_0024. Reproduced with the permission of Downside Abbey General Trust.

abbot of Downside, was presumably unaware.² They include photographs and postcards that illustrate his closeness to family members and love of travel, newspaper cuttings that confirm his interest in current affairs, and, more strikingly, two passports, issued in 1915 and 1918, together with the travel journal kept on the later occasion. Alongside these items, correspondence from the years 1915 to 1921 reveals that Ford enjoyed close contact with officials at the Foreign Office in London and was employed by them as a wartime agent, the serene and scholarly manner of an elderly monk providing the perfect cover for clandestine activities. In turn, these new discoveries act as a key that unlocks a revised appreciation of the relationship between the British state and the Catholic Church in the early twentieth century.

Hugh Ford was born to a Catholic mother and convert father in the affluent Clifton area of Bristol. His schooling was at Downside, where he was noted for his ‘prim and precise’ appearance, his courteous manner, musical talent, debating skill and quiet command of a range of subjects across the curriculum.³ When he entered the monastic life in

² Bruno Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford: First Abbot of Downside* (London: Sands, 1947).

³ Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 14-15.

1868, taking the name of Edmund, it was at Belmont Priory in Herefordshire, the house of studies for the monasteries of the English Benedictine Congregation (EBC).⁴ For the theme of his first sermon, delivered at Belmont, he chose 'Peace', and it remained one of his favourite subjects for preaching.⁵ Thereafter, his monastic vow of stability was interpreted somewhat loosely, though he never ceased to be a monk of Downside. In the mid 1870s he spent nearly three years on a trip to Australia, the purpose of which was to toughen his weak physical constitution. This set a precedent, so that extended travel for the sake of his health became a standard feature of his monastic career, even if the next major expedition was conventional enough: in 1884-5 he undertook studies in Rome. His academic interests were wide-ranging, incorporating both patristics and canon law, though he was shy of publishing his researches. Nevertheless, he was viewed by his brethren as a formidable intellect, a competent manager of money, and a natural leader, so that when Dom Aidan Gasquet (1846-1929) resigned as prior of Downside in 1885, Ford was chosen to complete Gasquet's eight-year term of office. In 1888-9 the internal politics of the EBC obliged him to live in premature retirement at Little Malvern, Worcestershire, after which he served as parish priest of Beccles, in East Anglia, but in 1894 the pendulum swung again and the Downside community chose him as their prior. In that capacity he put into practice his concepts of confidently English monasticism and Catholic worship, commissioning Ninian Comper to design decorative pieces for the Lady Chapel and its immediate neighbours at Downside and appointing Richard Terry, a pioneer of the early music revival, as organist and director of music.⁶ After Pope Leo XIII raised the three priories of the EBC – Downside, Ampleforth and Douai – to abbatial status in 1899, the Downside community confirmed Ford's position by electing him as their abbot. Again, the architecture can provide a useful measure of his achievements, for the bell Great Bede was hung in 1903 and the choir, the heart of the monastic church, was completed to the design of Thomas Garner in 1905.⁷ Thus Ford became known as the 'founder of modern Downside'.⁸ After three-quarters of his eight-year abbatial term had passed he followed Gasquet's example by resigning on the grounds of poor health, becoming the titular abbot of nearby Glastonbury. For some years he divided his time between

⁴ For the history of Belmont, Andrew Berry, ed. *Belmont Abbey Celebrating 150 Years* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2012).

⁵ Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 19, 54.

⁶ Aidan Bellenger, 'The Work of Sir Ninian Comper and Frederick Walters', in Aidan Bellenger, ed. *Downside Abbey: An Architectural History* (London: Merrell, 2011), 153-75.

⁷ Michael Hall, 'Thomas Garner and the Choir of Downside Abbey Church', in Bellenger ed., *Downside Abbey: An Architectural History* 117-51.

⁸ Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 147.

Downside's daughter house at Ealing, in the western suburbs of London—where he served as superior—and annual travels in southern Europe. Defying expectations, he survived to the age of seventy-nine, died at Downside towards the end of 1930, was buried in the abbey church, and was long remembered by the community he had done so much to develop, but it now appears that the image of long and well-managed decline masked another story altogether.

The Great Game

Ford was in his mid-sixties when Europe was convulsed by war between 1914 and 1918. In terms of Anglo-papal history, the alleged 'silence' of Pope Benedict XV when German troops invaded Belgium in 1914 was significant. The recently elected pontiff was accused of being pro-German, a label that proved difficult to shift amid the heightened emotions of war.⁹ In reality, Benedict sought to champion the cause of peace, making his greatest impact with the Peace Note issued on 1 August 1917.¹⁰ While the pope endeavoured to rise above the fray, it did not follow that the princes of his Church were similarly detached: Cardinal Mercier of Mechelen/Malines became a national Belgian icon and prelates on both sides of the conflict were supporters of their home states and armed forces.¹¹ In the case of Britain, Cardinal Francis Bourne (1861-1935), archbishop of Westminster, was concerned to show that Catholics, whether soldiers or civilians, were loyal subjects of the king-emperor.¹²

Bourne's authority at the apex of the Catholic hierarchy of England and Wales did not go unchallenged, because a second English cardinal had been created by Pius X two months before the outbreak of hostilities. This was Aidan Gasquet.¹³ In 1901, on the death of Cardinal

⁹ A particularly trenchant denunciation is Francis Tyrrell, *The Pope and the Great War: The Silence of Benedict XV. Can it be Defended?* (London: Hampden Press, 1915).

¹⁰ John F. Pollard, *Benedict XV: The Unknown Pope and the Pursuit of Peace* (London: Continuum, 2005), esp. 123-8 on the Peace Note.

¹¹ Jan De Volder, *Cardinal Mercier in the First World War: Belgium, Germany and the Catholic Church* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018). See also an expanding literature: Patrick J. Houlihan, *Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1922*, Cambridge, 2015; Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Changed Religion for ever* (London: HarperCollins, 2014); and Anita Rasi May, *Patriot Priests: French Catholic Priests and National Identity in World War I* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).

¹² Francis Alphonsus Bourne (1861-1935) was fourth archbishop of Westminster (1903-1935). He was made a cardinal in 1911. Mark Vickers, *By the Thames Divided: Cardinal Bourne in Southwark and Westminster* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2013). For the British context, Kester Aspden, *Fortress Church: The English Roman Catholic Bishops and Politics, 1903-63* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002).

¹³ Shane Leslie, *Cardinal Gasquet* (London: Burns Oates, 1953), Dominic Aidan Bellenger, 'Gasquet, Francis Neil [name in religion Aidan]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/33350> (accessed 6 June 2019), and Dominic Aidan Bellenger, 'Cardinal Gasquet's Papers at Downside', *Catholic Archives*, 4 (1984): 40-7.

Vaughan, Gasquet's name had appeared on the Westminster *terna*, but he lost out to the little-known Bourne. In wartime the rivalry between these prelates was revived with regard to the provision of chaplains to the British armed forces. At the onset of war Bourne enjoyed direct authority over the Catholic chaplains, but the dramatic increase in their number was more than he could handle and, in 1917, Gasquet's advocacy of an independent military bishop was put into practice. The man appointed to that role was William Keatinge, a secular priest but a former Downside pupil.¹⁴ It is no less revealing that the principal Catholic chaplain on the Western Front, Stephen Rawlinson, was a Downside monk, as was Dominic Young, Rawlinson's right-hand man.¹⁵ This indicates that Downside's cardinal was as well connected in the British Establishment as he was in the Church.

Since 1907 Gasquet had been living in Rome, where he was chairman of the Vulgate Commission. At the outbreak of war in 1914 his Roman residence was S. Anselmo, the international Benedictine house of studies on the Aventine. S. Anselmo has been established by Leo XIII as a means of bringing together the otherwise disparate and distinctive Benedictine congregations—Subiaco, Solesmes, Beuron etc—with its abbot serving as primate of the entire Benedictine Confederation. However international the character of Benedictine monasticism was as a whole, S. Anselmo quickly acquired a markedly German character, reflected in the fact that the first two abbots primate, Hildebrand de Hemptinne and Fidelis von Stotzingen, were both monks of Beuron in south-western Germany. The Italian authorities regarded Stotzingen as 'a friend of the Kaiser' and the community at S. Anselmo as a 'nest of "Tedeschi"'.¹⁶ Gasquet felt so uncomfortable that he crossed the Tiber and took up residence in the Palazzo S. Callisto, in the heart of Trastevere. The strength of the Central Powers in papal Rome was not confined to S. Anselmo. There was also a clear diplomatic imbalance. Austria, Bavaria and Prussia all maintained ambassadors to the Holy See, while their enemies were collectively represented by no more than an elderly Belgian ambassador and an unexceptional Russian one.¹⁷

¹⁴ Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005), and Michael Snape, 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Recusant History*, 26 (2002), 314-58.

¹⁵ Steven Bellis, 'The Rawlinson Papers in Downside Abbey Archives', *The Downside Review* (2012): 1-25; James Hagerty, *Priests in Uniform: Catholic Military Chaplains in First World War* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2017) and James Hagerty and Steven Parsons, *Monks in the Military: Benedictine Chaplains in the British Armed Forces during the Twentieth Century* (Stratton-on-the-Fosse: Downside Abbey, 2017).

¹⁶ Pius Engelbert, trans. Henry O'Shea, *Sant'Anselmo in Rome: College and University* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁷ David Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican: Espionage and Intrigue from Napoleon to the Holocaust* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 88-9, 98.

In 1914-15 the sense of German diplomatic superiority in Rome was compounded by the fact that the former German chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow, who was married to an Italian and lived in the palatial Villa Malta, was called out of retirement by Kaiser Wilhelm II to serve as his ambassador to the kingdom of Italy. Bülow's British counterpart was Sir Rennell Rodd (1858-1941), a man who had considerable Roman experience but no accreditation to the Vatican, the sharp divide between 'black' and 'white' Rome, the Holy See and the kingdom of Italy, having existed since the loss of papal temporal power in 1870. This left a vacuum which Gasquet sought to fill by proposing the creation of a British mission to the Holy See and recommending the appointment of Sir Henry Howard (1843-1921) as its head.¹⁸ Howard was an old Downside boy whose diplomatic career had peaked in 1896 when he was appointed as ambassador to The Hague and Luxembourg. The British mission began operating before the end of 1914, with much of the work being undertaken from 1915 by Howard's deputy, John Duncan Gregory.¹⁹ In 1916 Howard retired again and was succeeded as head of mission by the Anglo-Irish diplomat John, Count de Salis (1864-1939), who was married to a Borghese and lived in that family's palazzo.

Wartime Rome offered countless opportunities for propaganda, espionage and all manner of covert activities, not least through the notoriously porous walls of the Vatican.²⁰ If Allied suspicions of pro-German sentiments had centred on the pope himself during the opening phase of the conflict, by the beginning of 1916 attention had shifted to Benedict's Bavarian chamberlain, Mgr Rudolf von Gerlach (1886-1946). Gerlach could hardly have been better connected: not only had he ingratiated himself with the pope, but his sister was a lady-in-waiting to Zita of Bourbon-Parma, whose husband, Karl, succeeded to the Austro-Hungarian throne in November 1916. Rodd was not alone in believing that Gerlach was a German agent, though no conclusive evidence could be found. In January 1917 the Italian authorities escorted him to the border; he crossed into Switzerland and ceased to be their problem.²¹ Three months later, in February 1917, the new emperor launched his own peace initiative, independently of Austria's allies, by making

¹⁸ Stella Fletcher, *The Popes and Britain: A History of Rule, Rupture and Reconciliation* (London: IB Tauris, 2017), 164-5; Daithí Ó Corráin, 'The Pope's Man in London: Anglo-Vatican Relations, the Nuncio Question and Irish concerns, 1938-82', *British Catholic History* 35 (2020): 55-84.

¹⁹ Gregory's memoirs were published as *On the Edge of Diplomacy* (London: Hutchinson, 1928), though more extensive treatment of the legation's work, albeit in the 1920s, is provided by Gregory's successor Sir Alec Randall in *Vatican Assignment* (London: Heinemann, 1956). The Downside archive contains a letter of 1924 from Gregory to Ford.

²⁰ Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican*, 85-129.

²¹ Pollard, *Benedict XV*, 103-7.

an approach towards France. It was rebuffed. On 1 August Pope Benedict issued his Peace Note, reaffirming his complete impartiality, his consistent championing of the greatest good, and his commitment to finding a just and lasting peace. In the light of the emperor's recent efforts, it is hardly surprising that Austria was the only one of the warring nations to take the pope's statement seriously. The British press roundly dismissed it as the work of a man they had labelled as pro-German, and the specific role of *The Times* correspondent Wickham Steed is made clear in a report by de Salis: 'The Cardinal [Gasquet] reproached Steed with his attacks on the peace note of last summer. Steed promised that in future he would ask for information if he did not know; also that he would take account of and publish any explanations given to him by the Vatican.'²² The press's antagonism required a response, a rapidly produced but nevertheless thoughtful analysis of the pope's statement. Gasquet's bluster ruled him out for such a delicate task, but his long-time ally at Downside, Dom Edmund Ford, with his legal expertise and interest in current affairs, was just the man for the job.

Diplomatic cover

Hicks relates how, from 1916 and in the context of more extensive travels, Ford spent a portion of each year in Rome, where he stayed with Gasquet at S. Callisto.²³ To that account can now be added the details of the passport issued to Ford in February 1915 and the letters supplied by the Foreign Office to smooth his journeys through France and Italy—and potentially as far as Greece and Portugal—in 1915 and 1916. This recent experience of papal Rome was added to his underlying legal expertise when he penned three letters to the *Tablet* (dated 1, 8 and 22 September 1917) on the subject of Pope Benedict's Peace Note.²⁴

In the wake of the third letter, Ford's correspondence mentions another visa for foreign travel. This suggests that Ford's talents were being channelled by the British authorities and his wartime travels encouraged.²⁵ Precisely how Ford served the war effort at this stage remains obscure, but there are hints among his papers. One such is a letter of 30 March 1918, sent from Casa Solitaria on the island of Capri. The writer, Captain Mackenzie, requests Captain Clarence, the Railway Transport Officer (RTO) at Modane, near

²² De Salis to Drummond, 6 May 1918, FO800/329/1/69, The National Archives (hereafter TNA).

²³ For example, Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 142-6 for his visit to Naples in September 1914.

²⁴ The three letters were quickly combined and reissued as a pamphlet: Hugh Edmund Ford, *Pope Benedict's Note to the Belligerents, with some Explanations* (Bristol: J. A. Arrowsmith, 1917). For comment see Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 167-8.

²⁵ Ford to J. H. Sidway, acting consular agent for France, 26 September 1917, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

the Franco-Italian border, to assist his friend, the abbot of Glastonbury.²⁶ In civilian life, this was the novelist and recent Catholic convert Compton Mackenzie, who so enjoyed his wartime role in the Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau that he could not resist publishing detailed memoirs that led to him being charged with breaking the Official Secrets Act.²⁷ His revelations included the use made of the passport and visa sections of British embassies for intelligence work. Ford's densely-stamped passports were processed by those very offices. The other two letters, both dated 'May 6' (without a year), are signed by Algar Thorold, and were sent from the British Mission of Allied Propaganda located at Via XX Settembre 30, Rome. In one of them Thorold expresses his sorrow at Ford's departure and states that he does not know how he and his colleagues will manage without him; he encloses further letters for the police at Le Havre and Southampton and one for the RTO at Modane that should facilitate the abbot's journey.²⁸ The other surviving item is Thorold's recommendation to Captain Clarence, in which Ford is described as 'a member of my mission', with the instruction to 'help him at your frontier'.²⁹ A limited amount of light is shed on Thorold and his work in Rennell Rodd's memoirs, where it is stated that, after Italy entered the war in 1915, 'a small office of Propaganda was organized in Rome by Mr. Algar Thorold, and the Embassy was thus relieved of much direct correspondence'.³⁰ Algar Labouchère Thorold (1866-1936) was a man of letters whose most recent book at the outbreak of war was a life of his maternal uncle, the Liberal MP Henry Labouchère.³¹ Like Mackenzie, he was a dabbler, an enthusiast, which gives some idea of why and how he threw himself into propaganda work. Ford was another man of broad interests, but the precise nature of his contribution to the Allied cause in Rome may never be known.

Propaganda was one thing, entrusted to experienced authors such as Thorold in Rome and to John Buchan, the ex-priest Gerald O'Donovan and others in London, but diplomacy was quite another, and that was the preserve of a social set to which Ford had access

²⁶ Mackenzie to Clarence, 30 March 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA. On RTOs, including at Modane, Compton Mackenzie, *Greek Memories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939), 328.

²⁷ Andro Linklater, *Compton Mackenzie: A Life* (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), 145-72.

²⁸ Thorold to Ford, 6 May 19—, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

²⁹ Thorold to Clarence, 6 May 19—, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

³⁰ James Rennell Rodd, *Social and Diplomatic Memories: Third Series 1902-1919* (London: Edward Arnold, 1925), 307.

³¹ The Labouchères were of Huguenot extraction, while Thorold's paternal forebears were notable Anglicans, his father Anthony ending his career as bishop of Winchester. Algar was a Catholic convert whose interests had taken a decidedly Italianate turn, his first book being a study of Catholic mysticism with special reference to Angela of Foligno. He went on to edit texts relating to Catherine of Siena.

through the school at Downside. In 1904 one of his correspondents assumed, reasonably, that he knew Sir Henry Howard, who was then in The Hague. More significantly, Fr Basil Maturin wrote from St Mary's, Cadogan Street, Chelsea, to tell Ford about 'a very nice fellow' from the Foreign Office, the Hon. James Eric Drummond, who was in the process of converting to Catholicism prior to marrying the Hon. Angela Mary Constable-Maxwell, and who might benefit from a stay at Downside.³² The visit ensued and Drummond's gratitude for Ford's hospitality is expressed in three further items among the abbot's papers. The marriage linked Drummond, a Scottish aristocrat who inherited the earldom of Perth in 1937, with the interrelated Catholic families of England, not least the Howards, who were his bride's maternal kin.³³ His son, the future eighth earl, was educated at Downside from 1916, suggesting that Ford and the monastic community had made a positive and lasting impression.³⁴ From 1915 to 1919 Drummond was principal private secretary to the foreign secretary, which office was held by Sir Edward Grey until December 1916 (when Drummond was knighted) and by Arthur Balfour thereafter. Drummond's papers from that period are held in the British National Archives and reveal how he put his acquired Catholic network to practical use in the context of war, gathering intelligence from both sides of the Atlantic. From New York, Mgr Arthur Barnes, until recently the Catholic chaplain at the University of Cambridge, wrote in January 1918, arguing that the pope should be made protector of the Holy Places in Palestine 'at once' and identifying the Jesuit John J. Wynne – 'the nearest I met to the Jesuit of fiction' – as the leader of anti-British feeling in the wake of the 1916 Easter Rising.³⁵ In October that year, from Cardinal Gibbons' residence in Baltimore, the Irishman Shane Leslie (1885-1971), another Downside parent and subsequently Gasquet's biographer, informed Drummond about the bishop of Northampton's recent visit to the United States and pointed out distinguishing features of the American hierarchy.³⁶ In Europe, Drummond's network of informants included the Polish exile Count Jan Horodyski (1881-1948), whose opinion was that Pope Benedict was so thoroughly pro-German that

³² Maturin to Ford, 29 June 1903, Hugh Edmund Ford Personal Papers, DAA.

³³ Mark Bence-Jones, *The Catholic Families* (London: Constable, 1992).

³⁴ David Michael Henry Dewar, *List of Boys at St Gregory's* (Stratton-on-the-Fosse: Downside Abbey, 1972), 71.

³⁵ Barnes to Drummond, 9 January 1918, FO800/329/155-7, TNA. On Barnes see M. Couve de Murville and P. Jenkins, *Catholic Cambridge* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1983), 123-4. On Wynne see Michael F. Lombardo, *Founding Father: John J. Wynne, S.J. and the Inculturation of American Catholicism in the Progressive Era*, *Jesuit Studies* 9 (2017).

³⁶ Leslie to Drummond, 22 October 1918, FO800/329/145, TNA. October 1918, Leslie to Drummond. Dewar, *Boys at St Gregory's*, 83. On Leslie see A. Leslie, rev. C. L. Taylor, 'Leslie, Sir John Randolph [Shane], third baronet', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31354> (accessed 25 January 2021).

the ‘real German Chancellor is Monsignor Pacelli, Nuncio at Munich’.³⁷ Pacelli’s movements were certainly tracked in the spring of 1918, when he travelled through Switzerland to Rome: the British ambassador in Bern, Sir Horace Rumbold, reported on the nuncio’s journey and Rumbold’s counterpart at the Vatican—de Salis—sought to discover the purpose of the visit.³⁸ The recipient of all this information, Drummond, is best remembered as the founding secretary-general of the League of Nations (1920-33) and as Britain’s ambassador to Italy (1933-9); he left the latter post shortly after Pacelli’s papal election.³⁹

Although Drummond exploited international Catholic networks for secular diplomatic purposes, he built on the existence of a ‘Catholic mafia’ in the Foreign Office associated with his predecessor, Sir William Tyrrell, who had served as Grey’s principal private secretary from 1912 to 1915.⁴⁰ A case in point is provided by one of Balfour’s assistant private secretaries, Cecil Dormer (1883-1979), whose later diplomatic career saw him as head of mission in Oslo at the time of the German invasion in 1940 and subsequently ambassador to the Polish government in exile. If Dormer’s story is traced in the opposite chronological direction, it includes an indirect connection to British Catholics and diplomacy before either Drummond or Tyrrell, in that his father-in-law, Rudolph Fielding, 9th earl of Denbigh, was chosen to represent King Edward VII on an extraordinary mission to Leo XIII in 1902.⁴¹

It was marriage into noble or otherwise well-connected dynasties throughout Catholic Europe that made the diplomatic service a particularly good fit for members of Britain’s Catholic elite. None were more cosmopolitan than the Actons. Successive generations of that family produced a minister of the Neapolitan Crown, a cardinal, and a celebrated historian, the last of whom was ennobled. The second Baron Acton was a career diplomat who specialised in German and Swiss affairs, holding wartime posts as second secretary at the British embassy in Bern and consul-general in Zürich. Writing from

³⁷ Rumbold to Drummond, 28 January 1918, FO800/329/158, TNA. On Horodyski see Paul Latawski, ‘Count Horodyski’s Plan “To Set Europe Ablaze” June 1918’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 65 (July 1987): 391-8.

³⁸ De Salis to Drummond, 12 April 1918, FO800/329/165, TNA.

³⁹ Lorna Lloyd, ‘Drummond, (James) Eric, seventh earl of Perth’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32902> (accessed 6 June 2019); David Macfadyen, Michael D. V. Davies, Marilyn Noah Carr and John Burley, *Eric Drummond and his Legacies: The League of Nations and the Beginnings of Global Governanace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁴⁰ Edward T. Corp, ‘Sir William Tyrrell: the Eminence Grise of the Foreign Office, 1912-1915’, *The Historical Journal*, 25 (1982): 697-708; T. G. Otte, ‘Détente 1914: Sir William Tyrrell’s Secret Mission to Germany’, *The Historical Journal*, 56 (March 2013): 175-204.

⁴¹ Fletcher, *The Popes and Britain*, 154.

Bern in 1918, Acton reflected on the consequences of his geographically diverse ancestry, as well as on the distinctive religious and political inheritance bequeathed by his distinguished father: 'I myself am in a difficult position, as owing to family connexions I am not detested as I should be by the Austrians; on the other hand I am a Liberal Catholic and a Home Ruler of the Gladstonian type.'⁴² This statement was directed to the convert Drummond, who replied that he did not share the cradle Catholic Acton's qualms about the 'dual allegiance' of being both British and a Catholic.⁴³

An agent and his handlers

By 1918 Drummond's pragmatic interest in international Catholicism appeared to be paying off. On 6 May de Salis reported that, as a result of the military party being in the ascendant in Prussia, the Vatican seemed to be becoming more sympathetic towards the Allies.⁴⁴ Then, at the height of summer, de Salis suffered 'a rather severe attack of this Spanish influenza, as they are calling it' and Drummond's attention moved from Rome to Bern, where Acton was feeling 'redundant' but was nevertheless full of ideas.⁴⁵

Bordering the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary and also the Allied states of France and Italy, Switzerland had remained in an uneasy state of armed neutrality throughout the previous four years of conflict, effectively paralysed by the natural tendency of the country's German speakers to favour one side, while the French- and Italian-speaking minorities favoured the other. The Swiss cantons were also well-placed to host interned sick prisoners from both sides of the conflict.⁴⁶ This work was managed by the Red Cross, bankrolled by the warring powers in a rare gesture of cooperation, and facilitated by the Catholic Church as a supranational body that could communicate with all parties. Visiting the sick gave an excuse, if one was needed, for representatives of the Allied and Central Powers to travel to Switzerland. The country became a hotbed of diplomacy and espionage, to the extent that members of the Italian military intelligence service managed to convince themselves that the papal delegate to Switzerland, the general of the Jesuits, and the bishop of Chur/Coire together formed a committee that secretly controlled the papacy.⁴⁷ That may have been a far-fetched conspiracy theory, but Acton nevertheless saw potential in playing the

⁴² Acton to Drummond, 25 July 1918, FO 800/329/174, TNA.

⁴³ Drummond to Acton, 1 August 1918, FO800/329/177, TNA.

⁴⁴ De Salis to Drummond, 6 May 1918, FO800/329/168, TNA.

⁴⁵ De Salis to Drummond, 21 July 1918, FO800/329/172, TNA; Acton to Drummond, 5 August 1918, FO800/329/181, TNA.

⁴⁶ Susan Barton, *Internment in Switzerland during the First World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

⁴⁷ Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican*, 106-7.

Catholic card in Switzerland. On 25 July 1918 he wrote in confidence to Drummond regarding his concerns about the papacy's role in the war and how it might be channelled. Amplifying his theme, he wondered how Anglo-Swiss Catholic connections might be developed, though he stressed that he did not want to flood the Swiss press with accounts of the war patriotism of English Catholics.⁴⁸ By 5 August his thoughts had turned to how the archbishop of Munich had been in Switzerland on the pretext of visiting interned German soldiers, and how 'abortive efforts' of the same kind had been considered with regard to visits by Cardinal Gasquet and by Archbishop John McIntyre, rector of the Venerable English College in Rome.⁴⁹ It was not much of a cover, Acton conceded, because there were few Catholics among the British internees, though he also noted that the Germans had not allowed a similar denominational imbalance to deter them. Nevertheless, he continued, Prussia's current anti-Catholic policy had caused indignation in the Vatican, so Britain ought to capitalise on that.⁵⁰ Drummond replied cautiously: the idea of sending an English Catholic bishop to Switzerland 'on the pretext of visiting the interned but in reality to preach there for propaganda purposes' would be too obvious, though 'I think your suggestions with regard to capital being made out of Prussia's present anti-Catholic policy may be useful.'⁵¹ Propaganda was not the only option under consideration. In his letter of 25 July Acton also alluded to a targeted covert operation: 'It will be a good thing if we can realise our plan of posting an agent at Einsiedeln.'⁵²

Einsiedeln Abbey, the spiritual heart of Swiss Catholicism, traced its origins back to the ninth century and maintained a traditional emphasis on educational and pastoral work. Its mission extended as far afield as Indiana and North Dakota, where daughter houses put Einsiedeln at the forefront of the monastic colonisation of the United States. The abbot of Einsiedeln from 1905 was the learned and pragmatic Thomas Bossart, a theologian who had studied at the Gregorian University in Rome and spent time at S. Anselmo. According to the abbey's historian, Bossart enjoyed a wider reputation than any of his predecessors.⁵³ His personal reputation and contacts were such that in 1907 Pius X raised Einsiedeln to the status of a *diocesis nullius*, its borders coinciding with those of the monastic estates. Within those borders the abbot enjoyed full episcopal

⁴⁸ Acton to Drummond, 25 July 1918, FO800/329/174, TNA.

⁴⁹ Michael von Faulhaber (1869-1952) was selected as archbishop of Munich and Freising in May 1917 and confirmed in office on 24 July. He was made a cardinal in 1921.

⁵⁰ Acton to Drummond, 5 August 1918, FO800/329/180, TNA.

⁵¹ Drummond to Acton, 15 August 1918, FO800/329/186, TNA.

⁵² Acton to Drummond, 25 July 1918, FO800/329/174, TNA.

⁵³ A. 16/1, S. 973, *Geschichte des Klosters Einsiedeln* von P. Rudolph Henggeler: Klosterarchiv Einsiedeln (hereafter KAE): =http://www.klosterarchiv.ch/earchiv_archivalien_inhalt.php?signatur=KAE,%20A.16/1 (accessed 6 June 2019).

authority.⁵⁴ While still a cardinal, the future pontiff had visited Einsiedeln incognito. Distinguished visitors multiplied during Bossart's abbacy, including Cardinals Rampolla and Gasparri, the papal secretaries of state to 1903 and from 1914 respectively. Gibbons and Gasquet were also among the prelates who made their way to Einsiedeln.⁵⁵ In 1913 Bossart's standing among his fellow abbots was acknowledged when he was appointed coadjutor with right of succession to the seriously ill abbot primate Hildebrand de Hemptinne. In April and May that year Bossart travelled to Malta to attend the International Eucharistic Congress, proceeding to Montecassino for the consecration of the abbey's crypt on 6 May. Six days later he was unanimously proclaimed abbot primate by the abbots of the Order assembled in Rome, but declined the honour and was back at Einsiedeln five days later, leaving the primacy to Fidelis von Stotzingen, that alleged 'friend of the Kaiser'.⁵⁶

Einsiedeln's location made it an obvious staging post on journeys between Italy and Germany, between papal Rome and the Berlin of Wilhelm II, who sent his portrait to Abbot Thomas.⁵⁷ Although the emperor himself remained a devout Protestant, he was conscious of the need to cultivate his Catholic subjects and no less conscious of the global significance of the papacy.⁵⁸ In an act that anticipated Anglo-German rivalry over battleships, in 1903 he paid his own visit to Leo XIII less than three weeks after that of his uncle, Edward VII. The Catholic, Sigmaringen branch of the Hohenzollern dynasty had a much firmer association with Einsiedeln. Its princely heads included Leopold (d. 1905) and Wilhelm (d. 1927). Leopold's second son, Ferdinand, who was married to Princess Marie of Edinburgh, Edward's niece, was king of Romania from 1914 to 1927. The connection with Einsiedeln had already been established in the Romanian capital, Bucharest, where from 1896 to 1924 the archbishopric was held in succession by two monks of that house. This effectively put Einsiedeln at the geographical centre of a line between eastern and western Europe, as well as on the north-south route. In 1916 King Ferdinand sided with Britain and her allies against the Central Powers, which meant that Romania's borders were expanded when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up after the war. More immediately, it placed at least one monk of Einsiedeln, Archbishop Albinus Raymund Netzhammer, in the Allied half of the divided continent.

⁵⁴ A. 16/1, S. 971, KAE.

⁵⁵ A. 16/1, S. 973, KAE.

⁵⁶ A. 16/1, S. 974, KAE.

⁵⁷ A. 16/1, S. 973, KAE.

⁵⁸ Stefan Samerski, ed. *Wilhelm II. und die Religion: Facetten einer Persönlichkeit und ihres Umfelds* (Berlin, 2001).

The outbreak of war in 1914 had relatively little impact on a monastery in neutral Switzerland, but that changed dramatically when Italy entered the conflict in May 1915. The Vatican itself remained neutral territory, but most of Rome was not, forcing the Germans of S. Anselmo and many other clerics to seek refuge elsewhere. The abbot primate and his secretariat re-established their operations at Einsiedeln, as did the superior general of the Pallottine Order and members of the Greek College.⁵⁹ Although the embassies from the Central Powers to the Holy See relocated to Lugano, the Austrian, Bavarian and Prussian ambassadors were among the abbey's shorter-term wartime guests, as was Bülow, whose mission to the kingdom of Italy was necessarily suspended, rather than merely relocated for safety.⁶⁰ When Gerlach left Italy, he too made his way to Einsiedeln. To the outside world it created the impression that a monastery in neutral Switzerland was being used for clandestine purposes by the German-speaking Central Powers. Such suspicions were articulated in the Allied press.⁶¹

In Bern, Rumbold was fixated on what might or might not have taken place at Einsiedeln, and regarded the bishop of Chur, Georg Schmid von Grüneck, with particular suspicion. It was not a fixation shared by de Salis in Rome, as the latter explained to Drummond:

I cannot tell you how far the Vatican were aware at the time of the Emperor Charles' overtures to France in the earlier part of 1917. Very likely they may have known something about them but the Pope told me in the middle of last month that he had not up to then had before him a text of the Emperor's letter which he knew to be authentic. Cardinal Gasparri told me last week that he believed there was a second letter from the Emperor dealing with Italy; also that he thought that it was Sonnino [the Italian foreign minister] rather than Clemenceau [the French prime minister] who had managed to put a stop to the possibility of conversations. Neither he nor the Pope seemed to think that the Allies had done a good day's work in exposing the Emperor as had been done. In the long run the only gainer in the business had been Berlin. Neither of them seemed to think for one moment that Berlin had inspired the letter. Quite apart from anything said by the Pope or Cardinal Gasparri, I do not in any case think that the Emperor's letter was drawn up at Einsiedeln by the persons mentioned in Rumbold's telegram . . .⁶²

He returned to this theme a week later:

I see that Rumbold still defends his source of information with regard to the meeting at Einsiedeln in February 1917 to draw up the Emperor Charles' letter The Vatican has of course officially denied through the Osservatore [Romano] that the Pope's peace note had any connection with the Emperor's letter with which they have nothing to do.⁶³

⁵⁹ A. 16/1, S. 974, KAE. Englebert, *Sant'Anselmo*, 81.

⁶⁰ A. 16/1, S. 974, KAE. Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican*, 96.

⁶¹ A. 16/1, S. 974, KAE.

⁶² De Salis to Drummond, 6 May 1918, FO800/329/168, TNA.

⁶³ De Salis to Drummond, 13 May 1918, FO800/329/170, TNA.

It was in the aftermath of this correspondence that de Salis contracted the Spanish 'flu and Drummond's attention was drawn to the ideas of Rumbold's deputy, Acton, for exploiting the potential offered by Catholicism in Switzerland, including the plan to get a British agent into the monastery at Einsiedeln.

The earliest surviving reference to Abbot Ford as the chosen agent appears in Acton's letter to Drummond on 25 July, but only to emphasise Acton's reservations, because he distrusted what he called Ford's ultramontaniam.⁶⁴ It was a statement worthy of the first Lord Acton, whose aversion to ultramontaniam put him on a collision course with Cardinal Manning and other arch-papalists.⁶⁵ In Ford's case it presumably alluded to his time in Rome and close association with the curial cardinal Gasquet, for in other respects Ford was keen to emphasise the Englishness of Catholicism. However, the younger Acton's inherited prejudice was no match for the combination of reasons the principal private secretary could muster in order to conclude that Ford was a safe pair of hands: his long-established personal connection with Drummond, his recent dealings with Mr Thorold and Captain Mackenzie, which appear to have combined work and friendship, and his recognised expertise on the Peace Note. In addition, Ford had a particular connection with the target location. His Swiss friend, Alois Maria Benziger (1864-1942), the Carmelite bishop of Quilon (now Kollam), India, was a native of the town of Einsiedeln, had been educated at the monastery there and continued his studies at Downside in the early 1880s.⁶⁶ Despite Acton's misgiving, Ford was as perfect a fit as could be found for the intended mission. As Hicks relates, Ford's detractors often accused him of being a schemer who 'sought his ends by silent and secret methods', and Dom Hubert Van Zeller, a monk of Downside from 1924, recalled that Ford possessed 'a certain combativeness which surprised those who judged by the frailty of his appearance', but such personal characteristics only served to make him all the more attractive as a potential player of the Great Game.⁶⁷

The decision made, it fell to Drummond's deputy, Cecil Dormer, to organise the practicalities. On 20 August he recommended that the abbot take £25 for his expenses and ask for more later, rather than being advanced a larger sum, because giving refunds 'causes complications'. Although the Passport Office had still not provided the necessary paperwork, 'you need not worry too much about

⁶⁴ Acton to Drummond, 25 July 1918, FO800/329/174, TNA.

⁶⁵ R. Hill, *Lord Acton* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁶⁶ A. 16/1, S. 972, KAE. Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 146.

⁶⁷ Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 199; Hubert Van Zeller, *Downside By and Large* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 58.

difficulties in travelling, as we shall do our best to make your journey as easy as possible.⁶⁸ The smoothness of the journey was again emphasised five days later.⁶⁹ By the end of the month the passport was ready, a letter of introduction to Rumbold in Bern had been prepared, and Ford was asked whether there were any papers he might wish to have forwarded in the diplomatic bags to Bern and Rome.⁷⁰ The passport itself survives at Downside, as do identical letters from Drummond to Rumbold and his counterparts in Paris and Rome, which state that the abbot, a personal friend, is 'proceeding to Switzerland and later to Italy for reasons connected with his health'.⁷¹ A covering letter to Ford explains that a cheque for £50 is enclosed, which he is advised to cash before departing. After purchasing his rail tickets, he should convert the remainder into circular notes or a letter of credit from [Thomas] Cook's.⁷² This was the very advice that Baedeker's guidebooks had been dispensing for years. Ford is further informed that Mr Martin has provided a letter to the Military Permit Authorities and made passport arrangements. The unidentified writer then requests that any papers be sent via the diplomatic bag from Rome and that word be sent to the Foreign Office about when he is expected to arrive in Bern, so that the ambassador there could be informed. By mid-September any hope of Ford's journey being imminent was frustrated because the Swiss border was temporarily closed.⁷³ The ambassador in Paris thought Ford should travel as far as the French capital and wait there for news about the border.⁷⁴ Finally, a general letter of recommendation was issued in the name of the foreign secretary, stating that Mr Balfour 'will be grateful for facilities which it may be possible to afford [the abbot] on his journey'.⁷⁵

In the course of these preparations Ford started to keep a travel journal, which reveals that he spent September partly in London and partly at Quarr Abbey, on the Isle of Wight, from where he could easily get to Southampton for the Channel crossing. His mission was evidently not an entirely secret one: while he waited for the go-ahead, he was contacted by Miss Laurence Alma-Tadema (daughter of the painter) on behalf of the Polish Victims Relief Fund.⁷⁶ She said that

⁶⁸ Dormer to Ford, 20 August 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁶⁹ Dormer to Ford, 25 August 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁷⁰ Dormer to Ford, 31 August 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁷¹ Drummond to Sir Horace Rumbold, Lord Derby and Sir Rennell Rodd, 9 September 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁷² Unsigned to Ford, 10 September 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁷³ Ewart to Ford, 13 September 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁷⁴ Dormer to Ford, 23 September 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁷⁵ 25 September 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁷⁶ Alma-Tadema to Ford, 16 September 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

she hoped to catch him before he left and asked him to draw attention to the plight of the Poles.⁷⁷

Ford arrived in Paris on 3 October, and proceeded to Bern by way of Geneva, Lausanne and Fribourg. His progress is charted in Acton's dispatch of 26 October, which reports that the abbot arrived about a fortnight earlier and had two meetings with Mgr Maglione, the papal representative, but no political conversation.

It was first suggested that he should reside at the convent where the papal agent is living. This convent shelters several prelates of mutually hostile camps, including a French Monseigneur who is attached to the French Embassy here and a Bavarian prelate who is employed, ostensibly, on behalf of the Catholics interned among the German prisoners. The Frenchman and the German are on excellent terms, and are neighbours at table, but it was eventually decided that it would be undesirable, for various reasons, that Abbot Ford should join this festive board.⁷⁸

A plan for him to lecture at Fribourg on the pope's Peace Note had been abandoned because there were few English speakers among the students there.

Ford's account of the mission is provided in a six-page memorandum attached to Acton's dispatch, though a draft of the text can also be found in the travel journal, which confirms his presence at Einsiedeln from Thursday 17 to Monday 21 October.⁷⁹ These combined sources demonstrate the seriousness with which he undertook his task, even if there is nothing startling in the content or in his analysis of what he encountered at Einsiedeln. His travelling companion for the last stage of the journey, the parish priest of Winturthur, explained that the area's German-speaking population had a 'natural bias' towards Germany in all things, though not to the extent of wanting a German military victory. Ford's main purpose at the abbey was to discover the opinions of the abbot primate, whom he had encountered at S. Anselmo before the war and considered 'very aggressively German'. The journal confirms that they met four times and took walks together. Upon renewing their acquaintance, Ford was still of the opinion that a 'thorough German feeling' pervaded everything that Stotzingen did, but he also appreciated the distinction between the latter's enthusiasm for Austrian and Bavarian Catholicism,

⁷⁷ Among her contacts in Britain's Polish community, Miss Alma-Tadema specifically mentions Mr Gielgud. This was presumably Frank Gielgud, whose devout Polish Catholic mother divided her time between Britain and Vevey in Switzerland: John Gielgud, *An Actor and his Time* (London: Penguin, 1981), 15, 17. At that point Frank's eldest son, Lewis, was a member of the British Military Mission in Paris, so not far removed from the circles in which Ford was then moving.

⁷⁸ Acton to Drummond, 26 October 1918, FO800/329/195, TNA. Ford's travel diary confirms that his arrival in Bern was indeed 12 October 1918.

⁷⁹ TNA, FO 800/329/197-9, undated, Ford memorandum; DAA, Personal Papers, Hugh Edmund Ford, travel journal.

on the one hand, and disinterest in militant Prussianism, on the other.⁸⁰ The visits of Bülow and Gerlach, which had drawn Allied attention to Einsiedeln, seemed to have been in connection with the abbot primate's 'ecclesiastical influence' and Ford was convinced that any 'caballing' had ceased. Turning to their hosts, as far as Ford could see, Abbot Bossart appeared to take 'much satisfaction' from the prospect of imminent Prussian humiliation. The community as a whole was 'strictly neutral', or at least outwardly so; inwardly, the patriotic Ford convinced himself, most of the monks harboured a preference for the Allies and regretted that their hospitality had been monopolised by Germans during the war years. Elsewhere in the journal are Ford's notes on individual monks, their nationalities and original monasteries, and, in the case of Bossart, his estimated age and linguistic capability. At Ford's departure, the memorandum attests, the monks plied him with messages for Gasquet in Rome. Ending the formal text on a secular note, Ford reports that the German consul-general at Zürich had stated that his emperor was a 'broken man', given up to prayer, and was unlikely to be succeeded by any of his sons. It was not the most revealing of insights, for the Kaiser abdicated less than three weeks later.

In his covering letter, Acton drew Drummond's attention to Ford's remarks about Stotzingen and the community's sentiments, before expressing regret that the visit had been so short: 'Of course his presence in Switzerland cannot be compared with the more permanent politico-clerical activities of the French and Bavarian prelates whom I have mentioned above. But at this stage of the war perhaps we have not lost much by this disadvantage'.⁸¹ Placing the memorandum in context, Acton explained that Ford was in the process of visiting the internment camps at Château d'Oex, Leysin and Mürren, where a large proportion of the soldiers were Irish:

[Ford] agrees with me that it would have been better to have sent as chaplains to these camps priests of British origin and of Unionist sympathy. In these troubled times it is difficult for the Philistine to draw a line of demarcation between a Home Ruler and a Sinn Feiner.⁸²

Again, this portion of the expedition is reflected in the Ford archive, the journal stating that he was back in Bern between 23 and 25 October—when his report must have been typed up—before

⁸⁰ Another Downside monk, Dom David Knowles, recorded his impression of Stotzingen as 'a cultured, externally benevolent man, chosen for a difficult position by virtue of his tact, linguistic skill and diplomatic expertise, which provided him with a mask that was hard to penetrate. His secretary, a Beuronese, was generally under suspicion as a government agent': Knowles Papers, *Autobiography* (1974), Typescript, 138, DAA.

⁸¹ Acton to Drummond, 26 October 1918, FO 800/329/195-6, TNA.

⁸² *Ibid.*

returning to Fribourg for two days and then stopping even more briefly at Vevey. A letter from the chaplain at Château d'Oex, dated 17 October, invited him to visit the internment camp and the journal confirms his presence there twelve days later. The chaplain was Henry John Chapman OSB, a monk of Maredsous in Belgium, who officially transferred to Downside in 1919 and was elected its fourth abbot a decade later.⁸³

A spy's legacy

The clandestine and pastoral elements of his expedition complete, Ford was 'keen to escape the rigours of the Alpine winter' and proceed to Rome. There were also other circumstances that made flight from Switzerland a sensible precaution: the Spanish 'flu had reached that region and deteriorating economic conditions led to a general strike in November 1918. Taking a route via Lugano, Como, Milan, Florence and Orvieto, he made his way to Rome, from where de Salis kept London fully informed about the Vatican's current concerns, which were to avoid the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary, 'if only as a counterpoise to Germany', and to support the continuation of the British protectorate in Palestine.⁸⁴

Before the Foreign Office could decide whether any further use was to be made of Ford, there were loose ends to be tied up. Dormer wrote again on 6 December, replying to Ford's of five days earlier: 'Your visit to Einsiedeln seems to have been valuable and we are most grateful to you for making a visit and for the report which you have been so good as to furnish.'⁸⁵ Then comes an admonition from a career diplomat to a novice agent: 'Your letter, I see, was sent through the ordinary post and was opened by the Italian censor which was unfortunate! I think perhaps it would be better if you write about Einsiedeln or similar matters again to send it in a Vatican Mission bag'.⁸⁶ Ford was on safer ground with his meticulous financial records, which can be seen in the journal, Dormer writing again the next day, asking him to kindly send a cheque for £6.1.5, the unspent portion of his advance.⁸⁷

Whatever Ford's strengths and weaknesses as an agent in the field, the Foreign Office had its finger on the central European pulse when it

⁸³ Daniel David Rees, 'Chapman, Henry Palmer [name in religion John]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/65085> (accessed 6 June 2019).

⁸⁴ De Salis to Drummond, 14 November 1918 and de Salis to Drummond, 24 November 1918, FO 800/329/200, TNA. On the latter see Agnes de Dreuzy, *The Holy See and the Emergence of the Modern Middle East: Benedict XV's Diplomacy in Greater Syria (1914-1922)* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016).

⁸⁵ Dormer to Ford, 6 December 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Dormer to Ford, 7 December 1918, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

sent him to Einsiedeln. In late March 1919 the Austrian emperor was forced into a reluctant exile in Switzerland, taking his wife and family with him. Their first Swiss residence was at Rorschach, where the monks of Einsiedeln had teaching responsibilities, and both the emperor and empress paid visits to and otherwise retained connections with the monastery itself, though they established a more permanent residence on the shores of Lake Geneva.⁸⁸

Ford disappears from view for a while, re-emerging on 3 April 1919 when a note was made on his passport to the effect that he was leaving Rome and proceeding to London on 'business of the Benedictine Order'. The Paris Peace Conference had opened in January and was in progress when he broke his journey in the French capital. The British Embassy there issued him with a letter requesting assistance for the remainder of his journey. In contrast to the passport, it states that '[h]e has been on an official mission for the Foreign Office' and is signed John de Salis.⁸⁹ This was Captain de Salis of the Parisian embassy, not the eponymous count, who remained in Rome.

Thereafter, this section of the Ford archive peters out, giving only intriguing glimpses of his continued interest in current affairs and potential utility to the British government. By the autumn of 1921 another expedition was in the offing. This time Lord Curzon, the former viceroy of India and now Balfour's successor at the Foreign Office, was requesting 'any facilities which it may be possible to give' the abbot, though no light is shed on why Ford was 'proceeding abroad' or the reason for such high-level support.⁹⁰ There is nothing further in the collection until a note of thanks to Ford for his letter to the prime minister, that office being held by Stanley Baldwin at the time of writing in 1924.

Although Ford's brief mission to Einsiedeln came too late to make any impact on the course of the war, some of the figures connected with it were subsequently linked to one another in the quest for a lasting peace, specifically by means of the League of Nations. Drummond's involvement in the Paris Peace Conference led to his appointment as the League's secretary-general, and Maglione stayed on in Switzerland, as papal nuncio and provisional papal representative to the Geneva-based League. He went on to become a cardinal in 1935 and papal secretary of state the following year. In 1924 Ford's response to the new international body was to reflect on the legal

⁸⁸ A. 16/1, S. 973, KAE.

⁸⁹ De Salis to Ford, 25 April 1919, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

⁹⁰ R. G. Leigh [Curzon's private secretary] to Ford, 26 October 1921, Hugh Edmund Ford, Personal Papers, DAA.

claims made to underpin its legitimacy and to ask whether Catholics ought to support an organisation from which the Church was automatically excluded by virtue of not being a nation.⁹¹ Whatever his personal dealings with Drummond and Maglione, it was another connection from the war years that led to Ford's thoughts being brought before the public, for they first appeared in the *Dublin Review*, which was then under the editorship of Algar Thorold, who had valued so highly Ford's work for the propaganda office in Rome and who went on to develop other connections with the Downside community.

Ford's publication surely struck a chord with another of the contacts he acquired in the context of war and prompted his appearance in a completely different genre, that of fiction. Compton Mackenzie's novel *The Heavenly Ladder* was also published in 1924. It consists of 300 pages set in Cornwall, a few on the Western Front, and a somewhat incongruous conclusion in which the hero suddenly finds himself in Switzerland, where he meets 'a Benedictine monk, the titular Abbot of some famous and noble foundation long ruined'.⁹² This 'beautiful and dignified old man' speaks prophetically about 'any League of Nations that refuses to admit the vanquished to its councils', but nevertheless prays for God's blessing on it, 'for anything that tends, however ineffectively, toward the unity of the human race will help the hearts of men to desire that perfect unity in which Catholics recognize the only possible future, institutionally speaking, for the world.'⁹³ This is surely an affectionate portrait of Ford, lifelong preacher of peace, inveterate traveller and — we now know — fairly secret agent for the British government.

The wartime roles of the English cardinals Bourne and Gasquet are well known, not least from their feud over military chaplains, as are those of various English Catholic bishops. Only now can their contributions be set against that of another senior Downside monk, one who lacked the impediments of a cardinal's status, who could cross borders with little fuss, and could reach the heart of the vast international network that was the Benedictine Confederation without exciting suspicion. This article has meshed the newly available material at Downside with a portion of the relevant correspondence in the National Archives, to reveal Abbot Edmund Ford as a trusted agent of the British state under the cover of a frail elderly monk. The potentially uncomfortable facts of his Catholicism and his

⁹¹ E. Ford, 'The Law of the League of Nations', *Dublin Review*, 174 (1924): 28-52. See also Hicks, *Hugh Edmund Ford*, 169-70; Cormac Shine, 'Papal Diplomacy by Proxy? Catholic Internationalism at the League of Nations' Intellectual Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, 1922-1939', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 69, 4 (October 2018), 785-805.

⁹² Compton Mackenzie, *The Heavenly Ladder* (London: Cassell, 1924), 317.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 319.

priesthood were made less awkward by his co-religionists in the Foreign Office, led by Sir Eric Drummond, who recognised the potential offered by the Church's global structures. Ford's mission to Einsiedeln was a minor contribution to the war effort, but it also illustrates the close association that existed between a relatively compact Catholic elite and the diplomatic arm of an ostensibly Protestant state.