

Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 32 — Layer, Christopher

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1892

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LAYER, CHRISTOPHER (1683–1723), Jacobite conspirator, born on 12 Nov. 1683, was the son of John Layer, laceman, of Durham Yard, Strand, and Anne his wife (*Life*, 1723). He was brought up by his uncle, Christopher Layer, a fox-hunting Norfolk squire, who placed him at Norwich grammar school, and afterwards with an attorney named Repingale at Aylesham, Norfolk. His uncle, finding himself in difficulties, offered to make over to his nephew the remains of his estate, worth 400*l.* a year, in exchange for 1,000*l.* and an annuity of 100*l.* Layer readily assented, procured the 1,000*l.*, got possession of the property, but refused to pay any part of the annuity. Soon after this he quarrelled with his master, went up to London, and qualified himself under Hadley Doyley, an attorney of Furnival's Inn. Returning to Norfolk, he obtained plenty of business, but afterwards entered the Middle Temple, and was called to the bar. Though a good lawyer, he was known to be grossly immoral, quarrelsome, and unscrupulous. While a protestant, he professed ardent Jacobitism, and hoped to be made lord chancellor in the event of a restoration of the Stuarts. Accordingly he went to Rome in the summer of 1721, and there unfolded to the Pretender the details of a wondrous plot ‘which,’ he declared, ‘no one would understand till it had been carried out successfully.’ He proposed to enlist broken soldiers, seize the Tower, the Mint, the Bank, and other public buildings, secure the royal family, and murder the commander-in-chief and ministers whenever the conspirators could find them together. Layer

boasted of having a large and influential following, and it is certain that he met some confederates regularly at an inn in Stratford-le-Bow. He tried to entice soldiers at Romford and Leytonstone, and succeeded in enlisting a handful of malcontents. After a day spent in such work Layer would write his letters and despatches in the house of one of his many mistresses. The more compromising of his papers were entrusted by him to the care of a brothel-keeper named Elizabeth Mason. He was betrayed by two female friends and placed under arrest in a messenger's house, from which he managed to escape, but was retaken after an exciting chase the same evening and closely confined in the Tower. His clerks were placed under the surveillance of messengers, and his wife (Elizabeth Elwin of Aylesham) was brought to town from Dover in custody. The case was carried to the court of king's bench on 31 Oct. 1722. Layer stumbled to the bar heavily fettered, and was compelled to stand although tortured by painful organic disease. The trial was opened on 21 Nov. The lord chief justice (Pratt) ordered Layer's chains to be taken off. Among the papers found in Elizabeth Mason's possession was one entitled the 'Scheme,' sworn to be in Layer's writing. It gave full instructions for the proposed insurrection. Ample proof was adduced of the intimacy which existed between the Pretender and Layer. James and his wife had consented to stand by proxies (Lords North and Grey and the Duchess of Ormonde) godfather and godmother to Layer's daughter, and the ceremony was privately performed at a china shop in Chelsea. Layer and his counsel argued in his defence;

but, after a trial of eighteen hours, the jury unanimously found a verdict of guilty. Sentence was not pronounced until the 27th. Layer, again cruelly ironed, pleaded ably but vainly in arrest of judgment. He was condemned to be hanged, drawn, and quartered. He was respited from time to time in the hope of disclosures, which he resolutely declined to make. Time was also granted him to arrange his law business. He was executed at Tyburn on 17 May 1723, and met his fate with courage. There is a story that Layer's head having fallen from the top of Temple Bar, where it had been placed, was bought by a well-known nonjuring attorney named Pearce, who resold it to Dr. Richard Rawlinson, the Jacobite antiquary. Rawlinson is said to have kept the skull in his study and was buried with it in his right hand (NICHOLS, *Lit. Anecd.* v. 497). Layer's portrait has been engraved.

[Life, by a Gentleman of Norwich, 1723; Hist. Reg., Chron. Diary for 1722 and 1723; Howell's State Trials, vol. xvi.; Cobbett's Parl. Hist. viii. 54; Stanhope's Hist. of England, 2nd ed. vol. ii.; Doran's London in the Jacobite Times, i. 377–89, 427–31, 436–7; Evans's Cat. of Engraved Portraits, i. 204; Noble's Hist. of England, iii. 467, where the christian name is wrongly given as Richard; Hist. MSS. Comm. 11th Rep. app. iv. pp. 190–2.]

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