

# Progress amidst the pitfalls? Perception, deception and reception in the writing of an early modern biography

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Some 327 years ago Nathaniel Hooke left Ireland and enrolled in Glasgow University. We know this because in later documents he referred to an acquaintance whom he says he first encountered while both were students in Glasgow in 1679. On further scrutiny however, can we be satisfied that we do indeed know this? The records of the University itself reveal no mention of a Nathaniel Hooke having studied there in 1679 or 1680. Without such supporting evidence how much confidence should we place in what Hooke later recalls many years after the events in question? Perhaps even with the best of intentions his memory, a tricky mechanism at the best of times, was faulty, but beyond this and more importantly, as we shall see later, there is good reason to consider the claims Hooke makes about his early life very carefully indeed.

The question of whether Nathaniel Hooke did or did not study in Glasgow was only one of a number of questions relating to issues such as the accuracy, completeness, reliability, interpretation and biases of sources which arose during the research and writing of my doctoral thesis, entitled *From Irish whig rebel to Bourbon diplomat: the life and career of Nathaniel Hooke (1664-1738)*. These problems fall into three general categories: those attributable to Nathaniel Hooke himself, those arising from later authors and those created by the vicissitudes of history itself.

Originally in the thesis I set out to explore the life and career of Nathaniel Hooke who was described in 1685 as:

A tall personable Irishman, who speaks good English, somewhat brownish [...], slender, his face somewhat ruddy, at least sometimes, with a long duskish periwig hanging commonly behind his shoulders, [...] somewhat of the smallpox in his face, his visage long [and] his garb and gait a little too antick. (British Library Ms Add. 41817, f. 199)

In 1718 he was described as ‘certainly as cunning and as designing a fellow as any in Europe (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1916, VI p.550). He was born in 1664 at Corballis House in Co. Dublin (Bodleian Library, Carte Ms 154, f. 78v). He was the third son of John and Margaret Hooke. John Hooke was a nonconformist clergyman since his ejection from the Anglican Church of Ireland in 1662. Margaret Hooke (*née* Hooke) was English by birth (ed. Macray 1870 I, p.ix). Nathaniel’s grandfather, Thomas Hooke (c. 1590-1670), was a merchant who had strong links with the Cromwellian regime in the 1650s, being elected mayor of Dublin in 1654 (Gilbert 1889-1922 IV, p.61).

Tracing the origin of the Hooke family in Ireland is problematic. Much of what exists relating to the Hookes’ migration to Ireland is based on circumstantial evidence. However, direct testimony from Nathaniel Hooke himself informs naturalisation papers he submitted for registration in France in January 1706. These documents traced the origins of the Hookes back to the Norman invasion of England in 1066, where Eustache de la Hougue was one of the knights of William the Conqueror’s invasion force. In 1172 his descendant Florence de la Hougue allegedly accompanied Henry II to Ireland, and the de la Hougues established themselves near

Waterford, anglicising their name to Hooke. The town which they founded was called Hooke-Town, but unfortunately, (if perhaps conveniently), this bourg had been eventually inundated by the ocean. The only remaining remnant of the settlement was the original family seat, still bearing the name of Hooke Castle. The document then skips directly to Nathaniel Hooke and refers to frequent marriage alliances between the Irish family and branches in England (Bibliothèque Nationale, MSS Dossiers Bleus 59, f. 9351; ed. Macray 1870 II, p.ix).

A pedigree of the family contained in a French genealogical guide draws on and echoes much of the account given in the naturalisation document (Saint-Allais 1872, p.19-22). Intriguingly however, it then proceeds to add new information fleshing out the rather skeletal family tree presented in the original source. In this version we learn of the same claimed descent from Eustache de la Hougue's arrival in England, to Florence de la Hougue's journey to Ireland. From this point it vaults four centuries to arrive at another Eustache Hooke, of Hooke Castle, County Waterford. His existence is unconfirmed by other documentation. He is said to have lived in the 1590s and to have been married to Helen O'Byrne of County Wicklow. His son is named as Thomas Hooke (of Hooke Castle), who married Eleanor O'Kelly from Aughrim in County Galway (or possibly of Aughrim, County Wicklow). Partial veracity of the document is confirmed by the inclusion of Thomas Hooke, Nathaniel's grandfather. Independent documentation confirms his existence, though not his place of birth, and the feasibility of his being born in 1590s (*Twenty-sixth report* 1894, p. 428). There is no evidence connecting him with Hooke Castle. It is interesting to note that both of these early Hookes are claimed to have married women

from prominent Gaelic Irish families. Such a connection with Gaelic nobility would have served Nathaniel Hooke's purpose by strengthening his claim to noble status in French eyes. It may also have gained him greater acceptance in Irish *émigré* circles in Paris, where he spent the last 47 years of his life. Significantly, Hooke made no mention of his grandfather being mayor of Dublin. While this would have testified to the family's status, it would also have highlighted unwelcome links with Parliament and radical Protestantism in the 1640s, 1650s and 1660s. Hooke would appear to have suppressed this aspect of his past by constructing an alternative origin centring on Hooke Castle/Hook Tower.

Most of the confusion surrounding the history of the Hookes, therefore, stems from Nathaniel seemingly constructing this past connection with Hook Tower himself. An early seventeenth-century map depicts a 'Castle Hooke' complete with fortifications (Colfer 2004, p.86). A later document by Hooke refers to his possession and use of a book of maps by cartographer John Speed (Archives des Affaires Etrangères, CP Angleterre, supp. vol. 3, f. 277r; Speed, 1614). Hooke wrote in praise of the usefulness of the atlas in 1705, one year before he applied for naturalisation as a French subject. For a man seeking to prove his noble ancestry, the existence of an extant Hooke Castle with suitably impressive battlements hinting at the past martial *gloire* of the family must have been a godsend. However, the Tower of Hook, was built and functioned as a lighthouse from its foundation in the thirteenth-century (it still fulfils that role today), and the original keepers were the monks of the nearby Rinn Dubhán monastery (Dubhán in Irish means fishing hook), who had also been involved in its construction (Colfer 1984-85, p.68-79). The monks remained *in situ* until 1641. Given these facts, any involvement of

the Hooke family in the history of the tower is unlikely (Colfer 2004, p.84). Whether Hooke was aware or not that the building illustrated in his atlas was a lighthouse (and, given his family's mercantile background, it is quite possible he was) it served his purposes exceptionally well in supporting his claims to nobility in France.

Notwithstanding this, it has been claimed that the Hooke family were driven out of the 'Hooke Castle' by Cromwellian troops in the 1640s, escaping or expelled to the West Indies (O'Callaghan 1870, p.328; Hayes 1949, p.128). While members of the Hooke family were indeed to be found on the West Indian islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, it is unlikely that Cromwellian dispossession was responsible for their presence. What had come to be called Hooke Castle was attacked by a small Parliamentary force in July 1642. However, it appears that at this time and before, the only connection between the Tower of Hook and the Hooke family was a chance coincidence in name. Yet both John Cornelius O'Callaghan and Richard Hayes, two authors to have written on Hooke, appear to have accepted the 'Cromwellian' attack on Hooke castle as the action which led to the expulsion of the Hookes from their alleged lands in Wexford (O'Callaghan 1870, p.328; Hayes 1949, p.128). There are serious problems with this version of the Hooke's family history. Despite later misunderstanding or obfuscation, it remains a fact that the Hookes benefited rather than suffered from the Cromwellian conquest and settlement.

Nathaniel Hooke was far from unusual in attempting, retrospectively, to embellish his ancestry to mask the foundations of a rapid social ascent (Bergin 1997, p.12; C.E.A. Cheesman, Rouge Dragon Pursuivant, College of Arms, London, personal

communication, 9 December 2004). Many first and second generations *arrivistes* in Ireland, England and France spent much time and money avoiding the stigma of being seen as a *parvenu* in the ranks of nobility. It was crucial to ‘cover their sometimes unsavoury and usually shadowy backgrounds with a veneer of antiquity’; similarly, ‘members of the displaced élites of Old Ireland, adrift on the continent, clutched at pedigrees [which] comforted by reminding them of what they had forfeited, and buttressed requests for fresh ennoblement’ (Barnard 2003, p.45-51). That even a man who became as eminent in the hierarchies of the French church and state as Cardinal Richelieu felt the need for a sympathetic redaction of his pedigree demonstrates that the weight of authority and legitimacy attached to the prestige of lineage was no mere foible (Bergin 1997, p.12-13). The consequences of having the legitimacy of claims accepted could be great. For a man in Richelieu’s position in the highest ranks of the elite, an illustrious past served to cast his rise to power in a natural light and reinforce his hold on the most powerful offices of state. To those in Hooke’s position, strangers and exiles in France, far below *les grands* on the social scale, the benefits of a distinguished ancestry were also practical. Economically the acknowledgement of noble status was vitally important in avoiding taxes and making the financial position of *émigré* families more secure. Socially it provided an *entrée* into the exclusive world of the French nobility. Hooke’s true identity as one of the newer English of Ireland complicated his situation still further. Hence he obscured the awkward portions of his heritage and highlighted or invented elements which he believed enhanced his prospects of being granted a patent of nobility in France.

Beyond Hooke's conscious attempts to muddy the historical record to suit his own purposes, the very nature of his life and career also contributed to later difficulties (some accidental, and others intentional) in writing his history. Alteration and adaptation were the defining hallmarks of Hooke's life and the period in which he lived. When he was born in Dublin in 1664, England was one of Europe's weaker states. In 1738 when he died, Britain was a great power. In this period of change, Hooke's own life and career were markedly fluid. Raised in a stoutly Protestant family with strong Cromwellian connections, Hooke first mutated from a non conformist clergyman and Whig rebel in 1680s England, into an exile and Catholic convert in France via service to James II in France. Then he metamorphosised again, into another role as a trusted and reliable soldier, diplomat, intelligence analyst and geopolitical strategic advisor in the service of Louis XIV.

As a study of such a fluid life and diverse career, the thesis also necessarily evolved and transformed. The project was initially conceived as a biography of an Irish Jacobite exile. Existing references to Hooke in John Cornelius O'Callaghan's *History of the Irish Brigades in the service of France* (1870, p.329-30) and Richard Hayes' *Biographical Dictionary of Irishmen in France* (1949, p.127-28), emphasised his Jacobitism, his Catholicism and his military career. This is not surprising: then as now, history, and the writing of history, is closely intertwined with politics. O'Callaghan joined the staff of the *Nation* newspaper in 1842. He was a strong supporter of Daniel O'Connell's campaign to repeal the Anglo-Irish Act of Union. 'I love not the delicacies of literature but the meat and drink of sedition – I make a daily meal on the smoked carcass of Irish history.' The fact that O'Connell's uncle, Count Daniel O'Connell

(1745-1833), had been the last colonel of the Irish Brigade in France may have inspired O'Callaghan's interest in the Irish regiments. Contemporary events also coloured Richard Hayes' historical perspective. Born in Bruree, Co. Limerick, an area marked by land agitation, boycotts and evictions throughout the nineteenth century, he was a boyhood friend of Éamon de Valera. He became active in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and was jailed for his role in the 1916 Rising. He was elected a member of the first Dáil, the separatist underground Irish parliament convened in Dublin by pro-independence MPs in 1919

These works were very much of their time and reflected the prevailing preoccupations of Irish historiography. O'Callaghan's work was published in the same year as the Home Rule party was founded. O'Callaghan made no mention of Hooke's family origins or life before Jacobitism. In the same vein, Hayes made only a brief reference to Hooke's time in Trinity College Dublin before stressing that he 'left soon afterwards, became an enthusiastic Jacobite and reverted to Catholicism, the religion of his immediate forbears' (1949, p.127). 1940s Ireland was envisaged as the natural culmination of a long struggle for an independent and Catholic Ireland – anything which tended to contradict or complicate, anything inconvenient to this narrative of the imagined and homogenised community was minimised. William Dunn Macray (1826-1916), a librarian in the Bodleian Library, investigated Hooke's life and career while preparing an edition of some of Hooke's correspondence from original manuscripts held in the Bodleian, entitled *The Correspondence of Colonel N. Hooke, agent from the court of France to the Scottish Jacobites, in the years 1703-1707* (1870). Macray's main focus was to use the documents to shed light on

British history and the work concentrated on the attempted French expedition to Scotland in 1708. He did, though, give a brief overview of Hooke's family history, early life and education, a synopsis which was largely accurate, although containing a small number of factual errors. The *DNB* article on Hooke in 1891 drew in large measure on Macray's introductory preface in this work (eds. Stephen and Lee 1891 XXVII, p.281-82). Very noticeably as we have seen, Richard Hayes' entry on Hooke in his *Biographical Dictionary of Irishmen in France* (1949, p.127-28), while drawing on the *DNB* article which references Macray's work, studiously refrained from referring to the Hooke family's Protestantism and Cromwellian connections.

Macray's scholarship and thoroughness were impressive. Despite his best efforts, however, there were a number of limitations to his work. Travel to far-flung archives was arduous and access to many private collections difficult to negotiate. The creation of comprehensive catalogues, calendars and guides and centralised repositories was a slowly unfolding process. Macray did his best to overcome the difficulties he faced in Britain. Abroad however, he faced insurmountable problems. He corresponded with French archives, noting access was carefully controlled. Succeeding in obtaining a list of some manuscript materials related to aspects of Hooke's career, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 rendered further progress impossible before the work went to press. Macray's *Correspondence of Colonel N. Hooke* (1870), although incomplete, thereafter remained the standard work on Hooke. What was essentially a snapshot of a portion of Hooke's career and a constricted view of his life and character became fixed in the historical record as the fullest account of his complex career.

Access to the documents which Macray was unable to obtain led to a radical alteration in the shape and scope of this project. The two volumes of correspondence published by Macray, containing over 1000 letters covering a core period of five years of Hooke's career, were originally envisaged as the most important source for this project, which intended to examine Hooke's Jacobitism and his (military) role in the Scottish expedition of 1708. O'Callaghan, Macray, the *DNB* and Hayes, had all highlighted Hooke's Jacobitism and Scotland as the mainstay of his career.

A closer examination of the published correspondence and research in the Bodleian Library raised questions about the range of Hooke's activities and the nature of the role which he played. Received opinion increasingly appeared to underestimate and misjudge the man and his career. The unpublished manuscript detailing Hooke's mission to the Saxon court in 1711/12, only of passing interest to Macray's project, in particular suggested that there was more to Hooke than existing accounts indicated. Combining detailed information on, and analysis of, the personalities and politics of the Saxon court with a broad ranging overview of European geopolitics, this correspondence was addressed to the French Foreign Secretary, Jean Baptiste Colbert, the marquis de Torcy, at Versailles; the paper was annotated in the margin by Hooke, himself, indicating that it had been read in council before Louis XIV. Presenting such a report for the personal consideration of the French king suggested that Hooke's life and career were indeed more complex and significant than previously understood. He was not just a Jacobite but an important figure in the theory and practice of French diplomacy and geopolitical strategy. Therefore he required, and was worthy of, a deeper and broader reconsideration and reinterpretation.

An important question to ask was why Hooke had not yet been the subject of in-depth research. Professionally, as a political activist, clergyman, exiled dissident, rebel, royal messenger, soldier, covert emissary, intelligence agent, political analyst, strategic advisor, military planner, secret envoy and diplomat he was involved in an impressive array of important events in British and European history such as Monmouth's rebellion, the Glorious Revolution and the War of Spanish Succession; personally he led a remarkably varied life and career, being at different times Protestant and Catholic (and later accused of having no religion), Whig, Jacobite and adherent of Louis XIV, Irish-born of English heritage but dying a naturalised Frenchman. Thus, a study of Hooke appeared to offer a uniquely rich and rewarding vein of insight and understanding at a personal level, of migration, strategies for survival and identity and transformation in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, while at the same time linking this individual experience with the broader unfolding of history by casting valuable light on workings of geopolitics, diplomacy and international relations. However, despite this promising potential, Hooke as a topic of investigation and analysis had, so far, been overlooked. Why was this? Was it merely neglect and oversight or were there practical historiographical reasons why Hooke had remained unexamined? That is to say, were sufficient primary materials at hand and accessible for such a study and would they provide enough evidence to allow worthwhile conclusions to be made?

The history of how and why some of Hooke's manuscripts reached the Bodleian Library provided some answers but also raised more questions about Hooke and the nature of the project. It soon became apparent that little about Hooke, personally or

historiographically, was uncomplicated. A short time after his death in 1738, his private papers had been seized by an officer of the French Court. His grand nephew, Luke Joseph Hooke (1714-1796) who had had possession of the papers, had managed to hide, and then smuggle to relatives in England, the documents that eventually came to be deposited in the Bodleian (O'Connor 1995, p.198). Why had the French government believed it necessary to impound his papers? Did some or all of these confiscated papers still exist and could they be accessed to answer some of the growing questions about Hooke?

A report by Armand Baschet on documents relating to British history in French archives mentioned Hooke in connection with manuscripts in the Archives of the Foreign Affairs Ministry (1875, p. 230-58). Some of these documents matched the list Macray had been supplied with in 1870 but others were mentioned for the first time. My research in the archives eventually led to the discovery of a sequence of manuscripts relating to Hooke's career from 1701 to 1712 in Holland, Germany, Scotland, and Saxony. Despite Macray being aware of at least some of this evidence it had been almost entirely neglected in investigations and assessments of Hooke's life and career.<sup>1</sup> Among these were original dispatches with some sensitive sections in numeric code. In most cases these were followed by decoded copies prepared for de Torcy by his officials. Frequently, a number of Hooke's individual letters have been grouped together in one document. He also wrote a number of briefing papers for de Torcy on the general European geopolitical situation just prior to the outbreak of the War of Spanish Succession. In these documents

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<sup>1</sup> John S. Gibson's excellent *Playing the Scottish card: the Franco-Jacobite invasion of 1708* (Edinburgh, 1988) used a small number of these original documents to cast light on the failure of the expedition in that year.

Hooke recommended strategies to protect and enhance French diplomatic and commercial interests. In the case of Holland and Scotland, Hooke was assigned the task of putting his suggested policy into practice. Other documents shedding light on Hooke and his career were found in archives in Dublin, London, Paris and Dresden. Together, these sources created a very different impression of Hooke's role, activities and influence than that traditionally available.

While it was now clear that a significant body of source material existed on Hooke, the scattered and fragmented nature of the evidence provided another reason why Hooke had been neglected in the historical record. The study, for the first time, of these variously located archival materials as a unified body of sources held the promise of providing a valuable insight into Hooke's world and important aspects of late-seventeenth and early eighteenth-century European history. Examination of the documents confirmed that Hooke had played a significant and substantial role in advising the marquis de Torcy on French foreign policy during the War of Spanish Succession. Allied with his practical activities as an intelligence agent, it was now apparent that Hooke had also been an acute and incisive theoretician of political strategy.

The discovery and subsequent evaluation of these documents brought about particular challenges. In practical terms it necessitated the reorientation of the scope and emphasis of the thesis to accommodate a broader study concerned with political, diplomatic and intelligence history. The sources themselves also required careful handling. As Alan Haynes remarks in *The Elizabethan secret services*, 'ideas of historical scholarship and polite truth do not sit easily with mendacity, betrayal, apostacy, double-dealing, false witness, torture and execution' (2004. p.v). Yves Martial, in the preface to a

collection of conference papers on diplomatic relations between France and the Netherlands, comments that some of the real activities related in the accounts can often outdo events usually 'confined to espionage novels' (eds. Frijhoff and Moorman Van Kappen 1993, p.viii).

The practitioners of history and the gatherers of intelligence do, however, have much in common. Both seek out information and evidence with a view to interpretation and understanding 'of meanings in people's writings and other significant behaviour' and 'in particular the weighing, sifting, and tying together of intelligence data resembles the analysis that goes into the writing of history' (Bennett 1988, p.313). Equally, 'for intelligence purposes, as for historical study, it is necessary to gauge the quality of the source material – the access of its authors to the relevant information, the temporal closeness of the record to the event, the established pattern of the authors for veracity or fabrication, their motivation or bias, the limits of their perspective' (Bennett 1988, p.313). Neither intelligence agents nor historians can be sure of having all of the relevant material to hand nor claim that the result of their work is infallible. Historians and intelligence analysts both 'try to understand the action of inaccessible people, but this takes research, imagination, and self restraint, and of course never wholly succeeds' (Bennett 1988, p.313). This close linkage between history and intelligence is readily apparent in Hooke's writings, in style, structure and content.

Of course Hooke was relating this information some twenty years after the fact and the vagaries of human memory inevitably must be borne in mind. However, Hooke amassed the collection of papers that were seized after his death precisely to aid his own recall and avoid the pitfalls of inaccurate recollection. It appears that he

may have intended to use this collection in the preparation of his memoirs.<sup>2</sup> Although many of these papers are now missing, Hooke makes it clear in his writings that he drew on documentary evidence when drafting many of his reports. He had a vested interest in being accurate – the reliability of his written work determined the success of his career in French service. That being the case, and bearing in mind the complexities of the sources and the man involved, and the varying motivations over time and space manifested by the man and the sources, to return finally to the original question posed at the beginning of this article: did Hooke study in Glasgow? I think it most likely that he did, but with the ever present historiographical caveat in mind, that like all conclusions, this one remains provisional and subject to the constant revision and reinterpretation of the historical process.

Researching my thesis showed that questions about Hooke's identity and allegiance were central to innuendo surrounding the man during his own lifetime and caused confusion in attempts to assess him historically. One of the reasons for this is that Hooke sought, deliberately, to adopt and project different personas as befitted the surroundings in which he found himself. At different times he represented himself as both a 'good Englishman' to win over the English and Dutch, and a loyal servant of Louis XIV and France to gratify de Torcy.

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<sup>2</sup> A number of Hooke's papers located in the Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs are annotated with later clarifications, additions and corrections in his own hand, indicating that they were originally among the personal documents seized after his death. These notes appear to have been made as Hooke was trying to sort his papers, perhaps with memoirs in mind. His nephew, also Nathaniel Hooke (d. 1763), the author of a celebrated history of Rome, was the likely editor of an edition of some of Hooke's documents published anonymously at The Hague in 1758, *Revolutions d'Ecosse et d'Irlande en 1707, 1708 et 1709* (The Hague, 1758).

With the benefit of historical perspective and archival research, it is possible to judge the former a mere ploy while the latter contained a good deal of sincerity. Some contemporaries, lacking this ability to see behind the mask and differentiate façade from reality regarded Hooke as simply duplicitous. Indeed it is not unreasonable to wonder if there were many occasions when Hooke was not actually consciously fashioning the image which he wanted received. It is thus the task of historical research to sift and assess the available evidence critically in an attempt to provide an objective and unbiased account. However, as the case of Nathaniel Hooke shows, this can be a complex and complicated process with pitfalls to be expected amidst the progress.

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