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INTRODUCTION

In the past twenty years we have learned a good deal about the Tudor commonwealth – that concept of a responsible state committed to social, political and religious reform. Where once everything concentrated on the crisis years of Edward VI's reign, we are now taught to think of a philosophy repeatedly asserted and revised, a continuous attitude to public life making its effects felt among the agents of that life. And where earlier historians saw only statesmen and administrators reacting to the practical problems of the day, we have been shown the importance of intellectuals and writers. Humanism, often defined as Erasmianism, has usurped the place of leadership. Obscure thinkers are no longer obscure and somewhat more thoughtful. Commonwealth, Protestantism and Christian humanism have been jumbled together in a splendid porridge of reformist yearning; and I want to stress that in my opinion this cross-play of beliefs, weighing differently in different men, strikes much more convincingly than a distinction of categories which turns individuals into representatives of abstract ideas. Reform and reformation, as we have come to realize, were in the air in the early sixteenth century, in England as elsewhere; golden ages may have lain in the past, but that did not discourage men from supposing that they might manage, here and now, to approach more closely to that distant state of bliss. In England, this very general complex of ideas and aspirations gathered round the notion of the commonwealth, and we have learned increasingly what this meant and how pervasively it coloured all political thinking and practice.

Is there, then, any more to be said about problems that have attracted so much attention? Before I can answer that question, I propose to review briefly what our guides have told us. The pioneering study appeared in 1948: Gordon Zeeveld's investigation of the group that gathered round Reginald Pole at Padua and from there, returning to England, spread a new and practical gospel in the atmosphere of change produced by the early

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Reformation.¹ Zeeveld's book was not only the first breakthrough on that front, after decades of work on the 'More group' and on the Edwardian reformers which implicitly denied any ideas to the Henrician reformers; in spite of a good deal more work since, it also remains the most remarkable, in part because Zeeveld recognized the importance of unprinted treatises. It was he who first drew attention to the impact of reformist humanism on the generation after Erasmus and More, who demonstrated that programmes and ideas played their part in the politics of the Henrician Reformation, and who plotted the contacts between Thomas Cromwell and the intellectuals. All these familiar commonplaces of today were new in 1948.

While Zeeveld made real sense of the proposition that his writers must be understood as involved in affairs, the next book on those themes retreated into a more conventional form of the history of ideas. The title of Fritz Caspari's study of the educational ideals propounded by four leading Tudor humanists made one hope for an analysis of social programmes which did not emerge.² The book has little relevance to our present purposes, except that it, too, demonstrated the English humanists' participation in a European complex of discussions – and except that people still cite it. Stanford Lehmberg's study of Sir Thomas Elyot brought a fuller understanding of one thinker, but it did not investigate the general intellectual society of the time: which is the less surprising because Elyot, though something of a friend of Cromwell's back to Wolsey's day, deliberately withdrew from public life into the study, and in consequence exercised little influence or none.³ Elyot, who was quite a considerable writer, appears to have opted out of the chance grasped with both hands by Thomas Starkey; he demonstrated that some sympathy with the religious reforms of that administration was required before a man could hope to assist it in other ways.

It was not until 1965 that the questions asked by Zeeveld were taken up once more, in Arthur Ferguson's massive study of the

¹ W. Gordon Zeeveld, *Foundations of Tudor Policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948).

² F. Caspari, *Humanism and the Social Order in Tudor England* (Chicago, 1954).

³ Stanford E. Lehmberg, *Sir Thomas Elyot, Tudor Humanist* (Austin, Texas, 1960).

main attitudes displayed by those second-rank thinkers.⁴ Where Zeeveld had concentrated on an identifiable group, living and working together, and on arguments about the nature of political society, Ferguson tried to range over two centuries and to demonstrate that the influence of Italian humanism, joined to a native preoccupation with the practical problems of society, produced a peculiarly English devotion to economic and social reform which, after the shock of Henry VIII's break with Rome, erupted from the study into the counsels of princes. He, too, emphasized the part played by Cromwell in organizing the services of those learned advisers. This type of investigation culminated, in the same year, in James McConica's attempt to accommodate virtually every rational discussion of social, religious and political problems in England from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties under the banner of Erasmianism.⁵ Whatever one may think of that label, McConica greatly advanced our understanding of the body of ideas shared by these people, of their interaction with the politicians, and especially of the manner in which the printing press helped them to announce themselves. He also gave shape to the earlier gropings after a chronological pattern by tracking the migration of his Erasmian policy-makers and advisers from one group to another – from Wolsey to Cromwell to Catherine Parr to Somerset and the commonwealth-men traditionally so called. This pattern also underlies the last significant contribution to the discussion, Whitney Jones's analysis of the manner in which the thinkers of those thirty years reacted to the impact of events around them – the events of 'the social and economic developments of mid-Tudor England'.⁶ It is not without significance for a full evaluation of all this scholarship that Jones was the first writer to break what had become an American monopoly, and a monopoly of people brought up in the American tradition of intellectual history at that.⁷

⁴ Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance* (Durham, N.C., 1965).

⁵ James K. McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics under Henry VIII and Edward VI* (Oxford, 1965).

⁶ W. R. D. Jones, *The Tudor Commonwealth 1529–1559* (London, 1970).

⁷ There have, of course, been other contributions of less significance in the present context, and there is the whole complex of writings around Thomas More and his *Utopia*, but it should be noted that the most famous book of the early sixteenth century has no identifiable bearing on reformist programmes after 1530.

This massive production, overlapping here and there but in general sufficiently diverse to indicate the remarkable fertility of the topic, has accounted for a variety of matters. We need not again investigate the derivation of *via media* concepts in the English Church, of practical interests among humanist thinkers, or of Erasmian notions of reform in every nook and cranny. In fact, the body of ideas as such needs at this time no further study, the more so because in itself it is far from remarkable. These Tudor writers were troubled by the state of the world, by its lack of honest spirituality and by social deficiencies, and they brought to their task of propounding reform some very simple basic ideas concerning the political perfectability of man's condition and a naïvely sanguine trust in the power of edicts to make men better. They were in all respects quite typical examples of 'social engineers'. Specific proposals circle round recurring themes: a cleaner Church, a more practical Christianity, the positive control of greed and selfishness, the greatness of England. Radical reformers are rarely very deep thinkers: deep thought about the human condition tends to promote pessimism and despair. What is worthy of notice (as all our authors have recognized) is those intellectuals' determination – a novel determination – to turn disapproval of the present and trust in reform into practical channels.

To indicate the relative simplicity of the ideals held by these writers is not to criticize the scholars who have given us such full expositions of that simplicity. If they may be criticized it is rather on two different grounds: one, a tendency to overschematize things, and two, a surprising unwillingness to follow the thinkers into the public arena where they themselves wished to be. These are two characteristic pitfalls in the path trodden by historians of ideas, and in this case they do seem to me to hinder a correct understanding of what actually went on.

An excessive addiction to pattern-making is particularly marked in McConica's book; Ferguson falls victim to it to a lesser extent; Zeeveld, who writes as though he was unaware of the profound transformation in historical thinking he was initiating, has almost none of it. Ferguson probably over-labours his distinction between lamenting moralists and buoyantly reformist activists, though there is real insight in a classification which links the change with the Reformation. Thomas More, in *Utopia*, made

no proposals: he diagnosed ills and placed his remedies in the fictional realm of the unattainable. Starkey, on the other hand, tried to prescribe specifically for the actual realm of England. But McConica's pursuit of Erasmus really distorts. When Cromwell's efforts are described as 'official Erasmianism' – that Erasmianism which can be traced active in Wolsey's household and allegedly entered politics with More's elevation to the chancellorship – fundamental changes are obscured. The commonplaces of Erasmus' social thought were shared by most reformers: they had to be because they were so commonplace. No doubt, many of the younger humanists had read Erasmus though they virtually never cite him; when they do, they do not use him for ideas on the common weal.⁸ What evidence is there that Pole's Paduan circle attached themselves to an international Erasmianism? Less humanist writers – men like Clement Armstrong or Christopher St German – showed even less of that godlike influence; yet this did not prevent them from proposing reforms marked by similar 'Christian humanist' principles.⁹ By the 1530's Erasmus himself had ceased to provide new ideas, especially on society, and his general reputation was much reduced. Of course, Erasmus carried influence. I do not mean to deny his wide and frequent effect upon all students and especially the aid and comfort he gave to religious reformers of whose ultimate ends he often disapproved; but to order all that was written – worse, all that was done – under that single device is to obscure the history of events by hiding it behind a misleadingly comprehensive generalization.

Another form of the excessive scheme, very relevant here, afflicts Jones. True, he only follows doctrine in organizing all his material under the theme of the 'Tudor commonwealth', but in doing so he perpetuates a linguistic confusion. There are two quite distinct meanings to the word, according as to whether it is a compound noun or a noun qualified by an adjective. In the first form it is used, occasionally, in the modern sense, to denote a

⁸ Richard Morison once called Erasmus 'the greatest learned man of our time', but though he did so in a book concerned with the social order he used him only to quote some extravagant praise of Henry VIII (*A Remedy for Sedition* [1536], sig. F iii–iv).

⁹ Armstrong's manuscript treatise on the true Church and its function in society is thoroughly evangelical but absolutely not Erasmian (SP 6/11, fos. 103–33 [*LP* vi. 416]).

political structure. Thus Elyot starts off his *Governour* with a long and very pedantic disquisition on the term which, he says, has been used to translate the Latin *res publica* (itself, of course, capable of a similar double usage). He concludes that the translation is wrong: *res publica* should be rendered 'public weal', while commonwealth should be translated into Latin as *res plebeia*.¹⁰ This is an absurdity, but an enlightening one. To Elyot, the 'commonalty. . . signifieth only the multitude wherein be contained the base and vulgar inhabitants not advanced to any honour and dignity';¹¹ his snob's commonwealth does not comprehend the concerns of the ruling classes. Clearly, therefore, he does not really regard the term as a description of the realm of England, the sense in which modern historians have taken it, and incidentally the sense canonized by the Rump Parliament. And indeed it is not easy to find people in the sixteenth century who did treat the word simply as though it described the nation in its temporal aspect. Richard Morison defined 'a common weal' as 'a certain number of cities, towns, shires that all agree upon one law and one head', and throughout his book he used it to denote what the nineteenth century called the organic state.¹² But such occasional usage is rivalled by the more usual one which speaks of the common weal or wealth as the welfare, the well-being, of all members of the community (or of the lower orders only, according to Elyot). When a pamphleteer heads his treatise with the title, 'How the common people may be set to work: an order of a commonwealth',¹³ he does not mean that he is about to set out the description of a polity or state, but that his proposals are designed to assist general social improvement. It is in this second sense that the term is just about always used in the statutes of the time. A certain country gentleman neatly exemplified the un-

¹⁰ Thomas Elyot, *The Booke named the Governour*, ed. H. H. S. Croft (1883), i, 1–3.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 2. Possibly Elyot's influence may be found in the occasional attempts to evade the distinction by applying both adjectives. Thus a proposal to exempt schoolmasters from the payment of first fruits speaks of them as being 'necessary to the continuance of a public or a common weal' (SP 1/104, fo. 152 [LP x. 1092]).

¹² A *Remedy for Sedition* pleads repeatedly that a true commonwealth, 'like a body', is a structure of all classes and kinds of people; when Morison asks, 'how can there be any commonwealth where he that is wealthiest is most like to come to woe?', he implicitly refutes Elyot's distinction.

¹³ SP 1/242, fo. 126 (LP Add. 1382[1]).

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conscious dilemma when he referred to 'this part of the commonweal' committed to himself and his fellow justices, meaning evidently a part of the realm, and then went on to cite a phrase from a royal circular about the King's 'loving mind to the common weal of this realm', where the term means the general advantage.¹⁴ Though Tudor writers could employ 'commonwealth' to designate the realm – minus the King (and the clergy?) – they more usually meant by it 'that which will benefit the nation' or 'a matter of common benefit'. They do not, therefore, discuss and promote 'the commonwealth' so much as 'the common weal', a distinction which removes the party label of commonwealth-men which historians have stuck onto all these social reformers. Alternatively, commonwealth-men means simply all the social reformers (since there was only one school of thought on the subject), but either way nothing is gained and something is obscured by the habit of turning an obvious commonplace ('we seek the good of all') into an intellectual concept.¹⁵

If excessive schematization has landed us with intellectual parties – Erasmians or commonwealth-men – where in reality we have no more than like-minded troubled individuals with complaints about different aspects of society, failure to look beyond the complaints and prescriptions has obscured the activities of governments and the reality of the relations between thinkers and actors. None of the historians I have reviewed here has attempted a systematic study of the way in which articulate protest and intellectual remedy-mongering may have percolated into statutes and proclamations; none is really concerned with the mechanism of translating aspiration into achievement. This is not to blame them – they had enough to do – but it shows what still needs doing. Even Jones, who starts off with hints that he will attend to such questions and does list statutes supposedly related to reformist movements, soon is back with classifying writers and

¹⁴ SP 1/241, fo. 110 (*LP Add.* 1241).

¹⁵ Ferguson's discussion of 'the commonweal and the sense of change' (*Articulate Citizen*, ch. 13) also suffers from this failure to distinguish. 'The Tudor commonwealth,' he says, 'was a profoundly conservative ideal' (p. 366). It could be so in the hands of writers who treated the commonwealth as a single noun; the far greater number who thought they were speaking of general welfare could be conservative or radical about it as the remediable deficiencies in question might dictate.

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writings, with extracting comment or ideas on topics ordered by himself, and with at most supposing that whatsoever was done was somehow a product of the 'movement' he discerns. Of course, the links between books and laws are always hard to trace. We know that a man like Thomas Starkey offered himself expressly as an adviser to the policy-makers; we have some exchange of views between him and Cromwell, and within the circle that surrounded both of them; yet even in his case direct effects are hard to prove, though some quite powerful probabilities emerge.¹⁶ Yet if the place of these thinkers is to be understood, their ambition to affect real life should at least be investigated.

I offer these criticisms in no carping spirit. The achievements of men who have laboured through some extremely tedious and highly repetitive materials in order to uncover a whole generation of purposeful thinkers are exciting and command both the highest respect and that gratitude which springs from a realization that this, at least, is work one will not have to do oneself. It is because I still need to answer the question whether anything further can be done that I have ventured to stress the weaknesses in the case as stated hitherto. For it is into those gaps that I propose to wriggle. I do not and cannot claim to fill them; but I can try to look at the reality of a government in action for a purpose which we know was also being propounded by systematic thinkers. Not Erasmian government, not commonwealth government, not the government of proposals only; but the work of a markedly reformist government, and whether what it did reflected the existence of those advocates of reform. All our historians have, one way or another, put up signposts which I should like to follow: signposts pointing towards the statute book, towards executive action, towards (especially) the era of Thomas Cromwell as a time when thought yielded results in deeds. In short, I am about to undertake a case study both to test and to fill out our existing theories about the early-Tudor commonwealth, and I propose to start the enquiry by looking at the man who has been seen as both the organizer and the agent of the intellectuals.

¹⁶ G. R. Elton, 'Reform by Statute: Thomas Starkey's *Dialogue* and Thomas Cromwell's Policy,' *Proceedings of the British Academy*, liv (1968), 165–188; and cf. below, pp. 46–55.

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THOMAS CROMWELL

All the experts are agreed that the years of Thomas Cromwell's administration marked an important stage in the thought and practice of social reform, but they are less unanimous or even clear about the role played by the minister himself. Zeeveld recognized his control of the propaganda machine and the intellectuals, but felt that Cromwell's own thought remained strictly pragmatic and concerned with expediency; he could in no way regard him as a radical anxious to remake the commonwealth.¹ Ferguson, sure that men of the new learning were employed solely for the purpose of serving the King's political aims, echoed this view.² McConica, though willing to speak of Cromwell's 'astute genius', saw him only in the role of a recruiter; he did not regard him as a man who contributed ideas and purposes of his own.³ And while Jones admitted that the Cromwellian group manifested their concern with social progress, he doubted the minister's own commitment to such notions.⁴ Yet Cromwell manifestly stands at the centre of whatever was being planned and done. Thus, before the reformist labours of the 1530's can be properly assessed, we must come to some positive conclusions about Cromwell's own personality and intentions.

It is certainly true that the Cromwell usually found in the books would hardly be seen as a man of ideas and ideals. He may no longer be thought of as a mere executive agent, the willing and useful servant of his master's autocratic determination, but that is not to endow him with positive plans for reform and renewal. An energetic administrator who gave English government a new cast, perhaps; a scrupulous executor of severe policies; even perhaps a man sympathetic to some of the new ideas in religion which were spreading through the realm in his days of

¹ Zeeveld, *Foundations*, 113.

² Ferguson, *Articulate Citizen*, 134.

³ McConica, *English Humanists*, 191.

⁴ Jones, *Tudor Commonwealth*, 31.

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power;⁵ but does any of this support a view which would turn him from an employer of writers useful to the political changes into the leader of a movement for comprehensive reform? I have before this suggested that his mind inclined to intellectual speculation, and that his relations with Thomas Starkey's work display him as an active participant in a dialogue between thought and action,⁶ but I agree that I have not yet succeeded in describing a Thomas Cromwell who would really fit that role.

Yet to do so is not really very difficult.⁷ The inadequacy of the conventional picture emerges in odd ways. Cromwell, we know, had no formal schooling, and we therefore assume, with the usual arrogance of educators, that however bright a mind he may have possessed he cannot have been attuned to the theorizing and formal planning beloved by intellectuals. Yet this uneducated man received letters in Latin, with Greek bits in them, and not only from tuffhunters but also from a man like Richard Morison who knew him well and meant his letters to be read. He spoke and read Italian and French with obvious fluency. Most surprising of all, he was something of an artist in English. On the basis of his surviving letters it has been concluded that his style displayed an 'extraordinary liveliness and flexibility of usage', marked by the employment of a 'large number of loan words, new formations and words modified in meaning',⁸ and this opinion would draw only support from a study of the state papers and statutes he drafted. A man whose mind operated in such an inventive use of language has at least the makings of an intellectual.

The best start for a proper appreciation of Cromwell's intellect

⁵ Cf. my *Tudor Revolution in Government* (Cambridge, 1953) and *Policy and Police* (Cambridge, 1972); A. G. Dickens, *Thomas Cromwell and the English Reformation* (London, 1959).

⁶ G. R. Elton, 'The Political Creed of Thomas Cromwell,' *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.* (1956), 69ff.; 'Reform by Statute,' *Proc. Brit. Acad.* liv (1968), 165ff.

⁷ A. J. Slavin, in his introduction to his selection of Cromwell's letters (*Thomas Cromwell on Church and Commonwealth*, Harper Torchbooks, 1969), has painted a generous picture of a passionate and universal reformer. Though overdone, and too much based on McConica's misleading analysis, it seems to me essentially correct.

⁸ Audrey le Lièvre, 'Linguistic Activity among Statesmen at the Court of Henry VIII, with reference to contemporary letters, and especially those of Thomas Cromwell,' unpublished dissertation (Cambridge, 1949); quotation at p. 168.