

HUMANISM AND AMERICA

*An Intellectual History of English
Colonisation, 1500–1625*

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

And yet when these insatiably greedy and evil men have divided among themselves goods which would have sufficed for the entire people, how far they remain from the happiness of the Utopian Republic, which has abolished not only money but with it greed!¹

Thomas More's hostility to greed was characteristic of Renaissance humanism. The distinctive aspect of his discussion of greed in *Utopia* is that he invented a society free from this vice which he located, twenty-four years after Columbus' first voyage, in the New World. Was More alone in imagining the New World through humanism? Humanism was the dominant intellectual force of Renaissance Europe. In what way did it shape Europe's 'discovery' and conquest of the New World? My aim is to explore this question in relation to the English (or, more precisely, anglophone) understanding of America from More's generation, early in the sixteenth century, through to the demise of the Virginia Company in 1625.² Humanists were active in New World projects throughout Europe, but it was in England, I shall argue, that the humanist imagination dominated colonising projects.³ Frequently, prominent English humanists – John Rastell, Thomas Smith, Philip Sidney, Humphrey Gilbert, Walter Raleigh – were at the forefront of colonisation. Many others who were prominent humanists (or patrons of humanists) – Richard Eden, John Florio, Dudley Digges, Henry Wriothesley – were also involved in the projects. We also find that many men of more humble birth, such as Captain John Smith, employed their education in the *studia humanitatis* as a tool of colonisation. But what in the humanist imagination drew these men to the New World? And why,

¹ Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge, 1989), p. 109.

² Our subject is anglophone because while dominated by the English, many of these projects involved Welsh, Scottish and Anglo-Irish interests. Moreover, Scottish, Welsh and Irish (resettling the Old English) colonies were projected. As we shall see, these projects all employed similar humanist tools.

³ On humanism in European colonising projects, see Wolfgang Reinhard, ed., *Humanismus und Neue Welt* (Bonn, 1987). For humanist nervousness of conquest and war, see Robert P. Adams, *The better part of valor: More, Erasmus, Colet, and Vives, on humanism, war, and peace, 1496–1535* (Seattle, 1962).

more than in any other European country, did the first period of English colonisation assume the form of a humanist project?

Profit and possession are central to our understanding of the motives for European expansion.⁴ These motives have great intuitive appeal. Greed, a desire that serves only itself, is a powerful explanation of human action, particularly actions that lead to the destruction of entire cultures, the death of millions and the dispossession of those who survive. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Renaissance humanism furnished arguments of profit and possession for early English colonisers. The highest aim of humanism was glory, and what better way to achieve glory, promoters of colonies asked, than to conquer barbarian lands? While historians remain largely unaware of the impact of humanist culture on European expansion, it is clear that an understanding of that impact would support their central conclusions on the motives of profit and possession.⁵

What may cause surprise is that humanists were deeply sceptical of profit and nervous of foreign possessions at the same time that they saw both as possible sources of glory. These ‘adventurers’ were formed by the Platonic (and Ciceronian) dictum that ‘man was not born himself alone’.⁶ According to humanist moral philosophy, we are social animals and as such we have a duty to pursue the good of the community. This means putting self-interest to one side, which in turn demands the cultivation of virtue. Profit and luxury divert us from active participation in public life. The Roman cultural heritage (upon which humanism was built) showed that foreign possessions were one of the most likely sources of luxury and corruption. A variety of Roman sources, including the histories of Sallust and Tacitus, and works on oratory and moral philosophy (such as Cicero’s *Brutus*), show that the luxury of Rome’s colonies was believed to be a source of effeminate

⁴ See Kenneth R. Andrews, *Trade, plunder and settlement: Maritime enterprise and the genesis of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 5; Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of happiness* (Chapel Hill, 1988), p. 8; Wm Roger Louis, foreword to *The origins of empire*, ed. Nicholas Canny, vol. I of *The Oxford history of the British empire*, ed. Wm Roger Louis (Oxford, 1998), pp. x–xii. For more general accounts of the themes of profit and possession in colonisation, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/postcolonialism* (London, 1998) p. 2; Marc Ferro, *Colonisation: A global history*, trans. K. D. Prithipaul (London, 1997).

⁵ Studies that have examined the role of humanism in English colonising projects include David B. Quinn, ‘Renaissance influences in English colonisation’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 26 (1976), pp. 73–92; David B. Quinn, ‘The colonial venture of Sir Thomas Smith in Ulster, 1571–1575’, *The Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), pp. 261–78; G. J. R. Parry, ‘Some early reactions to the three voyages of Martin Frobisher’, *Parergon*, new ser., 6 (1988), pp. 149–61. Cf. Howard Mumford Jones, ‘Origins of the English colonial idea in England’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 85 (1942), pp. 448–65. On the impact of humanist geography on colonisation, see Lesley B. Cormack, *Charting an empire: Geography at the English universities, 1580–1620* (Chicago, 1997).

⁶ Cicero, *On duties*, trans. and ed. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 9–10.

and 'Asiatic' influences and consequently the cause of a decline in virtue and the decline of the Republic. For some Romans, for example Cicero in *De officiis* (*On duties*), these problems of conquest reach further into a more general concern about the justice of empire, a concern that exceeds fears for the Republic and extends to the treatment of other peoples.

Drawing a parallel between the experience of Rome and their own encounters with the New World, humanists perceived colonisation with nervousness, anxiety and, sometimes, outright hostility. Indeed, through to the first quarter of the seventeenth century, these concerns overshadowed discussions of colonies. Profit and possession, it was repeatedly emphasised, were secondary aims or were denied to be aims at all. 'Beware my hearers', Alexander Whitaker declared in the first sentence of his 1613 report from the Chesapeake, 'to condemne riches'.⁷ He echoes book 1 of *De officiis* in which Cicero, who for Renaissance humanists was pre-eminent among moral philosophers, states that 'nothing is more the mark of a mean and petty spirit than to love riches'.⁸ Cicero's comment is made in the context of an argument in which even honour and glory are treated with scepticism and subordinated to justice. He mentions conquest as one of the pitfalls for the vices of greed and the excessive appetite for glory.⁹ For early English would be colonisers, glory had to be separated from profit and allied to the exercise of virtues such as courage in death, temperance in subduing desire, justice in the treatment of native Americans and the pursuit of the ends of God, not Mammon. The mental world of the early modern English was not, of course, entirely inhabited by dead pagans. When colonisers argued for the pursuit of glory they usually placed the glory of God first. Religion complemented the humanist preoccupation with virtue and the scepticism of greed.

Underlying the humanist nervousness of profit is one of the principal factors dividing classical and early modern European culture from that of modern Europe. Following the rise of liberal individualism and the industrial revolution, selfishness and the profit motive came to be perceived as potentially positive social forces. Of course, selfishness may well have been

⁷ Alexander Whitaker, *Good newes from Virginia* (London, 1613), p. 1.

⁸ Cicero, *On duties*, I, 68. On the pre-eminent position of Cicero in Renaissance humanism, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance thought and its sources*, ed. Michael Mooney (New York, 1979), p. 29: 'The ancient writer who earned their highest admiration was Cicero. Renaissance humanism was an age of Ciceronianism in which the study and imitation of Cicero was a widespread concern'; Jerold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and philosophy in Renaissance humanism* (Princeton, 1968); Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978), I; Markku Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁹ Cicero, *On duties*, I, 54–8 and II, 26–8.

as present in classical and neo-classical cultures as under twentieth-century capitalism. Why else would Cicero and Thomas More have spent so much energy writing against this vice? The difference between the cultures is that, under liberal individualism, selfishness is understood to be the engine of wealth and wealth is believed to be desirable, whereas in early modern culture both selfishness and wealth are perceived as threats to the fabric of the community.¹⁰ Cicero, one of the most influential writers on self-interest, is at best ambivalent on the subject. He believes it is unrealistic or even dangerous not to consider questions of advantage (as some Stoics had argued), but he insists that honour and virtue must always prevail, even if honour demands death. This view came to be widely held in the Renaissance and early modern period. Of course, we must question whether such sentiments were genuine when applied to European conquest, and we shall come to this problem. It is clear, however, that America was first colonised by people who stated that a glorious death in pursuit of the desires of their god was preferable to dishonourable self-preservation. In the twenty-first century such people would be more likely to be described as terrorists than as the proto-capitalists that historians have discerned.¹¹ These self-described 'adventurers' would not, of course, recognise either category.

What was humanism? At about the same time that the New World was being 'discovered' by Europeans in the late fifteenth century, a new learning was becoming established in England. This was the *studia humanitatis*: the revival of the Greek and Roman disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, history, moral philosophy and poetry that had flourished in Italy for more than a century.¹² From the mid-fifteenth century the English, in common with northern Europeans in general, began adopting this new education system, greatly extending the existing medieval tradition of studying the classics. Through the course of the sixteenth century the *studia humanitatis* became entrenched in England, first in schools and then universities.¹³ At the same

¹⁰ See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment: Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton, 1975); Albert O. Hirschman, *The passions and the interests* (Princeton, 1977, with a foreword by Amartya Sen, 1997); Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*.

¹¹ On the proto-capitalism of early American colonisation, see S. M. Kingsbury, ed., *The records of the Virginia Company of London*, 4 vols. (Washington, 1906–35), I, pp. 12–15; Wesley F. Craven, *The dissolution of the Virginia Company* (Oxford, 1932), p. 24; Herbert L. Osgood, *The American colonies in the seventeenth century*, 3 vols. (first published 1904, reissued New York, 1930), I, pp. 68–71.

¹² On humanism and the *studia humanitatis*, see Kristeller, *Renaissance thought and its sources*, pp. 21–3.

¹³ On school curricula, see T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's small Latine and lesse Greeke*, 2 vols. (Urbana, 1944). On the universities, see Mark H. Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in transition 1558–1642* (Oxford, 1959). The best recent examination of humanism in English education is part I of Quentin Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996).

time, numerous treatises were published outlining the education of boys in the *studia humanitatis*. Literate culture came increasingly to be dominated by this revolution in learning. Works within the disciplines of the *studia humanitatis* were produced following the classical models.

One of the fundamental distinctions made within humanist texts was the classical, characteristically Ciceronian, distinction between the contemplative and active life. The study of the classical disciplines was, according to this distinction, essential for the contemplative life. At times this understanding of contemplative life would reach a pessimism in which withdrawal was portrayed as the only alternative to participation in a corrupt society. In general, however, humanists, and particularly northern European humanists, maintained on the authority of Cicero that the contemplative life was a preparation for the active.¹⁴ The skills of the *studia humanitatis*, and the wisdom, justice, courage and temperance that those disciplines were believed to impart, were to be employed in the active life. This meant that the classical disciplines would be a source of reflection for immediate political concerns. Classical and humanist texts were employed to reflect, for example, upon political and military ethics.¹⁵ In an even more direct way, however, the humanist disciplines could be employed as the language or the medium of everyday life; the life, as Petrarch had put it, of the street.¹⁶ Thus according to the humanistic understanding of the relation between the contemplative and active life, the study of the classical disciplines was to be employed, for example, in political life, military affairs, the law courts, in commerce and in religion.

Several studies have explored the role of the humanist disciplines in religious reform but, to a large degree, the study of Renaissance humanism has been confined to those pursuits humanists themselves would have regarded as contemplative. It is true that many contemplative pursuits reflected on the active life, and no humanist would have denied that any form of speech or writing was a kind of act. Nevertheless, humanists insisted on distinguishing levels of engagement with civic life. It is surprising to find, therefore, that our understanding of the use of the *studia humanitatis* in civic life is anecdotal. Our knowledge of the use of classical learning to understand the colonisation of the New World, which was perceived as an extension of the civic sphere, has likewise been anecdotal and yet, as I argue, the *studia humanitatis* was fundamental to that understanding.

¹⁴ Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*, I, pp. 193–262.

¹⁵ Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, ‘“Studied for action”: how Gabriel Harvey read his Livy’, *Past and Present*, 129 (1990).

¹⁶ Seigel, *Rhetoric and philosophy in Renaissance humanism*.

The fear of corruption drove some humanists to oppose the foundation of colonies altogether. Those who did pursue colonisation did so because they found an outlet for the humanist passion for the *vita activa*, a means to exercise virtue in the foundation and conservation of a commonwealth – the highest calling of the active life. Moreover, when the promoters of colonies spoke of the glories of serving the commonwealth they did not always restrict their meaning to the English commonwealth. Their first duty was, of course, to their sovereign and to England. Frequently, however, the understanding of virtuous duties in the service of their sovereign extended to the foundation of new commonwealths. ‘Commonwealth’ was a translation of *res publica*, or republic. For the early modern English, it meant simply a coherent political body defined by mutual obligations.¹⁷ A commonwealth could be a guild, a business, a parish, a town, a city, the state or, in this case, a colony. The creation of colonies could be represented as the creation of discrete commonwealths, separate from England but under the *imperium* of the crown. In 1610, for example, the Virginia Company advertised for ‘men of most use and necessity, to the foundation of a Common-wealth’.¹⁸

The language of the *vita activa* was quasi-republican. This presented a problem. In the courtly world of northern Europe, the expression of Roman republican sentiment was limited. The possibilities for a life of virtuous action were even more limited. Humanists made great progress in reconciling much of the republican thought central to the *studia humanitatis* with princely societies.¹⁹ England was commonly portrayed not simply as a monarchy but as a mixed constitution, a layered political structure that provided many opportunities for political participation for men and women of almost all estates.²⁰ Humanism, as we shall see, provided the ideological architecture for this constitution. But a tension between the values of the humanist education system, with its emphasis upon self-government, and Renaissance European culture persisted. The opportunity to establish new commonwealths provided a means of political expression both for those who had no desire to be in conflict with their monarch and for those (particularly as the conflict between monarch and Parliament deepened

¹⁷ See, for example, Thomas Smith’s definition of ‘commonwealth’ in Thomas Smith, *The commonwealth of England [De republica Anglorum]*, ed. L. Alston [London, 1583], (Cambridge, 1906), p. 10.

¹⁸ *A true and sincere declaration of the purpose and ends of the plantation begun in Virginia* (London, 1610), pp. 25–6.

¹⁹ Skinner, *Foundations of modern political thought*, I; Patrick Collinson, ‘The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 69 (1987), pp. 394–424; Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought*.

²⁰ On the political participation of women, see Tim Harris, ed., *The politics of the excluded, c.1500–1850* (London, 2001). While they were involved in colonising, women did not directly participate in the promotion of colonies between 1500 and 1625.

under James I) who did seek political expression outside the confines of their society. In similar fashion others chose literary means to pursue the same ends.²¹

The humanist character of English colonisation can, therefore, in part be explained by tensions between the *studia humanitatis* and its reception into northern Europe. But why, as I argue, did humanism do more to shape the English understanding of the New World than that of other Europeans? The answer lies in part in the dependence by the English crown upon the grant of private patents for establishing colonies. It is true that all European colonisation began in this way. Christopher Columbus was licensed by the Spanish crown to establish colonies, as were the conquistadors (even if retrospectively). Similarly, in 1541 Francis I of France granted the right to colonise to Jean François de laRoque de Roberval, just as in 1578 Elizabeth I granted the first English patent for colonising in America to Humphrey Gilbert. As silver and gold were plundered in huge quantities from Mexico and Peru, the Spanish crown moved quickly to exercise close military, political and financial control over its New World possessions. It had little need to persuade anyone to provide support for the conquests (except, of course, on the question of justice). By contrast, in the period with which we are concerned, English colonising projects were persistently unsuccessful. They consumed rather than produced resources. As a consequence, the crown provided legal support but otherwise kept colonial matters at arm's length. The success or failure of the enterprises rested entirely on the ability of private interests to raise capital and personnel. The colonising attempts of the French Huguenots were the most striking European parallel with the model of English colonisation. The Huguenot projects were also licensed to private interests and enlisted men of humanist education in their support. Those men, as we see in ch. 2, included a number of English humanists, such as Richard Eden, who gained employment with their French co-religionists and subsequently came to prominence in the promotion of English colonies. Such was the common identification of English and Huguenot colonisation that joint projects were planned. However, the massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day in 1572 and its aftermath limited further French Protestant involvement in the New World, and in 1627 Huguenots were officially banned from venturing to the New World by Cardinal de Richelieu.²²

²¹ See David Norbrook, *Writing the English republic: Poetry, rhetoric and politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge, 1999), and David Norbrook, 'Lucan, Thomas May, and the creation of a republican literary culture', in Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake, eds., *Culture and politics in early Stuart England* (London, 1994).

²² For the ban, see 'Article XVII de la charte de la compagnie des Cent-Associés', *Mercure de France*, XIV, 245, cited in Pierre Clément, *Lettres, instructions et mémoires de Colbert* (Paris, Imprimerie

Falling back upon their wits and their education the English would be colonisers appreciated that an enormous persuasive project would be required to gain the necessary support. The creation of private colonising grants corresponded with the peak of the *studia humanitatis* in England. This new intellectual world was fundamentally rhetorical in character. At the heart of humanism was a belief that the moral world was contingent and that all political action, or indeed, all social relations, rested upon moral persuasion. As his model of 'deliberative', or political, rhetoric the English humanist Thomas Wilson used an example from Erasmus of 'An epistle to persuade a young gentleman to marriage'.²³ Rhetoric was, accordingly, a central discipline of the *studia humanitatis*. It was thus to the *studia humanitatis* that the promoters of colonies turned to convince their audiences to part with their purses and, if necessary, with their lives. 'If losse of life befall you by this service', argued Robert Johnson in *The new life of Virginea*, 'yet in this case too, wee doubt not but you are resolved with constant courage.'²⁴

It is often argued that the private grants to European colonisers reflected a medieval and feudal mental world.²⁵ The position of the conqueror resembled that of the feudal lord. This argument is perhaps true of the Spanish conquistadors, who could understand their actions as an extension of the reconquista or, like Columbus, the crusades. It is also true that Ciceronian values could be reconciled with feudal England.²⁶ It is difficult, however, to fit a feudal image upon English colonising enterprises in which the language of self-representation concerned the rewards of virtuous political action, a language of the classical commonwealth and of the city.²⁷ We shall see that Walter Raleigh appealed to both traditions, but as silver and gold proved elusive, the English rejected the possibility of emulating the conquistadors.²⁸

Impériale, 1865), tome 3, vol. II, p. 404. On Huguenot colonising projects, see Frank Lestringant, *Le Huguenot et le Sauvage. L'Amérique et la controverse coloniale en France au temps des guerres de religion, 1555–1589* (Paris, 1990).

²³ Thomas Wilson, *The art of rhetoric*, ed. Peter E. Medine (Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 79.

²⁴ Robert Johnson, *The new life of Virginea* (London, 1612), sigs. D4r–v.

²⁵ See, for example, Francis Jennings, *The invasion of America: Indians, colonialism, and the cant of conquest* (New York, 1975), pp. 3–5.

²⁶ See Stephen Alford, *The early Elizabethan polity: William Cecil and the British succession crisis 1558–1569* (Cambridge, 1998).

²⁷ This is not to say that civic language was employed exclusively in cities. It was a language also used for the parish 'commonwealth'. On the parish as republic, see Mark Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: officeholding in early modern England', in Harris, *The politics of the excluded, c.1500–1850*.

²⁸ See also Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the world: Ideologies of empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500–c.1800* (New Haven, 1995).

We can say, therefore, that humanism provided the tools of persuasion necessary for the projects to gain support. But we can go further than that. We must remember that the prospective colonies were represented as new commonwealths. For the humanist imagination, persuasion, or oratory, was fundamental to the foundation of a new commonwealth. When humanists questioned the origins of political society, the answer was not merely that it lay in a natural sociability (which was certainly not assumed in the opening of Cicero's *De inventione*) but an act of persuasion. According to Cicero, 'there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields', but a man of great eloquence 'transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk'.²⁹ Humanists attempting to establish colonies seized upon the idea that oratory was necessary to establish new commonwealths; indeed it is through this idea that they understood the process of gaining support for their projects. The emphasis upon persuasion reflected the understanding that the colonies were new commonwealths and simultaneously complemented the necessity of raising private support. Promoting the enterprises had a double imperative: first, the practical necessity of raising finance and personnel for private projects; and secondly, what we might call the 'imaginative' understanding of that first process, namely, the performance of oratory in the foundation of new commonwealths. This imaginative, ideological, dimension was no less practical than the first. For humanists, nothing could be more practical than the performance of an act in the foundation of a commonwealth.

One consequence of this understanding of the relation between oratory, or promotion, and the foundation of commonwealths, or colonies, was that the English produced more literature promoting colonisation in this period than any other European country. Through to the demise of the Virginia Company, numerous tracts and pamphlets in particular, but also histories, verse and plays, were produced debating the virtues of colonisation. This literature was composed by a wide a variety of authors from noble to humble birth, by authors who never set foot in America, by others who participated in voyages, and by many who lived in the New World. In this book, I will be concerned with the whole range of these texts because they all participated in the oratorical foundation of the commonwealths.³⁰

²⁹ Cicero, *De inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (London, 1949), I, 2.

³⁰ Cf. David Beers Quinn, *New American world: A documentary history of North America to 1612*, 5 vols. (London, 1979), V, p. 233. Quinn excludes some material from his documentary history: 'no examples . . . of the sermons preached to potential subscribers are given' because 'they are long-winded and of intermittent interest'.

The presence of civic, quasi-republican, thought in early English colonisation brings us to the myths concerning the origins of American liberty. From Thomas Jefferson to the patriotic American historians of the early twentieth century, early American colonisation was seen as the foundation of American liberty.³¹ Since the 1930s, this understanding has been overturned. It has been argued that early colonisation was devoid of political content.³² The driving force was commerce. The story of the foundation of liberty has become a story of the foundation of capitalism and individualism. Certainly, as I will argue, this emphasis upon commerce is misplaced. Moreover, a language of citizenship does appear to have been employed in early American colonising projects. It was, however, a citizenship conceived in terms of duties and not the rights-based citizenship valued by the patriotic historians.

It is true that studies of the transmission of civic thought in early modern Europe have, since the 1970s, described a movement from Florence to the English republic to the American revolution which gave little attention to the intervening periods.³³ Indeed, the standard accounts held that England was devoid of republican thought prior to the civil wars.³⁴ Recent studies have shown, however, a widespread consciousness of quasi-republican thought in the Tudor and early Stuart periods.³⁵ This consciousness prevailed despite the limitations placed upon political participation by the culture of the court. This was a time, as Patrick Collinson has said, when citizens were cloaked as subjects.³⁶

The *studia humanitatis* were, of course, heuristic. Ancient texts could be read in a variety of ways to support a variety of political interests from

³¹ Alexander Brown, *English politics in early Virginian history* (first published 1901, reissued New York, 1968), pp. 11–13; E. D. Neill, *The English colonisation of America during the seventeenth century* (London, 1871); Charles Mills Gayley, *Shakespeare and the founders of liberty in America* (New York, 1917).

³² Andrews, *Trade, plunder and settlement*, p. 5; Edmund S. Morgan, *American slavery, American freedom* (New York, 1975), pp. 44–5, 95, 118; Greene, *Pursuits of happiness*, p. 8; Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and center: Constitutional development in the extended politics of the British empire and the United States 1607–1788* (Athens, Ga., 1986).

³³ See, for example, Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment*.

³⁴ Blair Worden, 'English republicanism', in J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge history of political thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 445; J. P. Sommerville, *Politics and ideology in England, 1603–1640* (London, 1986), p. 86, n.1 'civic humanism was buried if not dead before the English civil war'; see also pp. 57–8.

³⁵ Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I', pp. 394–424; Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought*; Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes*; Andrew Fitzmaurice, 'The civic solution to the crisis of English colonisation, 1609–1625', *The Historical Journal*, 42, 1 (1999), pp. 25–51; Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic'.

³⁶ Patrick Collinson, *De republica Anglorum: or, history with the politics put back*. Inaugural lecture delivered 9 November 1989 (Cambridge University Press).

republicanism to absolute rule. The same authority, as we shall see, could be employed to support contradictory positions. Tacitus could be read as nostalgic for a lost civic virtue or as a guide for the corrupt courtier. Cicero could be read as an advocate of the life of citizenship and action. But Cicero with Seneca could also be seen to support contemplation and withdrawal from the corrupt world.

Crucially, however, the foundation of new commonwealths in America could not be pursued purely through study and contemplation. The projects demanded, and attracted, those who were committed to the highest ideals of the Ciceronian conception of the active life. Sir William Alexander (a Scot) struck the familiar theme of virtuous action rewarded by glory: 'Where was ever Ambition baited with greater hopes than here, or where ever had Vertue so large a field to reape the fruits of Glory.'³⁷ The projects attracted, therefore, those most in sympathy with quasi-republican ideals of citizenship even though many participants, such as Alexander, could never be described as republicans. These sympathies are abundantly evident in the language employed in promoting the new commonwealths. The early modern English tracts promoting colonies prove to be one of the most sustained and vigorous humanist discussions of the best form of government produced prior to the civil wars. While it is, of course, true that revolution was not the aim of the colonisers, we may still say that the republican tradition which developed following the English civil wars and the American revolution had far greater depth than has been recognised.

It is important to emphasise that humanist thought was neither coherent nor stable. Humanists pursuing colonisation were writing within multiple contexts and attempting to respond simultaneously to pressures from those different spheres. Over the period with which we are concerned, for example, the Ciceronian optimism of the early Renaissance gave way to the pressures of the wars of religion and saw the emergence of a more jaundiced view of the political world. Moreover, promoters of colonies were not dealing only with the European context for their ideology; their convictions were constantly tested by the realities of colonial experience, although that experience did not always lead them to the conclusions we might expect. As I show in ch. 2, English would be colonisers of the sixteenth century generally argued for what can be characterised as a Ciceronian humanist balance of honour and profit in the pursuit of glory. Profit, they argued, was a legitimate aim if it was subordinate to the pursuit of honourable and

³⁷ Sir William Alexander, *An encouragement to colonies* (London, 1624), p. 42.

pious ends. Those who failed in their enterprises, as Edward Haies, the humanist tutor turned ship's captain, argued, were being punished by God for thinking too much of their own advantage. In ch. 3 we see that the experience of repeated and disastrous failure caused a revision of this ideology. Against a backdrop of Elizabethan colonising failures and an inauspicious start on the Chesapeake, many Virginia Company promoters dismissed the pursuit of profit altogether and denied any intention to dispossess the 'Powhatans'. Here experience encouraged the humanist scepticism of profit and foreign possessions and produced an almost Stoic zeal. These sentiments were shared equally by the hired pens writing for the Company in London and by the participants in the colony such as Alexander Whitaker. In this sense it can be difficult to distinguish at this early point of American colonisation between the ideology of 'paper empires' and that of the colonisers.³⁸

To privilege direct experience in the colonies is to some degree anachronistic. The distinctions between these various accounts of colonisation – measured by the distance from the 'action' – are more precious to modern historians than they were to early modern Europeans. Certainly, the claim to have experience held as much rhetorical force for early modern audiences as it has in the twenty-first century. As I have said, however, humanist culture placed great emphasis upon the power of speech (including printing) as a form of action. Understood in this context, those who wrote to promote the colony, even those without 'first hand' experience, cannot be dismissed merely as an 'intelligentsia' or as marginal to the enterprise – they were believed to be central to the act of colonising.

In at least one very important case, however, experience in the colony did underpin a major shift in the Jacobean ideology of colonisation: in the writings of Captain John Smith. Although only in Virginia for a short period, Smith was one of the first colonisers to distance himself from the attitudes of the metropolis, a more familiar story later in the colonial period.³⁹ In ch. 6, I show that Smith reacted violently against the Virginia Company's concern with behaving justly toward the 'Powhatans'. In doing so, he appealed to deeply Machiavellian notions on the necessity of fear and

³⁸ Recent studies emphasise that colonisation creates a gap between the ideology of metropolitan propagandists and that of colonists engaged with a new environment and new peoples, see Jennings, *The invasion of America*; Karen Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians* (London, 1980); James Axtell, *The invasion within: The contest of cultures in colonial North America* (Oxford, 1981); Richard White, *The middle ground* (Cambridge, 1991); Karen Kupperman, *Indians and English: Facing off in early America* (Ithaca, 2000).

³⁹ See Jennings, *The invasion of America*; Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians*; Axtell, *The invasion within*; White, *The middle ground*; Kupperman, *Indians and English*.

violence as political instruments.⁴⁰ Again, Smith's ideological turn reveals a relationship between thought and experience that is not simply one way. Machiavellian and Tacitist thought were particularly fashionable in Jacobean England and Smith was clearly responding to that context. On the other hand, it was his dealings with the Powhatans that provided Smith with the opportunity to employ the instrument of Machiavellian critique. The colonial experience must therefore be considered part of the context that facilitated the reception of Machiavellian thought in England. The experience of Irish colonisation provided similar opportunities for the emergence of Machiavellian thought. The view advanced here is that the experience of colonisation shaped the thought of the protagonists: that the *studia humanitatis* were a tool for solving problems in the world of experience. The view presented is also, given that humanism provided terms in which colonisation was understood, that the foundation of colonies was a means through which humanists could pursue their moral and political values.

The question arises of whether it is possible to appeal to fear and violence as necessary instruments of politics without being labelled 'Machiavellian'. We could also ask whether a commitment to the primacy of honour over advantage must be labelled 'Ciceronian'. It is true that such political dispositions are often reified by intellectual historians. For the purposes of this book it is necessary only to observe that the authors we consider possessed certain distinctive attitudes, or conventional sentiments, to a field of related political values, including glory, honour, virtue, duty, corruption, profit or advantage, possession, fear, violence and persuasion. These attitudes were central to their plans to establish colonies; these were the terms of much of the political discourse of this culture. The conventions of this linguistic system were recognised and exploited by its participants. It was a convention of sixteenth-century political discourse, for example, that rulers should seek to be loved rather than feared. In this context, the argument that rulers should employ fear was recognisably an attempt to alter political discourse. It need hardly be added that this argument was popularised by Machiavelli. Terms such as 'Machiavellian' and 'Ciceronian' are merely the shorthand of the period. It should be stressed that a statement advocating the use of fear, to remain with the example, could hardly be made in this linguistic

⁴⁰ Machiavelli had also expressed anxieties over expansion. He acknowledged the conflict between empire and liberty but concluded that the loss of liberty was inevitable. It is preferable, he argued, to lose liberty in the pursuit of empire and greatness than to lose liberty without having achieved greatness. See David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire* (Cambridge, 2000), ch. 5.

environment in a way that was innocent of the conventions of debates over political leadership.

What, it will be asked, could writers of Classical and Renaissance central and northern Italy have to do with a series of enterprises lasting more than one hundred years in which the people of an island archipelago on the western boundary of Europe crossed the Atlantic? The answer, as I have suggested, lies in the attraction of the problems that the New World ventures provoked for men educated in the *studia humanitatis*. But it is possible to pursue the question further. The colonisation of the New World involved a large cross-section of English society, from leaders such as Raleigh to ships' crews, soldiers, artisans and common labourers. I have noted that leaders of the enterprises were frequently leaders of humanism in England – but to what extent did this ideology penetrate through the social orders? Are we concerned here simply with the mental world of an elite? Intellectual histories offer few leads here because the great majority of intellectual history is still concerned with the most highly educated portion of early modern society. Moreover, with a few notable exceptions, historians of colonisation have neglected intellectual history.⁴¹ At a more general level, as Mark Goldie has observed, intellectual and social history have been slow to draw upon each other.⁴² This problem is particularly evident when the fields deal with the same subject such as political participation. Intellectual history has pointed to the existence of an ideology of civic participation in early modern Europe. Social historians have shown that participation was pervasive through the orders. Little has been done to demonstrate what links, if any, existed between these two facts. Was the humanist ideology of participation employed widely throughout the orders, or was it the preserve of a highly educated elite? Historians of popular culture have alerted us to the fact that the elites of early modern Europe participated in supposedly 'popular' forms of culture.⁴³ People of humble origin also have been shown to have participated in supposedly 'elite' culture. Indeed, recent studies of popular culture call into question the dichotomy between popular and elite employed in Peter Burke's seminal study of European popular culture.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Notable exceptions are Anthony Pagden, *The fall of natural man: The American Indian and the origins of comparative ethnology* (Cambridge, 1978); James Tully, *An approach to political philosophy: Locke in contexts* (Cambridge, 1993); Pagden, *Lords of all the world*; and Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire*.

⁴² Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic', p. 154.

⁴³ Peter Burke, *Popular culture in early modern Europe* (London, 1978); Keith Wrightson, *English society 1580–1680* (London, 1980).

⁴⁴ Tim Harris, 'Problematising popular culture', in Tim Harris, ed., *Popular culture in England, c. 1500–1850* (London, 1995), pp. 1–27; Jonathan Barry, 'Literacy and literature in popular culture: reading and writing in historical perspective', in Harris, *Popular culture*, pp. 69–94.

Certainly, this dichotomy is difficult to maintain when we examine the mental world of the different orders involved in colonisation. Men from the yeomanry, such as the soldier Captain John Smith or the sea captain and fisherman Richard Whitbourne, employed the same range of humanistic values to discuss colonies as their social superiors. Literacy was not confined to an elite or even to the large number of the 'middling sort' who had access to a grammar-school education. But who were the audience of these men who wrote about colonies and could that audience include even those who were not literate?

Their audience was diverse: the authors explicitly addressed themselves to those who could support the ventures 'in purse' and those who would adventure 'in person'. They addressed themselves to the nobility, the gentry, merchants, all of whom could provide support in purse but who also adventured in person, remembering that in early colonies such Roanoke and Jamestown gentlemen were far more numerous than in England.⁴⁵ The promoters also addressed the 'lower sort' who could adventure in person. Would the humanistic mental world of the authors have furnished persuasive arguments with such an audience? Several possibilities present themselves. The first is that the notion that humanist values could have universal appeal was simply the self-delusion of an elite. We must remember, however, that the authors did not exclusively belong to an elite. Furthermore, we will see that they possessed a keen rhetorical awareness that different arguments were appropriate to different social orders. They contained these differences within a tension between the motives of honour and profit, within, that is, the tensions of humanist ideology (with honour urged upon the 'better sort' and a compromise urged upon the 'lower sort'). Second, we must concede that, given that the tracts promoting colonies were attempting to persuade their audience, the audience necessarily did not agree with all that was said in those tracts, for otherwise persuasion would not have been required. All persuasion, according to a humanistic understanding, rested upon bringing something unfamiliar together with something familiar. In this case, however, the unfamiliar idea was to make a commitment to the New World in purse or person; the more familiar values were the terms of the humanist moral philosophy in which that proposition was presented.

A third possible reaction to the humanistic content of the promotion tracts was for the audience to have internalised and reprocessed the humanistic conventions in terms of their needs and circumstances in the fashion

⁴⁵ On gentlemen in the colonies, see Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians*, p. 17.

of Carlo Ginsburg's *Menocchio*, although evidence for this is difficult to find.⁴⁶ Such accommodation would appear to be inevitable and was even, as I shall argue in ch. 4, encouraged by the necessities of persuasion. The possibility for reinterpretation was limited, however, by the very practical nature of humanist moral thought, by the need, that is, for a degree of consensus on the terms of political discourse. Here we come to the final and most important point. When we study the writings of figures such as Machiavelli or Montaigne, as intellectual historians are wont to do, we may believe that humanism was confined to the mental world of an elite. It is easily forgotten that in its medieval origins (from the *dictatores*) and in everyday life the *studia humanitatis* were concerned with practical matters and their adherents constantly emphasised the practical character of their movement.⁴⁷ Office-holding was not restricted to monarch and councillors. Early modern England offered a multitude of political offices at the levels of parish, town and county.⁴⁸ The city of Exeter, for example, 'had mayor, alderman, councillors, stewards, receiver, recorder, clerk, serjeants, constables, scavengers, swordbearer, porters, watchmen, and wardens of the poor, the bridges and shambles'.⁴⁹ The majority of these positions were unpaid, although their responsibilities could be onerous. Eligibility for the lower offices extended to all householders, who included men in such occupations as bricklayers, blacksmiths, tanners, bakers, glovers, butchers, soapboilers and turners. The lower orders had some say, as Thomas Smith argued, in the destiny of the ship upon which they were passengers. Discussion of the nature and aims of government was not possible without some consensus upon the weights and measures of political life. The language of good government was furnished by the *studia humanitatis*. At its heart, the humanist language of government was a language of duty. Debate could centre upon a whole spectrum of social duties, from those of the sovereign down to the duties of husbandmen (as Thomas Smith again pointed out). These debates invoked a whole field of humanist conventions on virtue and corruption.

But how could the lower orders come to understand Ciceronian moral philosophy? The majority of the lower orders could not read. It has been

⁴⁶ Carlo Ginsburg, *The cheese and the worms: The cosmos of a sixteenth century miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (London, 1980).

⁴⁷ Seigel, *Rhetoric and philosophy in Renaissance humanism*; Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*, I.

⁴⁸ Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I'; Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought*; Conal Condren, *The language of politics in seventeenth century England* (London, 1994).

⁴⁹ Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic', p. 161.

estimated, for example, that before the middle of the seventeenth century more than half of the rural men holding the office of constable were illiterate.⁵⁰ Moreover, it is hard to imagine a literate labourer returning home at night from a day in the fields to read Cicero by candlelight. Ideas, however, were not the prisoners of books. There were a number of bridges between the literate and non-literate worlds through which the lower sort would have been involved in the humanist language of good government. Participation and office-holding in parish and town assemblies were perhaps the primary basis for the development of this common language of government but the reformation of religion was also central to that process.

One of the principal aims of the Reformation was to make scripture accessible. In accordance with this desire, Erasmus and Melancthon reformed the sermon. Preachers were instructed to use the tools of the *studia humanitatis* to make sermons persuasive and moving. Classical rhetoric, which embodied Ciceronian moral philosophy, was to be used to that end.⁵¹ The moral content of sermons shifted away from abstract doctrine to the praise of God's actions and his works, especially man, in a humanist moral vocabulary. Merely through weekly attendance at church, all orders could find themselves exposed to humanist moral values. Moreover, the reform of the sermon had particular importance for the introduction of humanist values into the discussion of the New World because the sermon, as we shall see, was one of the favoured instruments for promoting the voyages.

There were other ways, also, in which the 'common sort' were exposed to humanist moral philosophy. The reading of texts to both literate and illiterate audiences was common practice, and these texts were not always ballads, chapbooks, almanacs and jestbooks. The promoters of colonies repeatedly emphasised that their texts should be read to the 'common sort'. This ambition was expressed by John Rastell, writing about one of the first English colonial projects in 1520, through to Richard Eburne writing in 1624, the closing year of this study. Rastell declared his desire to reach 'men of meane estate/ Whiche nothyng but englyshe can understande'.⁵² The Privy Council, to give another example, ordered that copies of Richard Whitbourne's *A discovery and discourse of Newfoundland* should 'bee

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵¹ John W. O'Malley, 'Content and rhetorical forms in sixteenth century preaching', in James J. Murphy, ed., *Renaissance eloquence* (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 242–4; Debora Shuger, *Sacred rhetoric: The Christian grand style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton, 1988); Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes*, pp. 66–7.

⁵² John Rastell, *A new interlude and mery of the nature of the four elements*, in *Three Rastell plays*, ed. Richard Axton (Cambridge, 1979), p. 31.

distributed' throughout the 'parishes of the Kingdom'.⁵³ Similarly, Richard Eburne repeatedly emphasised that his *Plaine pathway to plantations* was written for the 'common and meaner sort', and yet, as we shall see, the work was no exception from the humanist discourse of promoting colonies. He intended that his book should be read to his chosen audience: 'And now, that I may revert my speech to you, my countrymen and friends – you, I say, of the meaner sort . . . be pleased, I pray you, to peruse, that is, *to read and cause to be read to you* over and over, this book which I have written to you and for you.'⁵⁴ Ideology can also be absorbed without reading or hearing texts. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries a person may oppose state ownership of production without having read Milton Friedman. Or we may support state ownership without having read Marx or Keynes. It is very difficult to hold either position without entering liberal or socialist discourses, regardless of our level of literacy or learning. Humanism provided a language of government that was no less pervasive in the Renaissance. Histories of humanism and intellectual history in general tend to be culturally top heavy in part simply because the less literate have left fewer records of their mental world.⁵⁵ The textual remains we examine in this book were frequently intended for audiences across cultural boundaries. This did not mean that every audience and every member of every audience necessarily agreed with what is often called the 'propaganda' of those texts. Frustratingly, there is very little evidence of how audiences responded to the arguments of the promotional tracts.⁵⁶ We shall examine, however, satires of the promotional tracts that reveal a vigorous dialogue over the proposed colonies. Importantly, while those satires dispute the aims of the colonial projects, they conduct that dispute within a moral vocabulary shared with the promoters. While the audience of the promotional literature may not have shared the aims of the promoters, they did share the same moral universe. Indeed, it is the leverage of that familiar moral language, as I have said, that the promoters had to employ if they were to be successful with their proposals.

We are not simply dealing with the internalisation of elite culture at a popular level. The language of government, while necessarily held in common, could be employed to a variety of ends. Authors promoting colonies recognised this reality when they distinguished different audiences and

⁵³ Gillian T. Cell, ed., *Newfoundland discovered* (London, 1982), p. 101.

⁵⁴ Richard Eburne, *A plaine pathway to plantations* (London, 1624), ed. Louis B. Wright (Ithaca, 1962), p. 10, my emphasis.

⁵⁵ Harris, 'Problematising popular culture'; Barry, 'Literacy and literature in popular culture'.

⁵⁶ There are, for example, very few marginal comments on the surviving texts.

urged different balances of honour and profit upon those audiences. Moreover, the language of good government was very much a civic language: that is, a language both of citizenship and of the city. As a language of citizenship it included the landed gentry (in so far as the gentry perceived their political participation in terms of citizenship), but as a language appropriate to cities it was perhaps more useful for the emerging middle classes than the aristocracy.⁵⁷ Similarly, the ascetic aspect of humanism, the scepticism of luxury, was more fitting to puritan thrift than to the aristocracy.⁵⁸

Was the humanist ambivalence over profit a cynical cloak over a genuinely avaricious design? Cynicism has been attributed to the colonisers on those occasions when historians have confronted evidence confounding a straightforward commercial understanding of the enterprises.⁵⁹ When the *studia humanitatis* are understood to be heuristic, whether the promoters of colonies and their audiences believed what they wrote becomes of secondary importance. Certainly we shall see that humanism, like religion, could be and was employed opportunistically, or even cynically, but the designs of the cynics were no less serious for that. Indeed, cynicism is a mechanism through which political argument responds to its context: it is an acknowledgement of the boundaries of legitimate political discourse. We shall also see that the promoters of colonies cautioned against greed precisely because they understood that it was a motive for adventuring and could corrupt the enterprises. Equally, however, civic values were used by those authors who did in fact travel to America to account for why they were prepared to risk their lives, a risk underlined by the very high mortality rates. In the spectrum between these points humanism provided the terms in which the actions of colonisation were understood.

⁵⁷ On the political discourse of cities, see Condren, *The language of politics in seventeenth century England*. On humanist values and city government, see also Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought*; and Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I'.

⁵⁸ On the thrift of the middling sort, see Peter Earle, *The making of the English middle class* (London, 1989); Harris, 'Problematising popular culture', p. 18.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Quinn, *New American world*, V, p. 233, dismissing the seriousness of the Virginia Company's promotional sermons; Andrews, *Trade, plunder and settlement*, p. 320; and Francis Barker and Peter Hulme, 'Nymphs and reapers heavily vanish: the discursive con-texts of *The Tempest*', in John Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares* (London, 1985), p. 200.