

Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 15 — Digby, George

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1888

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DIGBY, GEORGE, second EARL OF BRISTOL (1612–1677), was the eldest son of John Digby, first earl of Bristol [q. v.], by his wife Beatrix, daughter of Charles Walcot of Walcot, Shropshire, and widow of Sir John Dyve of Bromham, Bedfordshire. He was born at Madrid in October 1612, during his father's first embassy to Spain. When only twelve years old he appeared at the bar of the House of Commons with a petition on behalf of his father, who, through the instrumentality of the Duke of Buckingham, had been committed to the Tower. His self-possession and fluency of speech on that occasion attracted the attention of the members, and gave great promise of a brilliant career in the future. He was admitted to Magdalen College, Oxford, on 15 Aug. 1626, where he distinguished himself by his remarkable abilities, and became intimately acquainted with Peter Heylin, the well-known historian and divine, who was a fellow of that college. After travelling in France, at the conclusion of his university career, he lived for some years with his father at Sherborne Castle, where he applied himself to the study of philosophy and literature. On 31 Aug. 1636 he was created a master of arts. It was during this period of retirement in the country that the 'Letters between the Lord George Digby and Sir Kenelm Digby, Knt., concerning Religion' were written. The first letter is dated from 'Sherburn, November 2, 1638,' and the last from 'Sherborn, March 30, 1639.' These letters, in which the Roman catholic church is attacked by Lord Digby, and defended by his kinsman, Sir Kenelm, were afterwards

published in 1651. On one of his short occasional visits to London, Digby quarrelled with a gentleman of the court, whom he wounded and disarmed within the precincts of the palace of Whitehall. For this offence he was imprisoned and treated with considerable severity. Upon his release he vowed vengeance against the court for the indignities which he had suffered. His opportunity soon came, for in March 1640 he was elected as one of the members for the county of Dorset, and was again returned for the same constituency at the general election which occurred a few months afterwards. On 9 Nov. 1640 he moved for a select committee to draw up a remonstrance to the king on 'the deplorable state of this his kingdom' (*Parl. History*, ii. cols. 651–4), and on 11 Nov. he was appointed a member of the committee instructed to undertake the impeachment of the Earl of Strafford. Though at first very eager in prosecuting the charges against the unfortunate earl, Digby gradually changed his tactics, and at length, on 21 April 1641, he vigorously opposed the third reading of the Attainder Bill (*ib.* cols. 750–4). His speech gave great offence to those with whom he had been lately acting, and on the next day he was called upon to explain. No further proceedings were then taken, but the speech having been afterwards printed, the House of Commons on 13 July ordered that it should be publicly burnt by the common hangman (*ib.* col. 883). Many months afterwards appeared 'Lord Digbie's Apologie for Himselfe, Published the fourth of January, Ann. Dom. 1642,' in which he affirmed that Sir Lewis Dive had given the directions for printing this speech without asking his

consent. Meanwhile on 9 June 1641 Digby was called up to the House of Lords in his father's barony of Digby, and took his seat on the following day. Much was expected from his accession to the court party at this critical period; but his restless disposition and untrustworthy character prevented him from being of real use to any party in the state. Though he had himself urged the prosecution of the five members upon the king, he actually whispered into Lord Kimbolton's ear, while sitting next to him in the House of Lords, that 'the king was very mischievously advised; and that it should go very hard but he would know whence that counsel proceeded; in order to which, and to prevent further mischief, he would go immediately to his majesty' (CLARENDON, *Hist. of the Rebellion*, i. 508). Furthermore, upon the retreat of the five members and Lord Kimbolton to the city, Digby suggested that they should be followed and seized by armed force. Though his proposal was rejected by the king, it soon got to be generally known, and Digby became one of the most unpopular men in the country. One day in the beginning of January 1642 he went to Kingston-upon-Thames upon business for the king 'in a coach with six horses, and no other equipage with him, save only a servant riding by him, and a companion in a coach' (WOOD, *Athenæ Oxon.* iii. col. 1101). Wood's account of this journey, however, materially differs from that received by parliament. It was asserted that Digby and Colonel Lundsford had collected some troops of horse, and had appeared in arms at Kingston. Digby was ordered to attend in his place in the House of Lords to answer for himself,

and Lundsford was committed to the Tower. Instead of obeying the summons, Digby fled to Holland, and on 26 Feb. 1642 was impeached of high treason in the House of Commons (*Parl. History*, ii. cols. 1103–5). Owing, however, to the confusion of the times, the prosecution of the impeachment was not carried through.

Unable to remain quietly in Holland, Digby came over to York, where he stayed some days in disguise. Upon his return voyage he was captured by one of the parliamentary cruisers, and taken to Hull. There he made himself known to Sir John Hotham, the governor, whom he attempted to gain over to the royal cause. Though Hotham refused to be persuaded to desert his party, he connived at Digby's escape. Upon the breaking out of the civil war, Digby took part in the battle of Edgehill. He greatly distinguished himself by his gallantry at the taking of Lichfield, and was shot through the thigh while leading an assault upon that city. Falling out with Prince Rupert soon afterwards, Digby threw up his command, and returned to the court, which was then at Oxford. On 28 Sept. 1643 he was appointed by the king one of the principal secretaries of state in place of Lord Falkland, and on the same day was admitted to the privy council. On the last day of the following month he became high steward of Oxford University, in the room of William Lord Say, who had been removed on account of his adherence to the parliament. Digby's conduct of affairs as secretary of state was both unfortunate and imprudent. His visionary project for a treaty between the king and the city

of London was quickly frustrated by the interception of Digby's letter to Sir Basil Brooke. His lengthy negotiations with Major-general Sir Richard Brown for the betrayal of Abingdon terminated in his utter discomfiture, while his correspondence with Lesley and the other commanders of the Scotch army in England met with no better success. On 16 Oct. 1645 he succeeded Prince Rupert as lieutenant-general of the king's forces north of the Trent; but meeting with several reverses, and being unable to effect a junction with the army of the Marquis of Montrose, he fled after his defeat by Sir John Brown at Carlisle Sands, with Sir Marmaduke Langdale and other officers, to the Isle of Man. Thence he went to Ireland, where he conceived the plan of bringing the Prince of Wales over to that country, and of making one more effort for the royal cause. With this object in view he visited the Scilly Islands, Jersey, and France, but had at length to return to Ireland without being able to accomplish his cherished design. Upon the surrender to the parliamentary commissioners Digby escaped with some difficulty to France. He then enlisted as a volunteer in the French king's service, and took part in the war of the Fronde. His conspicuous bravery soon attracted attention, and he was taken into favour by the king and Cardinal Mazarin.

In August 1651 he became a lieutenant-general in the French army, and was in the same year appointed commander of the royal troops in Normandy. Upon the death of his father on 6 Jan. 1653 he succeeded as the

second Earl of Bristol, and was nominated a knight of the Garter in the same month. In consequence of the failure of a political intrigue, by which he endeavoured to supplant Mazarin, Digby was dismissed from his commands in the French army, and ordered to leave the country. After paying a short visit to Charles at Bruges he retired to the Spanish camp in the Netherlands, where he gained the friendship of Don John of Austria, and rendered himself useful to the Spaniards in the negotiations with the garrison of St. Ghislain, near Brussels, which finally resulted in the surrender of that town by Marshal Schomberg. On 1 Jan. 1657 Digby was reappointed secretary of state. While staying at Ghent he became a convert to the Roman catholic faith, and was, much to his surprise, ordered by Charles to give up his seals, and at the same time was forbidden to appear at the council board in the future. Digby, however, accompanied Charles on his secret expedition to Spain, and afterwards went to Madrid, where he was well received and liberally treated by the Spanish king. Upon the Restoration, Digby returned to England, but was installed at Windsor as a knight of the Garter by proxy in April 1661, being at that time abroad. Though he took an active interest in public affairs, and spoke frequently in parliament, his religion precluded him from being offered any of the high offices of state. In the interest of Spain Digby vehemently opposed the negotiations for the king's marriage with the infanta of Portugal. In spite of his opposition they were successfully carried through, and Digby thereupon became conspicuous for his enmity against Clarendon, who had foiled his

designs of an Italian marriage for the king. On 10 July 1663 he brought a charge of high treason against the lord chancellor in the House of Lords (*Parl. History*, iv. cols. 276–280). The judges, to whom the articles of impeachment were referred, decided that (1) a ‘charge of high treason cannot by the laws and statutes of this realm be originally exhibited by any one peer against another unto the house of peers; and that therefore the charge of high treason by the Earl of Bristol against the lord chancellor hath not been regularly and legally brought in. 2. And if the matters alledged were admitted to be true (although alleged to be traiterously done), yet there is not any treason in it’ (*ib.* col. 283). Though the house unanimously adopted the opinion of the judges, Digby once more brought forward his accusation against Clarendon, but with no better success than before. His conduct so displeased the king, that a proclamation was issued for his apprehension, and for near two years he was obliged to live in concealment. But before Clarendon's fall, Digby reappeared in parliament (29 July 1667) and renewed his attack. Though still a professed Roman catholic, he spoke in the Lords on 15 March 1673 in favour of the Test Act, declaring that he was ‘a catholic of the church of Rome, not a catholic of the court of Rome; a distinction he thought worthy of memory and reflection, whenever any severe proceedings against those they called papists should come in question, since those of the court of Rome did only deserve that name’ (*ib.* iv. col. 564). This is his last recorded speech. He died at Chelsea on 20 March 1677, in his sixty-fifth year. He is said to have been buried

in Chelsea Church, but Lysons could find ‘no memorial of him, nor any entry of his interment in the parish register’ (*Environs of London*, 1795, ii. 87–8). Digby married Lady Anne Russell, second daughter of Francis, fourth earl of Bedford, by whom he had four children. His elder son, John, who succeeded him as the third earl of Bristol, married, first, Alice, daughter and heiress of Robert Bourne of Blackhall, Essex; and secondly, Rachael, daughter of Sir Hugh Windham, kt. John had no issue by either marriage, and the barony of Digby and the earldom of Bristol became extinct upon his death in 1698. Francis, the younger son, was killed in a sea-fight with the Dutch on 28 May 1672. Diana, the elder daughter, who like her father became a convert to the Roman catholic faith, married Baron Moll, a Flemish nobleman. Anne, the younger daughter, on whom the family estates devolved on her brother John's death, became the wife of Robert, earl of Sunderland. Digby was a man of extraordinary ability, and one of the greatest orators of his day. Ambitious and headstrong, he was utterly wanting in steadiness of principle and consistency of purpose. Horace Walpole has smartly described Digby's character in the following words: ‘A singular person, whose life was one contradiction. He wrote against popery, and embraced it; he was a zealous opposer of the court, and a sacrifice for it; was conscientiously converted in the midst of his prosecution of Lord Strafford, and was most unconscientiously a persecutor of Lord Clarendon. With great parts, he always hurt himself and his friends; with romantic bravery, he was always an unsuccessful

commander. He spoke for the Test Act, though a Roman catholic, and addicted himself to astrology on the birthday of true philosophy' (*Catalogue of Royal and Noble Authors*, iii. 191–2). His house at Chelsea, formerly Sir Thomas More's, and afterwards known as Buckingham House, was sold by his widow in January 1682 to Henry, marquis of Worcester, afterwards duke of Beaufort. It then acquired the name of Beaufort House, and in 1736 was purchased by Sir Hans Sloane, by whom it was pulled down in 1740. The gate, which was built by Inigo Jones, was given to the Earl of Burlington, who erected it in an avenue near his house at Chiswick. Besides a number of speeches and letters, Digby published 'Elvira: or the Worst not always True. A Comedy. Written by a Person of Quality' (London, 1667, 4to). According to Downes, he wrote, with Sir Samuel Tuke, 'The Adventures of Five Hours,' which was published in 1663, and, being played at Sir William D'Avenant's theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, 'took successively thirteen days together, no other play intervening' (*Roscius Anglicanus*, 1789, pp. 31–2). According to the same authority, Digby adapted two comedies from the Spanish, viz. "'Tis better than it was,' and 'Worse and Worse,' which were also acted at the same theatre between 1662 and 1665 (*ib.* p. 36). Neither of these plays appears to have been printed, but it is possible that one of them may have been the comedy of 'Elvira' under a new title. It is also worthy of notice that the title-page of the first edition of 'The Adventures of Five Hours' bears no author's name, while in the third 'impression' (1671) it is stated that the play had been

‘revised and corrected by the author, Samuel Tuke, kt. and bart.’ According to Walpole, Digby translated from the French the first three books of ‘Cassandra,’ and was said to have been the author of ‘A true and impartial Relation of the Battle between his Majestys Army and that of the Rebels near Ailesbury, Bucks, Sept. 20, 1643.’ Walpole also states that he found under Digby's name, ‘though probably not of his writing,’ ‘Lord Digby's Arcana Aulica: or Walsingham's Manual of Prudential Maxims for the Statesman and the Courtier, 1655.’ Digby's name, however, does not appear upon the title-page of either of the editions of 1652 and 1655, and it seems from the preface that the book owed its existence to one Walsingham, who, ‘though very young, in a little time grew up, under the wings and favour of the Lord Digby, to such credit with the late king, that he came to be admitted to the greatest trusts.’ Digby is also said to have left a manuscript behind him entitled ‘Excerpta e diversis operibus Patrum Latinorum.’ From the fact that his name appears in the third verse of Sir John Suckling's ‘Sessions of the Poets,’ it is evident that he must have been known as a verse writer before Suckling's poem was written. But few of his verses, however, have come down to us, and the song extracted from ‘Elvira’ is the only piece of his which is included in Ellis's ‘Specimens of the Early English Poets’ (1811, iii. 399–400), while some lines addressed to ‘Fair Archabella,’ taken from a manuscript in Dr. Rawlinson's collection in the Bodleian Library, are given in ‘Athenæ Oxon.’ A portrait of Digby with his brother-in-law, William, fifth earl of Bedford, by Vandyck,

was exhibited by Lord Spencer at the first exhibition of national portraits in 1866 (Catalogue, No. 728). This was the picture which Evelyn records seeing 'in the great house' at Chelsea, when dining with the Countess of Bristol on 15 Jan. 1679. Bliss says that 'the best head of Lord Digby is that by Hollar, in folio, dated 1642; there is a small one by Stent, which is curious, and one by Houbraken, from a picture of Vandyke's.' A strikingly handsome portrait, engraved by Bocquet, probably after Vandyck's picture, will be found in the third volume of Walpole's 'Royal and Noble Authors' (opp. p. 191).

[Clarendon's History of the Rebellion (1849); Wood's Athenæ Oxon. (Bliss, 1817), iii. cols. 1100–5; Biographia Britannica (1793), v. 210–38; Walpole's Catalogue of Royal and Noble Authors (Park, 1806), iii. 191–200; Lodge's Portraits (1850), vi. 23–39; Chalmers's Biog. Dict. (1813), xii. 79–82; Cunningham's Lives of Eminent and Illustrious Englishmen (1837), iii. 29–32; Baker's Biographia Dramatica (1812), i. 190; Burke's Extinct Peerage (1883), p. 171; Doyle's Official Baronage of England (1886), pp. 235–6; Official Return of Lists of Members of Parliament, pt. i. 481, 488; Faulkner's Chelsea (1829), i. 120, 131–3, ii. 15; Brit. Mus. Cat.]

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