‘Make a noise in the world’ - Thomas Stukeley: Soldier, Scoundrel, Mercenary, Spy.

In all of the remarkable and varied careers of individuals throughout the 16th century, one of the most extraordinary must fall to Sir Thomas Stukeley. He was, at various times, a soldier, mercenary, diplomat, pirate, spy, schemer, religious agitator and strategist, and, above all, a scoundrel of the highest order. All of these positions took place at the loftiest levels of European politics and he served, in various capacities, the rulers of England (both Protestant and Catholic), France, Spain, Portugal, the Holy Roman Empire and the Pope as well as rebels in Ireland and Europe. He was also intimately involved in several political intrigues including the attempt by Edward Seymour to seize power from Edward VI in 1551, the bullying of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, the Ridolfi plot to assassinate Elizabeth I in 1571, and several plans to invade England or Ireland from Spain and France. He fought in various battles of the age: at the defence of Boulogne in the 1540s, he may have been involved in the atrocities of the battle of St Quentin in 1557, commanded ships at the famous battle of Lepanto in 1571 in the fleet of Don John of Austria, and he died at the battle of Alcazar in Morocco in 1578 alongside the 24-year old king of Portugal, Sebastian I, and two sultans. Stukeley was commemorated in contemporary poetry, plays, and song as ‘the Lusty Stucley’, or just ‘Lusty Tom’, and his death was commemorated in at least two plays; George Peele’s The Battle of Alcazar and the anonymous The Famous History of the Life and Death of Captain Thomas Stukeley (although this play itself was probably an amalgam of more than one work). These both came twenty or more years after his death and there may well have been other commemorations. Stukeley’s fascinating exploits are well worth closer examination and much of the detail they provide show the vagaries and fickle nature of life in the turbulent 16th century.

Sir Thomas Stukeley (there are various spellings of his surname) was born as the third son of Sir Hugh Stukeley, lord of the manor at Affeton in Devon, in around 1525 (we lack an exact date). It was rumoured during his lifetime that he was an illegitimate son of Henry VIII. Indeed, several of the positions he held, his dealings with various heads of state and their treatment of him, as well as his later behaviours (and escape from serious punishment), lend support to this idea. Philippa Jones considers that his escape, unscathed, from the havoc he wrought (and from which many others were executed for much lesser crimes) under Edward VI, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I suggest there may have been a family connection.¹ Henry VIII had certainly visited the Stukeley home in the period, so the claim is possible. Thomas’ birth also coincided with the period of

¹ Philippa Jones The Other Tudors: Henry VIII’s Mistresses and Bastards (London, 2009), page 119.
Henry’s wandering eye and his estrangement from Catherine of Aragon and affairs with Elizabeth ‘Bessie’ Blount, Mary Boleyn and then her sister Anne. Bessie Blount, whose affair with Henry began around 1514, was the mother of Henry Fitzroy, born in 1519, and the only illegitimate offspring Henry VIII ever recognised. There are several other rumoured mistresses of the king throughout this period and several other suspected illegitimate children between 1519 and 1528. Henry also courted three of his future wives while still married to their predecessors; Anne Boleyn (in 1526) while married to Catherine of Aragon, Jane Seymour (in 1536) while married to Anne Boleyn and Catherin Howard (in 1540) while married to Anne of Cleves. Henry and Anne Boleyn’s child, Elizabeth, was born only three months after their marriage in 1533. Thomas Stukeley’s attitude to Queen Elizabeth, spoken aloud on several occasions, reveals a disdain which is hard to explain unless he felt he should have been preferred. It is even harder to fathom that he escaped with his life having uttered such sentiments on several occasions. Yet he continued to receive prestigious appointments from Elizabeth until 1570, just as he had from Edward VI and Mary Tudor. In 1569, during arguments over the office of Seneschal of Wexford, Stukeley stated of Elizabeth that ‘I set not a fart for her, nor yet her office’ and further that he would ‘teach her to displace a soldier and to put in one with a pen and inkhorn at his girdle.’ Elsewhere he spoke of his wish to ‘bridle’ her. Of course, comments like that did land him in trouble, in the case over the Seneschal of Wexford in Dublin Castle, but he always escaped further, more harsh, punishment whereas many others did not. And often, extreme punishments were meted out to other infractors for far less inflammatory statements. Before his expedition to Florida in 1563, Stukeley took leave of the Queen stating he would be a prince before he died and that he would address her ‘in the style of princes: “to our dearest sister.” ’ There are other instances where he is supposed to have mentioned a claim to the throne. The basis of the bastard-claim was a resemblance to Henry VIII. This does not seem to be borne out in a portrait which may be of Stukeley (‘Unknown Young Man in Red’, Holbein School, Hampton Court Palace). Unfortunately, the exact identity of the subject of that portrait is not secure, and there is, in fact, no known portrait of Thomas Stukeley. Yet we know there were contemporary depictions of him. All trace of ‘Sir Thomas Stukley Slain with the three Christian Kings’ which hung in the gallery of the works of the great art collector, Lord Lumley, in 1590, is lost. We do have a portrait of Sir Lewis Stukeley the betrayer of Sir Walter Raleigh in 1618 and grandson of Thomas’ brother Lewes, who inherited Affeton and who had been Standard Bearer to Elizabeth I, but it is not particularly useful.

We know very little of Stukeley’s childhood although several biographers have suggested that he took up a position in the household of Charles Brandon, 1st Earl of Suffolk and a favourite of
Henry VIII. Brandon commanded Henry’s invasion of France in 1544 and took Stukeley with him (probably around the age of 19) to the siege of Bolougne. *The Famous History of the Life and Death of Captain Thomas Stukeley* depicts him as a law student (although obsessed with weapons and war) at one of the Inns of Court Temples. The play is the only evidence for such training in his early life. Stukeley was the Standard-bearer to either the men-at-arms or the horsemen of Bolougne. His service at Bolougne ended in 1548 (Brandon had died in 1545) and he must have seen a great deal of action during that time; the city was never easy to hold. Some accounts of his life have him serving until the fall of the city to the French in 1550 but by then Stukeley had been dispatched to the Anglo-Scottish border, another hot-bed of action following Henry VIII’s death in January 1547. He gained a military reputation as courageous and a good fighter as well as one of a troublesome young man. He was deprived of his wages on at least one occasion. Thomas probably entered the service of Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset, another of Henry’s favourites and brother of Jane Seymour on his return to England in 1548 although it may have been later. Indeed, Thomas had probably been seeking a new patron since the death of Brandon in 1545. Seymour became Lord Protector of the Realm for his nephew Edward VI, following Henry VIII’s death and was virtually a king during his Protectorship, ruling autocratically via proclamation. This autocratic position fell apart in 1549, however, and Seymour was arrested. He was released in February 1550 and historian Juan E. Tazón considers that this was when Thomas Stukeley entered his service. In October of 1551 we find Stukeley gathering soldiers in London although for what purpose is unclear; probably as part of Seymour’s plans to seize power once again. Seymour was accused of plotting to seize the Tower of London and its royal treasure, and of coordinating a revolt in the North and the planned assassination of several Privy councillors. He was arrested and then executed in January 1552. A warrant was issued for Stukeley’s arrest along with many of Seymour’s subordinates in October 1551 but by then Thomas fled to France. This was to be his first flight, but certainly not his last. In France his adventures really began.

His undoubted qualities as a soldier soon found attention in France. He served Henri II, King of France, against the Habsburgs and became standard bearer of the king at Boulogne. We hear that Stukeley ‘was made much of’ at the French court. He was sent back to England in September 1552 with a letter of recommendation from Henri to Edward VI (possibly Thomas’ half-brother), stating that Stukeley had served Henri ‘gallantly in his wars’. As soon as he arrived, Stukeley began to play both sides at once (historian Charles Edleman sees this as Stukeley’s *modus operandi* throughout his career). Thomas told Edward of the French plans to seize Calais and move on England and that he, Stukeley, had been sent to gather intelligence for the French. Edward’s journal mentions this
report although the king seems suspicious of it. Several of Edward’s councillors believed Stukeley’s story, however, including William Cecil (later so integral to Elizabeth’s diplomatic machinery). It is possible that Stukeley himself was the author of the French plans which he then betrayed to the English. Edward asked his ambassador to France, William Pickering, for advice and Pickering claimed that Stukeley ‘never heard the French king speak no such word, nor never was in credit with him.’ Stukeley was therefore imprisoned in the Tower of London for the remainder of Edward’s (short) reign and had made an enemy in William Pickering who met with Henri and told him of Stukeley’s behaviour.

Whenever he had resources, Stukeley was a lavish spender, squandering vast sums of, not only his own inheritance, but several others through relations, guardianships and marriages during his life. He was also often accused of theft, counterfeit and other crimes as well as continuously amassing vast debts wherever he went which he never seems to have repaid. His name often occurs on arrest warrants. He seems to have been a disreputable charlatan who would say and do anything and use anyone to get what he wanted for his various schemes, but was nonetheless a skilled soldier. Despite the vast number of enemies he made, he does also seem to have been capable of charming people to his side, convincing them of his sincerity or, as he had to do on several occasions, of his contrition. He also had a remarkable ability to persuade people to lend him money despite his never seeming to pay his debts. His notoriety, fame or infamy, call it what you will, were certainly enough to make him a household name as his presence in plays and literature during his lifetime and, in fact, well after his death, indicate. Tazón goes so far as to call him a ‘national legend’ and points out that his career showed a combination of reckless personal ambition and treachery but at the same time a sense of freedom, and a willingness to break traditional social mores. He was also an adventurer of the first order, willing to undertake almost any task, high or low (and whether or not his reasons for doing so were sincere). He also spent a great deal of time at several courts around Europe pleading his cause (usually himself) and he met with equal amounts of success and disappointment. His career then seems equal parts subversion and conformity and the fascination which that lends it captivated audiences during his lifetime and beyond. Stukeley was also a political tool manipulated by greater forces than he, and whilst he may have thought he was in the great game of European politics, and an important part in that game, sparing on an equal footing with the greatest figures of the day, the attitudes of Philip II of Spain, Elizabeth I, the Pope and others show that he was a pawn in their own games. At times Stukeley was considered inappropriate or incapable of the role he cast himself in. His willingness to betray a cause or change sides on a whim may have made him a dangerous ally. At the same time, however, he strove far above his station
and, whether royal bastard or not, this actually made him a threat to the status quo. His continued presence in the minds of the powerful and the public reveal that he was remembered long after the events of his career and life should have been forgotten for their actual political impact. He’s not quite a Robin Hood figure (although he may have argued that he was) but there is a certain appeal to his socially mobile ambition, aiming as high as a man might (perhaps too high according to the ruling elite). We must also add a dash of the tragedy of too much personal aggrandizing ambition (and a bit of delusion) to his story. It is a fascinating recipe full of flavour and spice and Stukeley’s story becomes more absorbing with the turn of every page.

When Thomas was released from the Tower in 1553 after almost a year in prison, he was freed by the ‘clemency’ of Queen Mary only a few days after she marched on, and entered, London in August (ousting 9-day queen, Lady Jane Grey). Stukeley was released along with several other prominent men, mostly Catholics. He returned to Europe, but obviously could not return to the French court. Thomas therefore chose the other side and went to the Hapsburg Duke of Savoy, Emmanuel Philibert, in Flanders, at the head of a band of mercenaries to fight against France. His military skill recommended him and he already had a reputation as a soldier at least. The men he commanded were probably those whom he had been recruiting in October 1551 for Seymour’s cause. That said, we find reports of Stukeley in French service in 1553 but it seems clear that he was there as a double agent on the orders of either Queen Mary or the Duke of Savoy. Mary wrote to the Imperial ambassador, Simon Renard, in January 1554 of Stukeley that ‘he is a useful man’ and was spying on the French. Stukeley intercepted at least one letter between King Henri and his ambassador naming conspirators in England and Henri’s fears of the marriage between Philip II of Spain and Mary. Stukeley repaid his freedom with this coup. It also reveals that Stukeley was not all bluster and falsehood. He could offer legitimate and worthy service other than with just his sword. During this time Stukeley also met and served the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.

In Brussels, Stukeley took up command of his men in the Imperial army of Charles. We have communication from Mary of Hungary (Charles’ sister and Regent of the Low Countries) regarding several men who were recruited into ‘Stukeley’s Band.’ By June the same year Stukeley’s men were in the army of the Duke of Savoy and involved in the sieges of Mariemburg and Dinant. Stukeley may have known the land from his time in and around Boulogne and might well have been considered indispensable for his knowledge of the terrain. It was a long fighting season (April to August) and we find Stukeley reporting to Mary of Hungary in August that his men had
disbanded and that those who remained were tired and unable to prevent the French from ravaging the neighbourhood because they were too few in number.

In October 1554, the Duke of Savoy decided on a state visit to England and took Stukeley to accompany him in his train of 50 'gentlemen of reputation'. Stukeley wrote to Queen Mary at the same time requesting a remission of all his debts, incurred when he had served her father and brother. This may have been a further repayment for the letter he had intercepted. Despite his mercenary service he had not become rich and we may imagine that, despite his military reputation, he did not fit in well with a peace-time court. Whilst in England Stukeley married Anne Curtis, the niece or grand-daughter of a wealthy alderman. There may have been an earlier wife in Devon but the contention rests on little evidence. Anne Curtis was the sole heir to her family fortune. Yet money may not have been immediately forthcoming since another arrest warrant, this time for counterfeiting, was issued for Stukeley in June 1555 but, by then he was already back in Europe plying his trade once more as a mercenary. He returned to England in 1556 and got into a fight with the Master of the Mint.

With Stukeley in his forces, the Duke of Savoy commanded the victorious side at the Battle of St. Quentin in 1557 where an alliance of Spanish and English troops defeated the French. Stukeley may have been with the English forces who missed the initial battle in early August but who were then involved in the rest of the bloody campaign until late October and the merciless taking of the city itself. The city of St. Quentin (which had refused to surrender) was sacked and then its inhabitants, men, women and children, were put to the sword. This was despite Philip II's order that they should be spared. The mercenaries had not been paid and sacking the town was probably the only means to get any kind of return for their services. Stukeley probably returned to England with the rest of the English troops immediately following the campaign. Despite the victory at St Quentin things were bleak for the English. Calais, the last English possession in Europe, fell to the French in January 1558 and that year also saw the deaths of Charles V, Mary of Hungary, and Queen Mary in November.

Stukeley was also in trouble again in 1558, accused of piracy against Spanish ships off the Devon and Cornwall coasts, and summoned before the Privy Council. The charge was dismissed and he was able to continue in favour. He was also given the wardship of the son of one Sergeant Prideaux in September but he abused his authority and was found rifling through his ward's house in search of funds. His wife's uncle or grandfather died in 1559 and Anne inherited everything. We know
very little about the marriage although Stukeley soon set about spending as much of his wife’s inheritance as he could. He seems to have gone quiet in the early years of Elizabeth’s reign and gained service as a captain at Berwick in Northumberland, the only permanent garrison of anything approaching a standing army at that time. This was a return to the region of his service in the late 1540s and, for once, Stukeley seems to have gained a reputation for good conduct as an officer and a soldier. He is called both a ‘worthy soldier’ and ‘trim courtier’ as the dedicatee of George North’s translation of the Cosmographia, published in 1561. Perhaps his wife Anne had ‘tamed’ him. If she had, it only lasted a short while. Around this time Stukeley sided with the Protestant cause and became a supporter of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. We find reports of Stukeley involved in some unsavoury business on Dudley’s behalf. Perhaps he had simply kept his bad behaviours better hidden at Berwick. Also at this time, he made friends with the Ulster chieftain Sean O’Neill (various spellings of his name cause some confusion), who visited England in the winter of 1561/2 and sought the favour of Elizabeth. This friendship with O’Neill would save Thomas in the future. O’Neill’s visit would also open the eyes of many greedy and ambitious Englishmen to the possibilities which existed for them in Ireland.

Stukeley was favoured in June 1563 with entertaining Queen Elizabeth by staging a mock sea battle on the Thames. His next adventure was already well advanced in the planning. Stukeley was to command an expedition of five or six vessels to colonise Florida, following the French example from the year before. The French had set up a colony on Parris Island at Charlesfort in South Carolina in 1562. Ballads were composed about the ambitious English project and Stukeley’s part in it and yet a letter from the Spanish ambassador, Álvaro de la Quadra, to Philip II (written on May 1, 1563) indicates that Stukeley had informed the ambassador that ‘these people were sending him on a bad and knavish business, but that he would be with me and would show me how to play them a trick that would make a noise in the world.’ In short, Stukeley seemed willing to defect to Spain. The ambassador was sure that the aim of Elizabeth’s plan was to attack Spanish shipping although he seems to have seen through Stukeley’s usual posturing and thought he was playing both sides. He wrote to the King on June 19 that ‘my own opinion is that Stukeley is bent rather on committing some great robbery than discovering new lands.’ de la Quadra saw that Stukeley was quite capable of such duplicity and even more knavish behaviour but concluded he ‘is not much to be trusted.’ He guessed that Stukeley’s offer to serve the Spanish king (which he made again at the moment of departure) may have been a cunning stratagem to ensure he would not be molested by Spanish ships on his journey. Whatever the truth, the idea seems to have stuck in Philip’s mind that he could make some use of Stukeley (if not trust him completely). The Spanish
ambassador was, at the same time, assured by Elizabeth that no harm was intended to ‘friendly princes’ but she had already written to the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Sir Henry Sidney, to treat Stukeley well and to ensure that she got her share of the booty from plundered French ships. Of Stukeley’s ships (one was named the *Fortune Stukeley* and another the *Anne Stukeley*), two were funded by Elizabeth, two by Stukeley himself and one chartered by one of his captains, Jean Ribault. It was Ribault who had established the French colony in South Carolina the year before and who had returned to spruik the idea of an English colony in Florida to Elizabeth. She seized upon the idea but may have had another agenda of her own.

Stukeley’s departure from the Queen for Florida in late June 1563 was the occasion he claimed he would one day be a prince and would address her as ‘sister.’ In that same encounter, he claimed he would rather be the sovereign of a mole-hill than a subject in the greatest kingdom in Christendom. We find Elizabeth remembering this conversation as late as 1578 (saying that perhaps his mole-hill would be found in Morocco). It is possible that the Florida expedition was considered by Elizabeth and her councillors as a way of getting the meddlesome Stukeley out of the way, especially if he was a bastard relation. His service to Elizabeth in this instance (and hosting the entertainment on the Thames) seems odd indeed given his attitude towards her. Stukeley departed with his six ships and immediately set to plundering indiscriminately off the Irish coast; attacking French, Spanish and Portuguese vessels. Stukeley, apparently no stranger to piracy, was accused of never having planned to venture near Florida at all. He did, however, come across the survivors of the French colony in Florida returning home in a roughly fashioned vessel and tales of their failure in South Carolina and their terrible plight may have convinced him to abandon his plans. Still, within a month of his departure, Stukeley was hard at work as a pirate. Furious protests were made to Elizabeth’s various ambassadors and a force was sent to arrest Stukeley. He surrendered at Cork and was once again imprisoned. He asked his friend Sean O’Neill to intercede on his behalf. At that time, O’Neill had been successful on behalf of the English fighting the Scottish lords of Ulster. O’Neill wrote to the queen of Stukeley’s ‘prudence’ and obedience to her laws as well as being an ‘intimate friend’ of his, requesting that Stukeley be appointed as his intermediary to the crown. O’Neill also wrote letters of support for Stukeley to William Cecil and the Earl of Leicester. There were other voices in support of Stukeley in Elizabeth’s ear including Leicester, the Bishop of Meath, Hugh Brady, and the Justicar, Nicholas Arnold. Elizabeth acquiesced and left Stukeley in Ireland. Stukeley may have been seen as useful at O’Neill’s side since the Irishman had amassed a large army 4,000 strong and would prove difficult to deal with.
Stukeley was recommended to the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Sir Henry Sidney, who was converted to, and would remain, a staunch Stukeley supporter. Sidney’s own appointment was promoted by the earl of Leicester, another Stukeley supporter. Sidney even writes of Stukeley’s honesty and ‘deep judgement.’ If Stukeley was effective in controlling O’Neill this might explain Sidney’s unwavering support since it was with Sidney that O’Neill had clashed (and who outnumbered Sidney’s forces two-to-one). In Ireland, however, Stukeley again contacted the Spanish ambassador and offered to defect to Spain and, even further, to agitate for the Spanish cause in Ireland.

Stukeley’s arrival in Ulster in 1566 also saw a second marriage, this time to Elizabeth Peppard, a wealthy widow. His first wife Anne lived until at least 1562 when their son William was born but we have no precise date for her death. Using money from his new marriage and perhaps his gains from piracy, in June 1566 Stukeley purchased the property adjoining O’Neill’s and with it the title of Marshall of Ireland, the highest military command in the land. This purchase was blocked by Queen Elizabeth since she did not trust Stukeley and thought that he might make a common cause with O’Neill. The Spanish ambassador mused that the reason may simply have been that ‘they consider him a Catholic.’ Considerations about Thomas’ religion become vitally important from this point on (just as they become an important part of European politics) despite the fact that he had served Protestant and Catholic leaders without any apparent qualms up to that point.

Stukeley was summoned to England from Ireland to face all the charges against him but once again there was insufficient evidence to prove any charge. In his absence, Sidney had defeated O’Neill’s forces and O’Neill himself was dead yet Sidney’s support for Stukeley remained. Thomas was able to purchase the office of Seneschal of Wexford and with it came the control of several castles. His conduct was soon getting him into trouble, however, and when he insulted the Queen’s cousin, Lady St. Leger, even with Sidney. Stukeley was ejected from office and the queen made her own appointment, an attorney with little military experience. This led to the altercation about passing wind quoted at the start of this article. Stukeley seems to have determined (yet again?) on rebellion and may have been behind several outbreaks of popular unrest against Elizabeth’s Seneschal, Nicholas White. Stukeley was accused of treason and imprisoned again, this time in Dublin castle. The case never came to trial. Upon release, Stukeley travelled to London but soon returned to Ireland with his son. An anecdote reported by biographer John Izon has Stukeley walking barefoot or crawling through the streets of Waterford as a penitent, offering himself to God. Many have shown suspicion of this conduct and have accused Stukeley of undertaking it to pretend to be a Catholic unfairly exiled by Elizabeth. If this is so, and Stukeley’s pretence at religious zeal just
that, then he truly was a rogue who would stoop to any low. There does seem to be some light and shade to Stukeley’s character, however, and we cannot completely discount some acts of sincerity. On several occasions, he went to extraordinarily great lengths to prove that he was in earnest. If it was all a sham, the we must credit that he was certainly very good at playing his part since many were convinced of his penitence and his sincerity in the Catholic cause and others. At the same time, he was clearly not beyond acts of criminality which, for the most part, he managed to get away with. He also seems to have been able to tell the most blatant falsehoods without a moment’s hesitation or prick of conscience. If his religious position was a card in his hand he now played (and which he seems not to have up to that point) it may also reveal that he was aware of the winds of opportunity blowing in his favour if he was seen as a Catholic, especially one wronged by Elizabeth. If this was simply a manoeuvre and shows him reading the political situation, it all adds to his unscrupulous but canny ability to play the game of politics.

Stukeley departed from Waterford for Vivero in Galicia, on the North-western tip of Spain, with his 8-year old son, in April 1570, never to see England or Ireland again. As soon as he landed in Spain he took on the mantle of a zealous Catholic in exile and he may have sewn these seeds before he left. His prior career gives no indication of any strongly held religious beliefs, Protestant or Catholic. He had worked effectively for both the Catholic Mary Tudor and Protestant Robert Dudley. In Spain, however, he attended mass and (more importantly) was noticed observing fasts and other tenets of the faith. Stukeley was mentioned in the highest circles in both Spain and Rome but he alienated the Archbishop of Cashel, Maurice Fitzgibbon, who saw himself as the main representative of Irish Catholics in Spain. The two remained rivals for the favour of both Philip II and the Pope. It was to Stukeley’s advantage that the Papal Bull excommunicating Elizabeth, *Regnans in Excelsis*, had been issued just prior to his arrival in Spain, in February 1570. It may even have been part of the reason for his decision to depart. Perhaps, with an excommunicated queen in England, he saw his chance to gain support for his cause (as a Catholic) in Europe. He certainly seems to have been honoured in Spain as a way of distracting Elizabeth with fears of an invasion of Ireland. After some delay, Philip II made Stukeley Marquis of Ireland and awarded him a stipend of a thousand ducats a month (some reports say a stipend of 6,000 ducats) and provided him a villa on the outskirts of Madrid. Philip was also in need of Englishmen on his side especially since the Low Countries had been in revolt since 1566 and no success was forthcoming there. Stukeley’s loyalty to Mary Tudor seems to have been remembered and recommended him to the Spanish king although there also seems to have been some remnant of the idea that he could not be completely trusted.
In Spain, Stukeley set about attempting to raise funds and troops for the proposed invasion of Ireland to be led by him even though he seems to have been aware that such an invasion was never actually intended. The papal legate in Madrid wrote to the Pope that Stukeley had informed the legate that he had spent his wife’s fortune on an enterprise ‘for the salvation of souls’ and in the ‘service and augmentation of our holy Mother the Roman Catholic Church.’ Given his reputation for lavish spending, this seems to qualify as a blatant lie. Philip II paid for a trip to Rome in 1571, perhaps to get Stukeley off his hands. A letter from the Spanish Secretary of State to the ambassador in London summed up that his ‘talent, intelligence, and weight were insufficient for the purpose in hand, and for this reason, and in order not to stir up feeling prematurely, an honest excuse was found to divert him.’ Once again the Spanish seem to have seen through Stukeley’s posturing and, even though he may have thought he was undertaking great and weighty schemes, others saw that he did not have the capacity to carry them out. Stukeley’s actions were reported back to London and it seems that any reports on his behaviours in particular caused the Queen distress. In correspondence to Philip II in 1571 she accused Stukeley of being a ‘fugitive and a rebel’ who ‘could not be useful to any king.’ Letters from the Privy Council continued to paint Stukeley by name in a bad light. Added to these attacks were those by Fitzgibbon and other prominent exiled Irishmen who saw him as competition.

While in Rome, Stukeley sought and secured the support of Pope Pius V. This was unsurprising since it was Pius who had excommunicated Elizabeth. Stukeley next captained a galley (or a squadron of three galleys depending on the source) at the battle of Lepanto in October 1571 in Don John of Austria’s fleet. Stukeley’s exploits were immediately noted and allowed him to return to Spain. The reasons for his connection to Don John are unclear although John was the illegitimate son of the Emperor Charles I whom Thomas had served in the 1550s. A bond through their shared illegitimacy is possible. One biography claims Stukeley was appointed by the Pope to command at the battle. The Papal States provided seven galleys in the Holy League Navy of 206 galleys (and 6 galleasses). The Papal ships, whose flagship was commanded by Marcantonio Colonna, were in the centre squadron with Don John himself. This, therefore would have been where Thomas was stationed with his galley (or three). Colonna rescued Don Jon on his flagship, Real, during the battle. When it was nearly overrun with Janissaries from the Ottoman flagship, the Papal ship came alongside and swept the Turks off the ship and then boarded and took the Ali.

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2 Details of the battle can be found in Angus Konstam Lepanto 1571. The Greatest Naval Battle of the Renaissance (London, 2003); Jack Beeching The Galleys at Lepanto (London, 1982); Niccolò Capponi Victory in the West (London, 2006).
Pasha’s flagship. The hoisting of the banner of the Holy League on the captured flagship, broke the morale of the Ottoman forces although fighting continued for some hours. It is entirely possible that one of Stukeley’s exploits during the battle (they were reported as ‘manly deeds’) took place during this action. It is even possible they were depicted in one of the various paintings and illustrations of the battle, especially that depicted in fresco in the Vatican’s Gallery of Maps. Other depictions of the details of the battle such as the anonymous painting now hanging in the National Maritime Museum, in Greenwich, London, or Titan’s Philip II offering Don Fernando to Victory (now in the Museo del Prado, Madrid) or indeed that by Veronese, painted in 1572 (now hanging in the Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice) could include Stukeley’s exploits in a general sense. That said, none of the contemporary Spanish accounts of the battle mention Stukeley, and Tazon credits the assigning to him of a command to legends already growing around him. His experience as a ship’s captain (and a pirate) would have recommended him for such a command, however, and it is unnecessary to reject the account completely. Immediately after the battle his reputation with the Pope, Philip II, and with John of Austria were at their highest. The idea of him being a legendary figure already in 1571, however, may suggest that he was far more prominent in peoples’ minds in England and Ireland (and indeed in Europe) than previously thought, and is supported by the fact of his long-lasting fame.

It is possible that Stukeley (as a known agitator against her) was involved in the Ridolfi plot to assassinate Elizabeth and replace her with Mary of Scotland. The plot had been discovered earlier in 1571 when Stukeley was already in Europe. It also proposed plans to invade Ireland, or to try and burn the English fleet, and all to coincide with the proposed invasion of England from
Flanders. According to some sources, the reaction of Philip to the plot itself was, however, ‘infinite mortification’ and so it came to naught. Elsewhere though, it was the discovery of the plot which most grieved Philip.

Stukeley spent all of 1573 and 1574 in Spain and the period finds numerous letters from him to the king outlining his plans for an invasion of Ireland. In 1574, with Ireland in open revolt under the Earl of Desmond, Philip appointed Pedro Menéndez de Aviles to assemble 233 ships, and 13,000 troops. Reports reached England that Stukeley was to command 8 galleons complete with troops to invade Ireland. Elizabeth’s peace envoy to Madrid had special instructions regarding English exiles and named Thomas Stukeley in particular (he was third on the ‘most wanted’ list). The armada came to nothing and dissolved among several crises: money, logistics, plague and the threat of the Ottoman fleet in the Mediterranean. Stukeley was banished from Madrid as part of the peace brokered with England (his son was to remain in the city to be educated) and, once again, Thomas was ruined financially. He travelled to Rome in 1575 to the court of the new Pope, Gregory XIII, once again seeking support. There he was installed in the ducal palace with attendants and treated as a member of the highest nobility. Stukeley was forced to co-operate with another Irish exile, James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald, on Irish invasion plans. The two knew each other from Stuekely’s time in Ireland but they did not trust each other and their plans for invasion came to nothing. Thereafter, Stukeley’s exact movements are difficult to track but 1577 found him in Brussels with Don John, his commander at Lepanto, who was then acting as the Spanish governor of the Low Countries. John wrote letters to both King Philip and the Pope recommending Stukeley anew. Fitzmaurice had already left for Madrid but received short shrift from the king and left there with nothing. He gained some support from the King of Portugal, sailed for Ireland but became stranded in France after deserters from his cause stole his ship.

We know that Stukeley’s movements were still of interest in England and his whereabouts were reported to William Cecil, Elizabeth’s spymaster. One of his agents in Florence reported in March 1577 that Stukeley had left Siena for Rome. We are told of his lack of friends on this occasion; no one attended a banquet he had arranged. This, Stukeley’s final visit to Rome, bore long awaited fruit and, in early February 1578, he was sent with 600 soldiers, arms and munitions for 2,400 more, and provisions for all for six months on an 800 tonne ship, the St Giovanni di Battist, bound for Ireland to do ‘all the mischief they may to that wicked woman.’ Stukeley was loaded with titles: Baron, Viscount, Earl, and Marquis of various localities in Ireland. The ship, however, proved unseaworthy (with rotted timbers, and not enough rope or sail) and the men not much better. The
The ship was not provisioned properly and not outfitted for 600 troops. It also lacked artillery. There is a suspicion that Stukeley may have used all the funds provided (and his personal advance) to pay his debts although that would have been breaking with his tradition of not paying his debts. He may simply have squandered them in lavish living as he seems to have done every other time he came into money. Stukeley landed in Porto Palamos, North Eastern Spain, and reported back to Rome that five of his supposedly loyal Italian captains had deserted. There were fights between his men (mostly Genoese and Corsicans) and the locals. One of his remaining captains, Hercole del Mastro da Pisa, wrote back to Rome a scathing report containing the accusation that much of Stukeley’s behaviour disgusted him and that Stukeley had no interest in restoring faith in Ireland, and surmising that the Pope had been deceived. Hercole and Stukeley shared a mutual hatred. In George Peel’s play, The Battle of Alcazar, Stukeley is killed by two of his Italian soldiers named ‘Hercules’ and ‘Pisano’ (‘The Pisan’ is also based on Hercole). Even in The Famous History ..., he is slain by mutinous Italian soldiers. At Cadiz, a message from King Philip to Stukeley suggested that Thomas abandon his Irish scheme in the meantime and instead offer assistance to the 24-year old King Sebastian I of Portugal for his expedition to Morocco. Once Morocco was subdued, Philip argued, Sebastian would offer all manner of assistance to the Irish invasion.

Stukeley sailed on to Lisbon where his arrival in April was noted by an English merchant, William Pillen, who observed that Stukeley had about 700 soldiers (he may have recruited more on the way) and 80 of those were experts well-liked by the King of Portugal. Stukeley’s movements were still of interest to those in power in England (to whom Pillen reported them). It should be noted that if only 80 of Stukeley’s men were veterans, the remaining 620 were not. They had probably been recruited from the bars and brothels of Rome and along the way. Pillen met and talked with Stukeley and he reported their conversation. We can see Stukeley still playing both sides:

They say in England that I am going to Ireland; no, no, I am not appointed for it. I know Ireland as well the best; there is nothing to be gotten but hunger and lice. They say I am a traitor to the Queen; no, they are traitors that say so. I will ever accept her as my queen. It is true that there is in England my cruel enemy Cecil, the Treasurer, whom I abhor.

We even have corroboration that this hatred was mutual. Cecil’s opinion of Stukeley was that he was:

A defamed person almost through all Christendom and a faithless beast rather than a man, fleeing first out of England for notable piracies and out of Ireland for
treacheries not unpardonable, which two [Charles Neville and Stukeley] were the first ringleaders of the rest of the rebels, the one for England, the other for Ireland.

It is of interest that Cecil pairs Thomas with the Catholic Charles Neville, 6th Earl of Westmoreland, and co-leader of the Northern Rebellion (with Thomas Percy, 7th Earl of Northumberland) in 1569. The rebellion was crushed and both Earls fled. Percy was captured and executed in 1572 but Neville evaded capture, was a commander of the forces in Flanders intended for the invasion of England with the Armada in 1588, but died penniless in 1601. Stukeley and his continued movements and doings, seem to have caused more disquiet to the queen than those of Neville.

Part of Cecil’s attitude may have been professional jealousy, formed by Stukeley’s effective spying for Mary Tudor back in 1553. Cecil had also been the man to take Stukeley’s deposition in 1552 about the French plans to invade England under Edward VI and he had believed Thomas’ story. The ambassador Pickering’s version may have revealed that he, Cecil, had been duped, and perhaps he didn’t forget the sleight. In 1571 he declared that Stukeley possessed ‘the highest degree of vainglory, prodigality, falsehood.’ Later (in 1583) Cecil could still remember Stukeley as a ‘rakehell’ and a ‘wicked crafty traitor’ even though, by then, any effects of Stukeley’s ‘noisy’ career should have faded. That the memory of Stukeley was still strong, however, can be seen in Peel’s *The Battle of Alcazar*, which probably was first performed in late 1588 (a decade after Stukeley’s death) although not published until 1594. Later still came *The Famous History of the life and death of Captain Stukeley*. There may also have been other plays. Philip Henslowe’s Diary records a *Stewtley* performed in 1597 and there is no candidate for a subject other than Stukeley.

King Sebastian of Portugal was supporting the deposed Moroccan sultan, Muly Mohammed (Abu Abdallah Mohammed II), who had been ousted by his uncle, Abdelmalek (Abd al-Malik). Abdelmalek was the son of the founder of the Saadi dynasty in Morocco in 1544, Mohammed ash-Sheikh but had fled with his brothers to the Ottoman Empire in 1557 when their eldest brother, Abdallah al-Ghalib, became Sultan and sought to eliminate them. Abdelmalek was named successor in their father’s will but on Abdallah al-Ghalib’s death from asthma in 1574, his son Muly Mohammed took the title of Sultan and this plunged the country into four years of civil war. Abdelmalek invaded with an Ottoman army in 1576. Muly Mohammed fled and made war against his uncle, eventually appealing for support to Sebastian to invade Morocco.
Stukeley’s decision to side with Sebastian seems in keeping with his pragmatism of looking out for himself but if it was in order to gain additional support for the Irish invasion we will never know. The Papal Consul-General attempted to stop Stukeley from landing at Lisbon in order to keep him to the Irish task at hand (he promised to deliver the requested additional funds to Stukeley) but the ship was in so poor a state that Stukeley had to dock. From there Stukeley was recruited into Sebastian’s army. The Pope was amazed at the Portuguese King’s actions in diverting Thomas Stukeley, Marquis of Leinster, from his purpose.

The Irish members of Stukeley’s expedition abandoned him in disgust and returned to Rome to protest his desertion from their cause with most of the men and money intended for the invasion. Once Stukeley had agreed to become a subordinate in Sebastian’s army, it would seem as if his authority over his men disintegrated. One report back to the Pope spoke of Stukeley’s inability and the obvious distrust between him and his troops. It is possible that his lack of religious fervour, and his willingness to be diverted from his purpose, put his Italians completely off-side since it is unlikely that Stukeley could have had the extensive military career he had had to that point if he was always mistrusted by his men. He would have found it difficult to impress his successive commanders if his men undermined him.

Stukeley joined Sebastian’s 17,000 strong army made up of 9,000 peasant levies, 5,500 foreign troops (German, Walloon, Spanish, and Stukeley’s Italians), and 2,500 Portuguese gentlemen volunteers. The army was therefore a largely untrained force and it lacked any kind of cohesion. We are told of ‘divers other Englishmen gentlemen’ in the army by Richard Hakluyt and Stukeley always seems to have had English and Irish co-conspirators with him, for the invasion of Ireland at any rate, if not with him more generally for profit and adventure. Hakluyt, however, only names a single Englishman, a survivor, M. Christopher Lyster, who was taken prisoner and later escaped, returning to England in 1586. The Portuguese levies (who relied on the outdated pike) and gentleman volunteers were gathered under feudal obligations, a practice sorely out of date in the late 16th century. The 24-year old Sebastian himself was inexperienced at command but had old-fashioned, knightly, ideas of leading from the front and excelling his men in valour. Unfortunately,

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3 Richard Hakluyt The Principal Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation (London, 1598-1600) Book 2, Part 2, pages 67-68. Hakluyt’s voluminous work (in 12 volumes) includes ‘The Voyage of Thomas Stukeley, wrongfully called Marques of Ireland, into Barbary in 1578’ by John Thomas Freiigius, taken from his Historia de bello Africano (1580). Interestingly, the Hakluyt text is heavily edited and reassembled, using only eleven lines taken from three separate chapters. Colm MacClossan (‘Framing the English nation: Reading between Text and Paratext in The Principal Navigations (1598-1600)’ in Daniel Carey and Claire Jowitt (eds.) Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe (London and New York, 2012), pages 139-152, at page 148) even accuses Hakluyt of deliberately taking attention away from Stukeley by mention of Lyster (who is not included in Freiigius’ original).
his inexperience and headstrong unwillingness to listen to advice, would lead, very quickly, to disaster.

The fleet of 400 ships departed in late June 1578 and landed at Arizla (Asilah, on the Atlantic coast of Morocco) on July 14th and made camp. Signs of the unprepared and amateur nature of the Portuguese force were immediately apparent. They made no fortified camp and bivouacked in the open with no one knowing what their role was. As such, the men, mostly inexperienced, were prone to panic at the slightest disturbance. Sebastian rejected Abdelmalek’s offer to negotiate a peace. He then abandoned the plan to march down the coast with the fleet in support and instead decided to march inland. Sebastian would hear no advice to the contrary (inhospitable terrain, supply problems, two opposing armies, abandoning the fleet) and was determined to bring the enemy to a decisive battle. Stukeley objected to the plan to march immediately against a superior force of Moors but he was shut down in ‘injurious terms.’ The army headed off on their march on July 29th accompanied by the baggage train and 9,000 camp followers. 1,100 wagons carried the noble baggage alone and they themselves travelled in gilded carriages. The baggage included such essentials as musicians, pavilions, sumptuous furniture and silver plate to eat off. It was a procession rather than an invasion and, heedless of their inexperience, the Portuguese expected a quick and swift victory. Despite their extensive baggage train, they were short of both water and food from the outset. The baggage train was harassed by light cavalry and the main force awaited the Portuguese at Kasr el-Kebir – it took the Portuguese six days to march those 40 miles.

There was a war council on the night of August 3rd and even Muly Mohammed advised to wait and attack late on the following day. This advice to attack late in the afternoon was because Abdelmalek was sick (perhaps poisoned) and might not live out the day and, if that transpired, it would throw the enemy into confusion. Stukeley supported this advice but was, as he had been on previous occasions when he argued to remain on the coast, all but accused of cowardice by Sebastian. The king refused all advice and chose to attack at first light. The king also chose the Portuguese position because it offered the opportunity for ‘beautiful cavalry charges and high feats of arms.’ Abdelmalek’s army opposing Sebastian’s 17,000, numbered between 50,000 and 70,000 troops. Sebastian’s last mistake was to attack with his baggage train attached to the army in a large open square formation; many troops were squandered protecting the baggage. Stukeley and his Italians, along with the Spanish, were on the left wing, the Germans and Walloons on the right, and the centre made up of the peasant levies. It is possible that, not trusting in their loyalty, Stukeley
split his Italians into detachments inserted between the Spanish contingents. The cavalry, led by Sebastian on the left and Muly Mohammed on the right, protected the flanks of the square.

The Battle of Alcazar as it is most commonly known (also El-Ksar el-Kibir, Ksar El Kebir, Alcacer Quibir, Alcazarquivir, or the Battle of the Three Kings or Oued al-Makhazin) was fought on August 4th, 1578. It lasted six hours and was a fiasco for the Portuguese almost from start to finish. The Portuguese cavalry, with King Sebastian at their head, charged the enemy centre and were, at first, successful but lacked the resources and reserves to take advantage of their gains. The Portuguese also lacked firearms and, as Moorish reserves filled the gaps in their line, their own cavalry chased the Portuguese cavalry back to their lines and then surrounded the square. The Portuguese army then disintegrated and was cut down. Losses are estimated at 9,000 dead and thousands captured, destined for slavery or ransom. The number of survivors who made it back to the fleet at Arizla only numbered in the hundreds. Among the dead lay the childless King Sebastian, who fought on as his concept of war dictated and fell late in the action, Muly Mohammed, the usurper sultan Abdelmalek who was indeed ill and did not live out the day, and Captain Thomas Stukeley.

Two traditions exist regarding Stukeley’s death. One was that he was killed early in the fighting when a cannonball took off his legs. The other tradition is that he was murdered by his own Italian soldiers after the imminent defeat of the Portuguese became obvious – both plays which have come down to us dramatise this version.

![The only known depiction of the Battle of Alcazar, Miguel Leitão de Andrade Miscelânea (1629), Museu do Forte da Ponta da Bandeira, Lagos, Portugal. The outnumbered Portuguese army is surrounded. Photo: Georges Jansoone.](image-url)
Stukeley’s death does not seem, at first glance, to have any real significance in itself but it did find resonance in England. Perhaps the greatest consequence of the battle was that the Portuguese throne, left without an heir, would fall to Philip II of Spain within two years and remain a Spanish puppet until 1640. In England, Stukeley’s death was seized upon by playwrights for the next thirty years at least and, as we have seen, he could still be referred to as a kind of bogey-man for the queen several years later. There may be more to it than that, however. The events of Stukeley’s flamboyant life had been immediately current in English society and he was often mentioned in contemporary poetry and ballads. Stukeley’s being diverted to the Moroccan invasion by Sebastian seems, at first glance, a side project (and yet one totally in keeping with Stukeley’s career of changing loyalties). Yet, the Moroccan adventure may have had more significance than at first appears. Emily Bartels has written of the importance of Barbary and trade with Morocco, especially in sugar but also saltpetre, essential for gunpowder. A trade mission from England in 1577 secured just that commodity. English merchants, agents, and other representatives were present in Morocco at the time of Alcazar and Stukeley’s presence with the invading, Portuguese army could only have undermined English interests and activities. What is more, trading with Morocco sought to thwart Spain, by trading ammunition and arms for sugar. A papal ban on providing weapons to the ‘infidel’ was ignored by England. Queen Elizabeth had been in negotiations with both Muly Mohammed and Abdelmalek and after Alcazar she was with Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur, Abdelmalek’s brother and Sultan of the Saadi dynasty until 1603. These negotiations were very often secret and state papers only allude to them although there are traces of covered-up trade deals involving arms and ammunition. Contact between the two countries slowed following the battle of Alcazar but by the probable year of production of Peele’s play in 1588, Ahmad al-Mansur had sent ambassadors to England to establish an economic and political alliance. Thomas Stukeley’s interference in Morocco then, may have been a much larger problem for England (and one that explains why it would cause such concern) and the involvement of a prominent personality like Stukeley’s may have (and seems to have) jeopardized a delicate relationship. The ongoing necessity and importance of the relationship between England and Morocco may go some way to explain why Stukeley remained a figure featured in English Drama to the end of the 16th and into the 17th century. To be reminded of his interference and just how problematic a thorn-in-the-side he had been added to the contemporary relevance of the plays. Given that it had been Philip who encouraged Stukeley to join with Sebastian, we might see the King of Spain using Stukeley as a pawn in his own games without telling him what his purpose was.
If Stukeley, and evoking his memory, was such an agitation, we may contemplate the effect that Peele’s play may have had, especially in the year of the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Peele makes Stukeley’s connection to the court of Philip at the time of his death explicit (Act 5, line 148). Peele’s use of Hercules and Pisano as well as an Irish Bishop (perhaps Fitzgibbon was meant) perhaps reveals an intimate knowledge of the events of Stukeley’s career, and although it is put to dramatic purposes, might have struck a chord in audiences in 1588 and after.

Whether Stukeley was a bastard of Henry VIII or not, he was one of the most colourful and troublesome figures of his day. Documents relating to his adventures offer all sorts of insights for the military historian, especially the changeable life of a mercenary captain. He has been condemned as an out-and-out rogue and villain who lied and dissembled to the greatest men and women of the day. Yet he remained able to convince some men (and women) of the highest rank of his sincerity, dedication and abilities. He is a colourful conundrum and, as his being the subject of several plays and even art in the decades following his death shows, he always has been. Stukeley’s career and death remained topical into the 17th century and, although he is all but forgotten today, his life and career amply reward a fresh examination.

Further Reading
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