

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09583-9 - Four Hundred Years of English Education, Second Edition

W. H. G. Armytage

Excerpt

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I

THE POLITICS OF PROTESTANTISM

1563–1603

I

At a dinner in Windsor Castle on 10 December 1563, some of Queen Elizabeth's principal officers of state discussed the news that some schoolboys had recently run away from Eton. Queen Elizabeth's former tutor, Roger Ascham, who was also present, observed that 'young children were sooner allured by love than driven by beating to attain good learning'. He sustained his point of view so well that Sir Richard Sackville, the Treasurer of the Exchequer persuaded him to expand his thoughts into a book. This Ascham did, but unfortunately died two years before it was published in 1570.¹

Before the Windsor diners loomed a nightmare struggle with Catholic Europe: a nightmare which, with ideological mutations, most of their successors have had to face. To keep England Protestant, no instruments were more effective than its schools, and no subjects in these schools more illuminating than the 'holy languages', Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Some of them had either been, or were influenced by, exiles under Queen Mary. These exiles had returned to force the pace of their fellow countrymen in religion and politics. Many exiles were country gentry, who in various continental towns had improvised 'universities'—as at Strasbourg under Peter Martyr. 'They left,' as a modern writer has it, 'as a faction and returned as a party,'—aware of continental Protestant practice, with experience of living in a non-episcopal society. They were endowed with the virtues of a 'godly' life, based on 'godly learning'.² Such slogans they could further disseminate by a vigorous press, which inveighed against Romish survivals, like vestments, in the Elizabethan church.

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One of the Marian exiles, John Foxe, published in 1563 the first English edition of his *The Acts and Monuments of Matters happening in the Church*. This anecdotal treasury for Protestants, popularly known as Foxe's Book of Martyrs, was bought by many clergymen for their churches where it was chained to the lectern and sifted for sermons. Almost all Puritan households turned to it as the standard authority for church history. To Catholics, Foxe's 'Golden Legend' was an affront, especially since in the pre-facing calendar, martyrs took the places of saints. It went through nine editions before 1641 and three abridgements before 1615.

The Church of England also acquired, in the year 1563, two other powerful weapons: the Thirty-nine Articles and the Oath of Supremacy. The Thirty-nine Articles settled a controversy that had, with intermissions, been raging since 1536, when the Ten Articles were issued.¹ Since then, the Bishops' Book (1537), the Six Articles (1539) and the King's Book (1543) had tried in vain to provide a doctrinal formula. The Oath, imposed by 5 Eliz. c. 1 on 'all schoolmasters and public and private teachers of children', ensured that they recognised the supremacy of the Queen in church matters before receiving their episcopal licences to teach.² And, as an additional insurance, archdeacons and bishops were, annually and triennially respectively, to make visitations to ensure that 'lewd schoolmasters' were not 'corrupting religion'.

II

As the most important figure at the dinner, Sir William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth's principal Secretary of State, was especially interested in education. In 1561 he had entered upon what was to be a 37-year Mastership of the Court of Wards: a very superior kind of magistrate's court to manage noble children. At Cecil House in the Strand he set up what has been called 'the best school for statesmen in Elizabethan England, perhaps in all Europe'.³ The education of the 'Queen's Wards', as these sprigs of the nobility were called, excited the sea-captain Sir Humphrey

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Gilbert, Raleigh's step-brother, to send Cecil a scheme whereby they might be taught mathematics, geography, physics and surgery as well as moral philosophy, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, logic and rhetoric, as well as 'Spanish, Italian, French and High Dutch'. Gilbert proposed that their teachers might employ their leisure translating foreign works of science and scholarship, conducting experiments (and delivering an annual report on them), or 'setting forth some new bookes in printe, according to their several professions'. 'By erecting this Achademic,' Gilbert argued, 'there shal be hereafter, in effecte, no gentleman within this Realme but good for some what, Whereas now the most parte of them are good for nothing.'¹

Cecil's interest in education was not so much doctrinaire (after all, he had stayed in office under the Catholic Queen Mary from 1553 to 1558), as political. His great opponent, Robert Dudley (created Earl of Leicester in 1564), had already exhibited a desire to marry the Queen even at the expense of involving England in continental entanglements. So, as time went on, Cecil not only built up a secret police, but devised a suitable version of events which was ordered to be taught in schools. One of his instruments was Christopher Ocland, a schoolmaster, whose account of the troubles antecedent in Elizabeth's accession, *Anglorum Praelia* (1580), was ordered to be used in grammar schools.

Cecil valued schoolmasters and used Thomas Ashton, who had refashioned Shrewsbury into the largest school at the close of the century, on confidential errands to Ireland. He was also kind to the Puritan Robert Browne, who taught in London without a licence and who took, with Robert Harrison, the first steps to separate from the Church of England. Browne's kinship with Cecil saved him from immediate arrest.²

III

The Papists fought back. That sharp maintainer of the old religion William Allen, after circulating in disguise during the years 1562–1565 exhorting the Catholics of Lancashire, Norfolk

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and Oxford not to conform, opened a seminary at Douai in 1568 to provide a substitute for the schools they could no longer enter. From Douai well over 400 secular priests poured into England, with Fathers Persons and Campion the vanguard of a new offensive launched in 1580 and 1581 to win back England to the fold. In the latter year, 23 Eliz. c. 1 made it high treason for anyone to reconcile or be reconciled with the Catholic faith and imposed a year's imprisonment on any schoolmaster who should absent himself from the parish church on Sundays or holy days. Keepers of private tutors were fined £10 a month, and informers on them promised a third share of the booty. Four years later, in 1585, 27 Eliz. c. 2 imposed the stigma of treason on any student at a continental seminary unless he returned to England within six months and took the oath of supremacy within seven days of landing.

The situation was perilous. The Catholic Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned in England, Elizabeth herself was under sentence of excommunication, and in 1588, after Mary's execution, Philip II of Spain, attempted, unsuccessfully, to enforce the sentence. The Armada's failure only intensified the efforts of the seminarists. English colleges at Valladolid (1589) and Seville (1592) were established and so further restrictions were imposed in 1593 by 35 Eliz. c. 2 which forbade 'popish recusants' to move five miles beyond the compass of their homes without an episcopal or justice's licence.¹

To prevent Irish students going abroad and being 'infected with Popery and other ill qualities,' and so becoming 'evil subjects' a College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity was chartered in Dublin in 1592. It had been mooted by the first Protestant Archbishop in 1536 and by Cecil himself in 1563. But whether, in describing it as 'The Mother of a University' the Crown intended further colleges to be founded is obscure. The first Provost reinforced the intention of the founders by telling the leading citizens of Dublin that from henceforth they need not hazard their children abroad 'for the acquiring of foreign accomplishments.' The hazard in the Elizabethan ages was very real, since Popery and treason were then synonymous.²

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IV

Cecil had other agents too, in his policy of securing the Protestant succession. The attorney of the Court of Wards was Robert Nowell,¹ one of whose brothers, Alexander, Dean of St Paul's, wrote the 'Small Catechism' now virtually embodied in the Book of Common Prayer, whilst another, Lawrence, an enthusiastic map maker, proposed in 1563 that maps should be made of all counties, a task subsequently undertaken by Christopher Saxton in 1579.

It was Alexander Nowell who, in a sermon before Elizabeth's second parliament in 1563, suggested that the revenues of one abbey in each shire should be set aside for the encouragement of scholars. The Speaker of the House also complained of the 'want of good schoolmasters' remarking 'the tree of knowledge groweth downwards, not upwards'. Bills to remedy this had been introduced in 1549 (twice) and 1553 (twice), but so far nothing of substance had been done.

The tree of knowledge was, however, being watered by the fount of private charity, tapped by pulpit orators like Alexander Nowell. *Certain sermons appointed by the Queen's Majesty* (1563) and *The second tome of homelys* (1563) stressed the 'stewardship' of riches by directing attention to the needs of the poor. These convinced Protestant merchants, especially in London, that poverty bred ignorance and Popery.

They had been generous in the century before Queen Elizabeth's accession, but (taking account of the price rise) they were even more generous in the century that followed. No less than 109 endowed schools and 49 unendowed schools were founded all over England by London merchants alone. In London itself, the generous provision made for St. Paul's School in 1512 by the Mercers' Company was emulated by others, so that fourteen schools were established which afforded an education 'probably the best (then) available in the Western world'.² These fourteen

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schools catered for five to seven per cent of the male population of the metropolis.¹ And, to supplement them, another fifteen grammar schools were founded in Middlesex.

Similar educational insurance against Popery was also manifest in all but six of the English counties. In Lancashire, Cheshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire and Herefordshire they established another 44 grammar schools. Another 72 grammar schools, with four in Wales, two in Scotland and one in Calais, gave the impressive total of 153 foundations established by them between the years 1480 and 1660. 'Perhaps even more truly than the great Queen,' a recent American historian has written, 'these enlightened and responsible London merchants were responsible for winning the west for Protestantism, and for giving to the region the social and cultural institutions required for life in the modern world.'²

In addition London merchants strengthened 141 existing foundations in the provinces—more than half of which had been established by local generosity. They provided 57.7% of the total endowments given by the rest of England. The extent of their generosity was such that they have been called 'in a true sense the founders of the endowed schools of England,' who made 'freely and readily available new channels for ability and ambition across the whole terrain of the society'.³

Similar donations by Protestants in Bristol, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire, Kent, Lancashire, London, Norfolk, Somerset, Worcestershire, and Yorkshire, brought the total up to 542 schools. Indeed in these ten counties, there was an endowed grammar school for each 6,000 of the population. No boy lived more than twelve miles from a grammar school where he could obtain a free education.⁴

This flow of charity increased in Elizabeth's reign. Thirty-two schools were founded, among them Rugby (1567), Bedford (1565) and Aldenham (1599), which amply repaid the total of £32,530 expended on them. These schools took boys between the ages of 6 and 8 and kept them until they were fit to enter Oxford or Cambridge at the age of 14 to 16. And by 1600 every boy, even

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in the remotest part of the country, could find such a school in his own neighbourhood competent to do this.

These charities received massive protection in 1601 as a result of the Statute of Charitable Uses (43 Eliz. c. 4). This Act marks the emergence of the secular charitable trust. Previous trusts for prayers or 'superstitious' purposes had been outlawed in the time of Henry VIII. Now, services like education, care of the sick and the maintenance of highways and bridges could grow under this Act. For, if abused, the Act empowered the Chancellor to appoint a commission to inquire into their use. In interpretation of the Act, the courts developed the principle of *cy près* (as near as possible), to ensure that whatever the ambiguity, the charity should remain for public use rather than private enjoyment. For the next 287 years the procedure it laid down remained standard, whilst its preamble is still valuable today.¹

v

As the grammar schools multiplied, increasing numbers of boys proceeded to the universities, helping them rapidly to recover from the bewildering changes of the previous twenty years. Cecil himself became Chancellor of Cambridge in 1559, and Lord Leicester of Oxford in 1564, by which year the number of residents at Cambridge increased to 1,267; those at Oxford being rather less than two-thirds of this. Young dons abounded; according to H. C. Porter there never can have been a period at Cambridge when there were so many of them.² These young Cambridge dons added their voices to those of the Marian exiles outside protesting against vestigial Romish practices in the Reformed Church. Some of them, like Thomas Cartwright, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, went further and aimed at eliminating the entire episcopal system, and setting up in its place an austere Genevan regime, with elected pastors and governing by elders. For this Cartwright lost his chair in 1570.³ Embryo forms of these minuscule theocracies arose amongst them, as the

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classis. Here were the germs of Presbyterianism and within ten years from the Windsor dinner, the word 'Puritan' was being used to describe the activities of these young theocrats.

After Cartwright's expulsion in 1570, the freer spirits of the universities, whose piety had been moulded by him or by his successors, Laurence Chaderton or William Perkins, scorned the institutional security of a living, preferring instead to be mendicant preachers. These preaching ministers, descanting on the Geneva Bible of 1560, grew in number. When homilies were issued to be read from the pulpit, they took to the press with such vigour that from being an adjunct to the pulpit it became an autonomous educational medium. Two fresh Cambridge nurseries of these 'lecturers' were created in 1584 when one of the Windsor diners, Sir Walter Mildmay, built Emmanuel College Cambridge on the site of a dissolved Dominican House, a foundation sustained by gifts from London merchant princes like Henry Billingsley and Sir Wolstan Dixie; and Sir Philip Sidney's aunt, the Countess of Sussex built another, Sidney Sussex College, on the estate of the Grey Friars.¹

The ageing Queen in 1593 appointed Thomas Nevile to the Mastership of Trinity (founded by her father 47 years before). Nevile ruthlessly removed rows of houses and old buildings to build his magnificent great court, and enriched its library by taking many fine books from Canterbury Cathedral.

One of the last acts of the Great Queen was to accord to the universities the right to send representatives to Parliament, a right petitioned for by Cambridge since 1566 and Oxford since 1570. Whether they feared for their own corporate security (accorded them under the Crown in Parliament in 1571), or whether the Puritan faction wanted a political base from which to resist restraints, the universities did not rely on graduate members of Parliament (36 in 1563, 106 in 1593), to represent their point of view. They retained their right to send members until 1948.²

The spirit of the Elizabethan universities, especially of Cambridge, was to find expression in the institution of the American colonies. Indeed, William Perkins, who died in 1602, exercised

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in the seventeenth century an influence almost as great as his great master Calvin and by 1610, his *Armillæ Aurea* (1590) had reached fifteen editions. There the *classis* came into its own.¹

VI

Anti-monastic, the Puritan code expressed itself in long diaries rather than auricular confessions, records of coming to grips with the world rather than running away from it. The parable of the talents was, to the preachers, a divine endorsement for labouring in one's vocation. So it was no accident that endowments for education spouted from an economy flexed by technological change. Here, too, 1563 marked an era: a patent for using water power to drain mines and crush ores was granted to Burchard Kranich (one of many such German miners in England at this time), whilst John Trew began his famous lateral cut beside the Exe which led to his pioneer pound lock; heralding a new technique of water transport in England. Mining, navigation, river improvement and the building of Elizabethan country houses stimulated mathematics. Robert Recorde, author of the outstanding English introduction to astronomy, *The Castle of Knowledge* (1556), wrote:

It is confessed amongeste all men, that knowe what learnyng meaneth, that besides the Mathematicalle artes, there is no unfallible Knowledge, excepte to bee borrowed of them.²

Mathematical knowledge was fostered by the same shrewd patrons of universities. Thus Henry Billingsley, a haberdasher with interests in coal mines, who was later to become Lord Mayor of London and endow scholarships at Emmanuel and St John's Colleges Cambridge, published an English translation of Euclid in 1570 with a preface by Dr. John Dee.³ This declared that mathematics would 'assist the common artificers' who with 'their owne Skill and experience already had, will be hable (by these good helpes and informations) to finde out, and devise,

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new workes, straunge Engines, and Instrumentes: for sundry purposes in the Common Wealth'. Another London haberdasher, Thomas Smith, took the lead in raising funds to endow a mathematical lectureship in London, the first lecture being given in his own house, and subsequent ones in the chapel of the Staplers' Company.¹

Dee owned the largest scientific library in England at this time: some 4,000 volumes of medieval manuscripts and contemporary mathematical texts.² From 1560 to 1583 it was the scientific centre of Elizabethan England. Dee was a friend not only of Billingsley and Thomas Smith, but of most of the explorers as well: amongst his pupils were Thomas Digges, Muster-Master General to the English forces in the Netherlands, Sir Edward Dyer and Sir Philip Sidney—to whom he taught chemistry.³

Dee's greatest significance was his conception of what he called *Archemastrie*. As he defined it in the preface to Billingsley's *Euclid*:

The Archemaster steppeth in, and leadeth forth on, the *Experiences* by order of his doctrine *Experimentall*, to the chief and finall power of Naturall and Mathematicall Artes.

It was a great pity that his boundless optimism about the powers of *Archemastrie* led him to turn his efforts towards alchemy.

His apprehension of the experimental method should be set beside the way in which the common artificers responded to his work. Robert Norman, maker of mathematical instruments, said as much in his *Newe Attractive* (1581). So did Edward Worsop in his *Discoverie of Sundrie Errours committed by Landemeaters ignorant of Arithmetike and Geometrie* (1582).

Schoolmasters followed suit. Richard Mulcaster, the first headmaster of the Merchant Taylors' School in London from 1561–86, and later headmaster of St. Paul's from 1596–1608, argued in 1581 that the study of mathematics should begin as early as possible. He also proposed a separate mathematical college at the university and contemplated writing a book on the teaching of the subject.⁴

For just as some of the young Puritan dons wished to strip the