1

Malmesbury and Magdalen Hall, 1588–1608

Our Saviour, the Man–God, was born fifteen hundred and eighty eight years ago. The renowned enemy fleet was standing in Spanish ports, soon to perish in our waters. It was early spring. The fifth day of April was beginning. It was then I was born, a little worm, in Malmesbury. I received baptism from my father, a minister, and he gave me his name. (“Vita Carmine Expressa”)

Mother

Fear invaded England months before the Spanish Armada set sail. Rumors that the Armada was on its way were circulating as early as December 1587. As spring approached, Hobbes’s pregnant mother became more anxious. Many thought that the Spanish were the Antichrist or his agent. And everyone knew that the end times would be filled with wars and rumors of war.

For more than a century learned men had been predicting that 1588 would be “climacteric.” Philip Melanchthon, Martin Luther’s theologian, had made 1518 the start of the final age, which would end after seventy years, supposedly the same number of years as the Babylonian Captivity. The calculations marking 1588 as a terrible year in world history were based on numbers supplied by the apocalyptic books of Revelation and Daniel, and confirmed by a passage in Isaiah. Some of the prophecies would be recorded by Francis Bacon in his essay “Of Prophecies.” What if 1588 was to be the beginning of the end of the world? The Book of Revelation had said that women with child would suffer especially horribly. Hobbes’s mother could not have known that the Armada would not leave Spain until May, that a wind would blow it off course, that another attempt would be needed, that the Armada would not reach England until July and would be resoundingly defeated by both the weather and the English navy.¹ Given the information available to her and
the possibly catastrophic consequences of an invasion, she would have been perfectly justified in being afraid. In any case, Hobbes reported that it was this fear that prematurely induced his mother’s labor and caused him to be born between four and six in the morning on Good Friday, April 5, 1588, in the village of Westport, just outside of Malmesbury, Wiltshire.

His traumatic birth affected Hobbes for the rest of his life. He thought that the circumstances of his birth explained “my hatred of the enemies of my country.” In his verse autobiography, written eighty-four years later, he wrote: “For the rumor went everywhere through our towns that the last day for the nation was coming by fleet. And at that point my mother was filled with such fear that she bore twins, me and together with me fear.”

Hobbes was the second child of his mother. John Aubrey, Hobbes’s earliest biographer, says that she came from a yeoman’s family, named Middleton, from the village of Brokenborough, Wiltshire; but no records of such a family exist. Virtually nothing more is known about her, but there are some speculations. Arnold Rogow mentions that a Thomas Hobbes married an Alice Courtnell on May 3, 1578, in the parish of St. Martin, Salisbury, not far from Malmesbury and speculates that this couple may be Hobbes’s parents. If ‘Alice’ was not the name of Hobbes’s mother, then ‘Anne’ may have been since that was the name of Hobbes’s sister. The mother’s principal duty, aside from the care of the children, was the maintenance of the family house, a stone-and-tile structure that included a buttery and two rooms on a second floor. Aubrey described it as “the farthest house on the left hand as you go to Tedbury leaving the church on your right.” The house stayed in the family at least for two more generations. It no longer stands.

Father

Hobbes was named after and baptized by his father. Thomas Hobbes senior was a semiliterate clergyman. He could read the Bible and the Sunday sermons and not much more. Aubrey calls him one of the ignorant “Sir Johns” of the Elizabethan church. Late in life Hobbes contrasted the seditious clerics who preached their own sermons with the law-abiding ones who read the prescribed sermons. When he mentions
that the latter were called “dumb dogs,” one gets the impression that he is thinking of his own father and thought that they were mocked unfairly.

Hobbes senior matriculated at Brasenose College, Oxford, in April 1587, supposedly at the relatively superannuated age of forty. (There is some uncertainty as to the accuracy of this date since there is also a document that lists his age as thirty-two in 1589.) It may be dubious that a grown man with a family would be starting university, but there are two likely explanations. One is that his bishop might have sent him there as part of the Elizabethan effort to upgrade the clergy. Another is that he may not have been a student at all but a so-called privileged person, someone employed by the college. Even janitors fell into the category of privileged persons. The city of Oxford did not like the category because all privileged persons were outside the jurisdiction of the city and could get away with shenanigans that citizens could not. The colleges had only an indirect interest in disciplining bad behavior in the city.

Thomas senior already had a son and so was presumably married. It is an open question whether his wife was with him in Oxford or still in the area around Malmesbury. Since she probably became pregnant in August 1587, Thomas senior’s stay at Brasenose would not have been very long. He never got a degree and almost surely would have been back home for his son’s birth the next spring.

According to Aubrey, one of the father’s positions was that of vicar of Westport, where he was paid sixty to eighty pounds per year. Current historians dispute this. The father is described in the Wiltshire Record Office as the curate of the nearby village of Brokenborough. And Rogow, who argues that Thomas senior was a member of the lesser clergy, estimates his annual pay as closer to ten pounds. By comparison, Hobbes’s future salary as an employee of the noble Cavendish family would be eighty pounds annually in addition to other income such as gifts from his master and royalties from his books.

All of the surviving stories about Hobbes’s father indicate that he was an irresponsible and unpleasant fellow. Aubrey calls him “choleric” (bad tempered). On two occasions his parishioners at the village of Brokenborough complained that he did not give the required number of sermons. Part of the problem was the father’s residence at Westport. The bridge between Westport and Brokenborough was often flooded by the Avon, so the father could not get to the church. His parishioners wanted him to reside in their town, as previous curates had, and he refused.
According to another story, the father fell asleep during a worship service and was heard to mutter, “Clubs are trump.”

Then there are the stories that reflect badly on the father. A clergyman of Westport angered the father at the church door, “so Hobbes struck him and was forced to fly for it and . . . in obscurity beyond London, died there.” There is more to the story. It began in October 1603, when the father was the defendant in a libel suit brought by another clergyman. The claim was that he had called Richard Jeane “a knave and an arrand knave and a drunken knave and one that would have killed his brother minister Mr. Andrewes.” The court found for Jeane, and Thomas senior was ordered to do public penance. He did not present himself on the designated day but reportedly “carried himself contumaciously.”2 Back in court, Jeane had Thomas senior declared “contumacious and . . . excommunicate accordingly.” Thomas senior would not let bad enough alone. In February 1604, he confronted Jeane in a churchyard and accused him of instigating the excommunication. Jeane denied it and walked away. Thomas senior followed and swore at Jeane before punching him “with his fist under the ear or about the head and stook off his hat and made him let fall his cloak from his back all which the said Mr. Jeane suffered until the said Hobbes hanged about him and would not desist from striking the said Mr. Jeane and then he [Jeane] in his own defense stroke the said Thomas Hobbes and shaking him off from him threw him to the ground.”3 Soon after this, the father left the area for the environs of London, as mentioned above. Because Oxford, where Hobbes had already started his university studies, would not have been far out of Thomas senior’s way as he traveled from Malmesbury to London, he could have visited his son. But whether he made the effort, we will never know. The father simply disappeared from history.

Since this unfortunate incident occurred after Hobbes had left home, he may have escaped the worst embarrassment caused by his father’s behavior. But as a young teenager in 1603, he still probably would have been mortified. Although there is no excuse for the behavior of Thomas senior, it was not unusual for the times. The church canons for 1604 forbade clergymen to frequent taverns and alehouses and insisted that they not “give themselves to . . . drinking or riot, spending their time idly by day or by night, playing at dice, cards or tables, or any other unlawful game.” Clearly, there was a genuine problem with clerical behavior. The puritan “Survey of the Ministry” for Essex in 1586 found that out of 335
Malmesbury and Magdalen Hall, 1588–1608 5

clerics, 173 were “ignorant and unpreaching ministers” and a dozen of “scandalous life.” One or more of the offenders was “a gamester, alehouse haunter, drunkard, very ridiculous preacher, dicer, carder, a pot companion, [and] incontinent.” One minister “had a child by his maid and is vehemently suspected to have lived incontinently with others.”

Brother and Sister

Hobbes had an older brother, Edmund, and a younger sister, Anne. Edmund, named for an uncle who died when Hobbes was eighteen years old, grew up to be a glover, like his other uncle, Francis. Edmund presumably did not leave the area around Malmesbury. He was not particularly well educated, yet he understood some Greek even into old age. He was not quite as tall as Hobbes, who was almost six feet. Since Edmund died at about the age of eighty, Thomas senior reportedly at the age of eighty-three, and Hobbes himself at ninety-one, they must have come from sturdy stock, even though Hobbes himself was sickly as a child.

Edmund had three children. One was a male, Francis, apparently named after his uncle. He was left a total of about eighty pounds a year income by the combined generosity of his father and Hobbes; he was an alcoholic who abused his wife.

About Hobbes’s sister, Anne, as about their mother, little is known. She married Thomas Lawrence, had seven children, and inherited her father’s house. Two of Anne’s children, Mary (Tirell) and Eleanor (Harding), were given bequests from Hobbes’s will. Although women play a minor role in what we know of Hobbes’s life, they are a significant part of his will. In addition to his two nieces, he left two hundred pounds to an orphaned girl, entrusted to his care, and ten pounds to one Mary Dell.

Uncle Francis

After Thomas senior abandoned the family, Hobbes was supported by his uncle Francis, who served in Malmesbury as burgess and as alderman (the chief magistrate of the town). In addition to supporting Hobbes at Magdalen Hall, Uncle Francis left Hobbes a pasture, Gaston ground, which earned sixteen pounds a year. Uncle Francis was a successful glover. Leather goods were one of the specialties of the area. Stratford is not far from Malmesbury, and William Shakespeare was the son of a glover as well.
Malmsbury and Westport

The place that Hobbes considered his hometown, Malmsbury, is in southwestern England, in the Cotswolds. In the seventeenth century, it was an average-size town of about one thousand residents. Two tributaries of the River Avon almost completely encircle Malmsbury. One, now known as Ingleburn, approaches from the north; the other, known as the River Avon, approaches from the south. They join just east of town. Hobbes lived outside the town in the village of Westport, so named because it began at the western gate of Malmsbury. One road from Malmsbury went through Westport to Gloucester; another went to Bristol. Brokenborough, where Hobbes’s father was a curate, was a little over a mile to the west; Charlton, where, according to Aubrey, the father held another clerical position, was slightly over a mile to the northeast. The church of Westport, dedicated to Saint Mary, was impressive, given the size of the village; its steeple may have stood taller than the one in Malmsbury. The church was destroyed by the parliamentary army during the Civil War in order to prevent it from being used as a fortress by the royalists. The church that eventually replaced it was described as being “like a stable,” but Hobbes never saw it, because his last trip to his hometown was in 1634.

In his verse autobiography, Hobbes expressed quite a bit of pride in Malmsbury. Standing on a steep hill, it was an ancient town, whose origins date back to the mid-seventh century, when an abbey was founded there. By the ninth century, it was a local trading center. It had a charter as a borough that sent two representatives to the House of Commons. The bones of King Aethelstan (tenth century) are buried there. Hobbes also mentions a monk of Malmsbury Abbey, Saint Aldheime (late seventh, early eighth century), who founded the first Latin school. Unfortunately, Hobbes does not mention the medieval historian William of Malmsbury, to whom we owe the story that the philosopher John Scotus Erigena, a resident of the abbey, was stabbed to death by his students with their pens. Malmsbury had been an important wool producer until the middle of the sixteenth century. Its economic condition declined with the woolen industry. In 1663, Hobbes tried to get the king to endow a free school at Malmsbury, and he had Aubrey look for a suitable location on at least one of his many visits to Wiltshire. In the end, the prospective school could not get funded, and so the idea died.
Malmesbury and Magdalen Hall, 1588–1608

As a boy, Hobbes was playful enough but sometimes melancholy. When he smiled, his eyes became little more than slits in his face; when he became angry, they opened as wide as “chestnuts.” His black hair earned him the nickname “Crow.” In later life, Hobbes had male pattern baldness and the remaining hair, left to grow to collar length, turned white.

Robert Latimer

Hobbes went to school in Westport at the age of four and stayed until the age of eight. Having learned to read and do elementary arithmetic, he went to school in Malmesbury with “Mr. Evans, the minister of the town.” But the great educational influence on Hobbes’s life was Robert Latimer, described as a “good Grecian,” who had a school in Westport. 6 Latimer graduated in 1591 with a B.A. from Magdalen Hall, which would be Hobbes’s own undergraduate school about a decade later, and received his M.A. in July 1595 from Magdalen College. Hobbes began taking classes with Latimer about 1596. According to Aubrey, Latimer was nineteen or twenty at the time. But, since he received his B.A. in 1591, it is more plausible that he was about twenty-four.

Later Latimer became a minister of Malmesbury and then rector at Leigh-de-la-mere (Leigh Delamere). He had taken a liking to Hobbes, and the feeling must have been mutual since decades later Hobbes went out of his way to find his old teacher in a village some distance away. The instruction that Hobbes received from Latimer went on until about nine o’clock at night. Shortly before going off to Oxford, Hobbes presented to Latimer a translation he had done of Euripides’ Medea into Latin iamb. The play seems to have deeply affected Hobbes. Later in life, he regretted not having kept a copy of these adolescent efforts. He refers to Medea four times in his writings, more than to any other non-Homeric literary work. Once is in Leviathan, when he warns against unrealistic expectations of creating a better government by altering the existing one: “those that go about by disobedience, to do no more than reform the commonwealth, shall find they do thereby destroy it; like the foolish daughters of Pelias, in the fable; which desiring to renew the youth of their decrepit father, did by the counsel of Medea, cut him in pieces, and boil him, together with strange herbs, but made not of him a new man.” 7

Scholars owe quite a bit to Latimer, because it was through him that Aubrey met Hobbes. Aubrey became an important antiquarian who wrote
biographies of many of the greatest Stuarts and a history of the city of Oxford. It is easy enough to excuse the occasional factual errors he makes because of the richness of his anecdotes and physical descriptions. He wrote the first and, without doubt, the liveliest biography of Hobbes. If it had not been for Aubrey, Hobbes would have a somewhat ghostly or at best skeletal appearance in history. Aubrey reminisced about the July or August of 1634, when he was eight years old:

Hobbes came into his native country to visit his friends, and amongst others he came to see his old Schoolmaster, Mr. Latimer at Leigh Delamere, when I was then a little youth at school in the church. . . . Here was the first place and time I ever had the honor to see this worthy man, who was then pleased to take notice of me, and the next day came and visited my relations. He was a proper man, brisk, and in very good equipage; his hair was then quite black. He stayed at Malmesbury and in the neighborhood a week or better.

He seems to have been quite full of himself and dropped the name of Ben Jonson, poet and raconteur. It is possible that Hobbes saw himself in the eight-year-old Aubrey. It is also fortunate that Hobbes came that summer to see Latimer, because the teacher died later that year.

Oxford

Hobbes chose to continue his education at Magdalen Hall, Oxford. He went there probably in 1602 but possibly in 1603. There would be no question at all if the record of his matriculation had survived, but because it does not, we must speculate. The evidence for the exact year is contradictory. The argument for 1603 is this: It is a hard fact that he was graduated in February 1608. In his prose autobiography, he says that he remained at Oxford for five years. Five from 1608 is 1603. This is the year that Aubrey gives, and it is likely that he arrived at his date just as we now have, by subtraction. We know that Aubrey did not have firsthand information of the year, because a marginal notation in his manuscript reminds him to ask Anthony Wood for the year. But there is reason to doubt that 1603 was the year Hobbes matriculated, because he would have been fifteen years old at the time and this does not square with what he himself says in both of his autobiographies: that he went to university at the age of fourteen. (Some translations of his autobiographies translate a tricky passage as saying that he matriculated in his “fourteenth year,” that is, at the age of thirteen; but I think fourteen is the correct understanding of
the Latin.) Fourteen is also more plausible on other grounds. The average entering age for students at Magdalen Hall was over sixteen. Only three students whose admission is recorded between 1601 and 1603 were as young as fourteen years of age. Most were sixteen to eighteen, with one as old as twenty-one.

Although younger than most of his classmates, Hobbes was adequately prepared. His education had begun at the age of four and had included six years of Latin and Greek before going to Oxford. And he was precocious.

On the assumption that he went to Oxford in 1602, stayed for five years, and graduated in 1608, there is a missing year to account for. A plausible explanation involves the interaction between the plague and graduation requirements. A student did not actually complete the requirements for the bachelor of arts degree until he went through a series of public and ritualistic academic exercises. The most important of these was the “determination,” a formal disputation pitting the candidate against two bachelors of arts. (The range of topics was broad, as we shall see.) Determinations were held only during Lent. Often when an epidemic raged, the university would cancel the public academic exercises, without automatically suspending the requirements to perform them. Obviously, these cancellations caused a backlog of students to be “determined” the next year. Some students might be excused from them altogether through a successful petition, and some might receive permission to perform them in private. But exceptions were usually given to clergymen and to the sons of gentlemen. Hobbes was neither. For the most part, students simply had to wait until the next year to complete their requirements, and this could well have happened to Hobbes. If so, then he would have completed his course work in 1607, missed the opportunity to determine that year because of the epidemic, and then determined the next. There were, in fact, epidemics in both 1606 and 1607. Epidemics occurred relatively frequently in Oxford. Hygiene was poor; dunghills littered the streets; the food was sometimes spoiled; and the water was polluted. Rather than risk death, the timid and sickly Hobbes might well have chosen to return to Westport at the first hint that the plague might interfere with the university exercises. Admittedly, this is speculative, but it seems neatly to explain how Hobbes might have arrived at Oxford at the age of fourteen, stayed five years, as he says he did, and graduated in February 1608.

Granted that we know little about when Hobbes went to Oxford, it is
plausible that he arrived in early April. There were four terms: Michaelmas, which usually began in October; Hilary, which began in January; Easter, which began just after Easter; and Trinity, which began in May or June. The starting times would vary from year to year, depending on epidemics and the date of Easter. August, September, and the beginning of October were vacation time. Students matriculated anytime from October through July, although most arrived at the beginning of a term. Aubrey says that Hobbes matriculated near the beginning of the year. Because in England the year was taken to begin on March 25, this would mean late March or early April, probably at the start of the Easter term. April 5, 1602, would have been when Hobbes turned fourteen. If Hobbes’s first year at Magdalen Hall began in April and ended in late July, it would have cased the stress of entering university at a relatively young age.

When Hobbes first arrived at Magdalen Hall, the first thing that would have been done was to enter his name in the buttery-book although he was probably not aware that this was being done. The buttery-book was a ledger in which were entered a student’s expenses. Students sixteen years of age and older were required to sign a pledge affirming that they subscribed to the Thirty-nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Royal Supremacy. Subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles was also one of the many terminal requirements for the B.A. In addition, Hobbes would have been assigned to a tutor who was responsible for his overall education. But some tutors were irresponsible or incompetent, and he never mentions his tutor’s name.

A student was not only expected but required to attend lectures according to the statutes. The practice may have been more lax, and by Hobbes’s own account he did not attend regularly. In the first year, grammar was taught on Tuesday and Friday at 8:00 A.M., rhetoric and logic on Monday and Thursday at the same time; metaphysics was introduced in the second year. The lectures were supposed to prepare the student for a series of logical disputations, in which he initially would have to defend some thesis against the objections of two more advanced students and then progress to being one of the objectors. A variation of these exercises is depicted on the lowest panel on the title page of Leviathan. Hobbes reports with some sense of reverse pride that when he arrived at Oxford he was placed in the most elementary (“the lowest”) class of logic. He mocks the young instructor, too young to grow a beard, who lectures him in a very solemn voice. What the instructor is gravely