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What Does the Fawkes Say? History and Public Festivity

Abstract

"The contemporary popular evaluation of Guy Fawkes is a great example of how iconic historical figures can become completely separated from their real-life inspiration."

Posting about British history from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/what-does-the-fawkes-say-history-and-public-festivity/>

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Comments

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Scott Culpepper

Few individuals have had a more interesting life and afterlife than Guy Fawkes (1570-1606). Fawkes provided the basis for one of the most interesting annual celebrations in Great Britain. He participated in a plot to destroy the meeting hall of the House of Lords on November 5, 1605. Of course, the plan also involved destroying the Parliamentarians themselves along with King James I. The resulting political vacuum was intended to provide an opportunity for the Catholic faction led by Robert Catesby to seize power through James' daughter, Elizabeth.

The plot was a comedy of errors. It began to capsize when an anonymous note arrived at the home of William Parker, Lord Monteagle, on October 26, warning him not to attend the upcoming Parliamentary session. The letter was sent by a relative who was one of the conspirators. Their plot continued to unravel when Fawkes was apprehended leaving the cellars beneath the House of Lords. Despite Fawkes' attempts to persuade his captors that his intentions were honorable, the sizable cache of gunpowder he had hidden in the cellar told a different tale. Fawkes suffered torture on the rack and eventually revealed the names of eight out of thirteen conspirators. They suffered execution on January 31, 1606. Some chroniclers wrote that Fawkes leaped from the scaffold after the noose was around his neck in order to avoid more protracted suffering, though this version was probably an exaggeration.

The Gunpowder Plot itself is a fascinating episode in British history, but the unusual celebration that arose in its wake was equally so. Parliament passed an act in January of 1606 authorizing annual public celebrations on November 5 in commemoration of God's preservation of the king's life. The idea was proposed by a Puritan, Lord Montague, and the celebration continued to be a popular observance for Puritans during early seventeenth century. The Gunpowder Plot observance in Britain and her colonies often involved fireworks, bonfires, and the burning of an effigy known by the nineteenth century as "the Guy." Some historians of pop culture have speculated that this practice may be the origin of using the term "guy" to refer to a man as, well, a guy. This practice replaced previous observances in which the effigy represented the Pope. It became customary to burn effigies of controversial political and social figures. In fact, one really has to wonder if you actually are *that important* if you are British and have not been burned in effigy. And, the Brits do not keep the fun to themselves; for example, a massive effigy of Donald Trump was burned in November 2016.

The celebration began to be called "Guy Fawkes Day" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Children often canvassed their neighborhoods during the mid-twentieth century asking for "a penny for the Guy." A ceremonial "search of the cellars" is still part of the festivities that accompany the opening of the British Parliament.

The celebrations waxed and waned at different times through the centuries. The holiday has struggled in the last couple of decades to retain its hold on the British imagination, but it persists. Americans wanting a glimpse of contemporary Guy Fawkes festivities can see examples on YouTube videos or check out the first season three episode of the excellent BBC series *Sherlock* entitled "The Empty Hearse," where Watson (Martin Freeman) gets to be the "Guy" against his will.¹

The world of imagination has intervened to preserve the memory of Fawkes himself, albeit in a somewhat altered form. Alan Moore's comic strip and graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, published between 1982 and 1989, featured a protagonist codenamed "V" who wore a chalky white Guy Fawkes mask.² "V" was essentially a terrorist attempting to subvert a totalitarian regime in a future Great Britain. The movie adaptation starring Hugo Weaving and Natalie Portman was released in 2006.³ This film adaptation of *V for Vendetta* introduced Moore's image of Guy Fawkes as a model for resistance to tyranny to a broader audience. "V" is portrayed as a terrorist—but, a terrorist who does

what he does for noble ends. This generous interpretation of “V”'s motivations is implied of Fawkes as well, who was allegedly just trying to blow that pesky Parliament up for the cause of freedom.

One only has to note how the visage of Guy Fawkes has been adopted by movements such as Occupy Wall Street to see the popularity of this interpretation. In fact, the contemporary popular evaluation of Guy Fawkes is a great example of how iconic historical figures can become completely separated from their real-life inspiration. The real Guy Fawkes was acting to secure religious freedom for English Catholics, but only so that they could then ban Protestantism. His methods, which would have caused many deaths, are certainly questionable. This sobering reality is important, especially in our troubled times, when religious radicals are all too ready to strap on explosives and advance their cause with violence. What did the Guy say? Not what many people suppose he said.

The Gunpowder Plot and the story of Guy Fawkes are reminders that coercing the human conscience is never the proper path to fostering true belief or morality. It is a reminder that violence is not the solution to our disagreements regarding temporal or ultimate questions. We should also be reminded not to take ourselves too seriously. For despite conspiracy, folly, and tragedy, festivity and celebration can still arise. So, cast aside your cares. Stoke the fire. Throw your blazing effigies to the flames. And, if you come this way, spare a penny for the Guy.

Dig Deeper

To learn more about Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot, check out the resources below.

Antonia Fraser, *Faith and Reason: The Story of the Gunpowder Plot*. (New York, NY: Anchor, 1997).

James Sharpe, *Remember, Remember: A Cultural History of Guy Fawkes Day*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[The Gunpowder Plot Society](#) (Great repository of primary source images)

Footnotes

1. Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, *Sherlock Season Three* (BBC Home Entertainment, 2014). ↩
2. Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V For Vendetta*, (New York, NY: Vertigo, 2008). ↩
3. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, *V for Vendetta*, d. James McTeigue, (Warner Brothers, 2006). ↩