

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06630-3 - Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry:
Together with a Book of Huswifery
Thomas Tusser Edited by William Fordyce Mavor
Excerpt
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Biographical Sketch

OF

Tusser.

THE personal interest which an author excites, is not always in proportion to the celebrity of his work. Of Thomas Tusser, one of our earliest didactic poets, and who has been styled the BRITISH VARRO, few particulars are known, beyond what he has himself recorded in his own poetical life; and from the paucity of chronological data which he has furnished, and the general silence of contemporaries, much uncertainty is thrown on the period when he first saw the light, and on the date of some of the more important passages of his existence.

According to Warton, he was born about the year 1523, in the reign of Henry VIII. but with more probability about 1515 *, else it would be impossible to crowd into the

* On this supposition, which, though not positively confirmed by any research which I have been able to make, is certainly not invalidated by any direct evidence, his dying at a pretty advanced age about 1580, a fact not disputed, may be thus made out. I have followed the incidents of his life, as written by himself, which appear to me to be the only fair grounds of decision. I will suppose that Tusser was seven years of age when he was sent to Wallingford college, that he staid there till he was ten, was then pressed into some choir, where he continued two years, and three years at St. Paul's, which will bring him to fifteen. He was then sent to Eton, probably from

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space such a variety of incidents as composed his chequered life. On his own authority, we learn that Rivenhall, near Witham in Essex, was the place of his nativity; and for the gentility of his family he refers us to “the Herald’s Book*.” The name and race, however, have long been extinct.

previous engagements, later than other boys, on purpose, as he says himself, “to learn the Latin phrase,” which would reasonably employ him till he was nineteen or twenty. I cannot allow him to have been older in 1534 than nineteen; because it may be presumed, that UDALL, whose pupil he was for some time at least, was not appointed master of Eton school till that year. At Cambridge, he probably staid about three years, for we do not find that he took any degree, and left it at twenty-three, in order to attend the court. In that situation he expressly says, he remained ten years, which will make him thirty-three, when he retired from its bustle and intrigues, in the reign of Edward VI. In his thirty-fourth year, I conjecture that he married, and settled as a farmer at Katwade, or Cattiwade, in Suffolk; and it is not allowing him too long for the experience of which he boasts, and which he really seems to have possessed, to conclude that he must have been a practical farmer for eight years before he published the first edition of his book, in 1557, at the time, according to the previous calculations, when he was forty-two years of age; so that he was about sixty five when he died, in 1580. That he was more than fifty-seven, which, on the supposition that he was born in 1523, would have been the case, may be inferred from his own words, in the conclusion of his life, where he says, “death draweth near;” which event, though we ought undoubtedly to anticipate at every age, would have less propriety of application when a man was barely turned fifty, as he would have been in 1573, when the life was first published, than when he was approaching the confines of sixty. These conjectures, for they are nothing more, though the fruits of due reflection, are respectfully submitted to the diligent inquirer.

* I am obliged to Francis Townsend, Esq. Windsor Herald, for the following information relative to the Tusser family.

“DEAR SIR,

Herald’s College, May 1, 1810.

“I much wish it were in my power to furnish you with a satisfactory answer to the principal point in question (the birth of Tusser); but there

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At an early age, notwithstanding his own reluctance and his mother's tears, his father put him to a music school; and he was soon placed as a chorister or singing-boy in the collegiate chapel of the Castle of Wallingford, which consisted of a dean, six prebendaries, six clerks, and four choristers, and was dissolved in 1549. In this situation he pathetically laments the hardships he endured; but having a fine voice, he was pressed, as was the despotic practice of the times, for the service of one of the choirs*; and after being bandied about from one place to another, which loss of time he mentions with regret, it was his good fortune, at length, to be admitted into St. Paul's, where he

is nothing in this office, by which I can feel myself warranted to place that event at an earlier period than that already assigned to it. His nephew, John Tusser, son of his eldest brother Clement, recorded his pedigree at the Herald's visitation of Essex, in 1570; and this is the only record we have of the family.

ment, Andrew, John, THOMAS, and William, and four daughters; the marriages of the daughters are set down, but no wives assigned to the sons, except to Clement, who married Ursula Petts, and had issue, John, who entered the pedigree, Edward, and Jane, all three unmarried in 1570. The mother of THOMAS was (1) a daughter of Thomas Smith, of Rivenhall in Essex, Esq. whose elder brother, Hugh, was ancestor of Smith, Lord Carrington, (not the present lord), sister of Sir Clement Smith, who married a sister of the Protector Somerset, and first cousin of Sir John Smith, one of the Barons of the Exchequer in the reign of Edward VI. This match with Smith I take to have been the chief foundation of gentility in the Tussers; for I find no traces of them or their arms before this connection.

"I am," &c.

(1) *Isabella, according to Morant, vol. ii. p. 119.*

* It does not appear that he was pressed for the actual service of the king's chapel, in the first instance, as has been insinuated by some. See his poetical life, and the note *in loco*.

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arrived at considerable proficiency in music, under John Redford, the organist of that cathedral, a man distinguished for his attainments in the science.

From St. Paul's he was sent to Eton school, and was certainly some time under the tuition of the famous Nicholas Udall *, who is said to have been master of that seminary in 1534 ; and of whose severity Tusser complains, in giving him fifty-three stripes at once, “ for fault but small, or none at all.”

Hence he was removed to Cambridge † ; and, according to some, was first entered of King's College, and afterwards removed to Trinity Hall, which receives some little countenance from his own words :

To London hence, to Cambridge thence,
 With thanks to thee, O Trinity,
 That to thy hall, so passing all,
I got at last.

After encountering a long sickness, which obliged him to discontinue his studies, he left the banks of the Cam, and was employed about court, probably in his musical capacity, by the influence of his patron, William Lord Paget, in whose family he appears to have been a retainer, and whom he mentions in the highest terms of panegyric ‡.

* Udall was reckoned a very elegant scholar, though few evidences of his attainments now remain. His severity rendered him odious to his scholars ; and from this cause, probably, his private character did not escape censure.

i 'Through every accessible channel I have endeavoured, but in vain, to obtain some traces of Tusser at Cambridge.

‡ Of this nobleman, the ancestor of the Earl of Uxbridge, and whose patronage of Tusser will probably be longer remembered than all the more

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In this situation, which must have been during the latter part of the reign of Henry VIII. and the first years of

important passages of his life, it will not be improper, in this place, to give an abstracted account from Dugdale.

William Lord Paget, son to — Paget, one of the Serjeants at Mace of the City of London, was born at Wednesbury in Staffordshire.

Twenty-third Henry VIII. he rose to be Clerk of the Signet; thirty-second, was made Clerk of the Council, and Clerk of the Privy Seal, and soon after Clerk of the Parliament for life; thirty-third, was sent, in consequence of his excellent conduct, as Ambassador into France; on his return was made one of the Principal Secretaries of State. Thirty-sixth of Henry VIII. being then Sir William Paget, he was constituted one of the Commissioners to treat with the Earl of Lenox, for the advancement of the King's interest in Scotland. Same year he attended Henry in his expedition to Boulogne, and was associated with others, to treat with the ambassadors of France for a general peace. Thirty-seventh, he obtained a grant to himself and to John Mason, Esq. or the survivor of them, of Master of the Post, with a salary of 66*l.* 13*s.* 4*d.* per annum. Thirty-eighth, was a Commissioner in concluding peace with France; and soon after appointed one of the King's executors, and of the Council to Edward VI. Second of Edward VI. he obtained a grant of the fee of the house without Temple-bar, first called Paget House, then Leicester House, and lastly Essex House. Fourth, sent Ambassador to the Emperor Charles V. Same year, being then Knight of the Garter, Comptroller of the King's household, and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, he was called by writ to Parliament, by the title of Lord Paget of Beandesert, com. Salop. and soon after sent to treat for peace with France. On the fall of the Duke of Somerset, 5th of Edward VI. his enemies prevailed against him, on the charge of designing the murder of several noblemen at Paget House. In consequence, he was sent to the Tower, and stripped of his ensigns of the order of the Garter. Some charges, better substantiated, were made against him, though arising from the excess of his zeal in the service of his prince, and he was deprived of all his employments, and fined 6000*l.* of which sum one-third was remitted. All this he bore with manly fortitude.

On the death of Edward he joined the Earl of Arundel, the chief champion of Queen Mary, and gained her favour by his activity. Soon after her marriage with Philip II. he was sent ambassador to the Emperor at Brussels, to consult Cardinal Pole respecting the restoration of popery. In this reign he was made Lord Privy Seal.

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Edward VI. when his patron was in great favour, he remained ten years; but being disgusted with the vices, and harassed with the contentions of the courtiers, or, what is more probable, finding, to use his own words, “the court began to frown,” he retired into the country, and marrying, embraced the profession of a farmer at Katwade*, now Cattiwade, a hamlet of the parish of Brantham, in Samford Hundred, Suffolk, near the river Stour, which divides that county from Essex. Here he “devised,” or composed, his book of Husbandry, the first edition of which was published in 1557, and dedicated † to his patron, William Lord Paget, then Lord Privy Seal; and who, after several reverses of fortune, on the accession of Mary, to whose

Lord Paget died very aged, in 1563, and was buried at Drayton, in Middlesex. A monument, erected to his memory at Litchfield, with a suitable inscription, was destroyed during the usurpation. He left issue by Anne, his wife, daughter of — Prestin, Esq. Com. Lanc. three sons and five daughters. His eldest son Henry succeeded him in the title; but dying in 1563, the peerage descended to his next brother Thomas, whom Tusser claims also for a patron. Thomas, being zealously affected to popery, and discoveries being made which betrayed his good wishes in favour of Mary Queen of Scots, fled the kingdom, and was attainted, 29th Eliz. as was likewise his brother Charles. Thomas died three years after at Brussels, leaving issue by Margaret, his wife, daughter of H. Newton, Thomas, his son and heir.

* In the later editions of the “Husbandry,” printed Ratwade, and by some transferred to Sussex. Warton falls into this mistake.

† In the first stanza of the acrostical dedication, we find some material differences between the first and the following editions, as will appear on comparison. I give the orthography, as well as the words.

The trouth doth teache that tyme must serve,
 (How euer man doth blase his mynde)
 (Of thynges most lyke to thriue or sterue :)
 Much apt to iudge is often blynde.
 And therefore tyme it doth behoofe ;
 Shall make of trouth a perfit prooffe.

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cause he adhered, had regained his influence, and been reinstated in power.

It is probable that he must have been acquainted with rural affairs, for several years at least, before he could produce even the rude essay, which forms the germ of his future and more enlarged work. In it, indeed, we find a correct outline of agriculture, which could only be drawn by a practical hand ; the laying on of the colours, however, was the fruit of more ample experience and observation.

The ill state of his wife's health, together with the too probable embarrassment of his affairs, and reinforced by a restless disposition, at length induced him to change his situation at Katwade ; and we find him successively at Ipswich, where he lost " good wife," the only epithet by which she is known ! at West Dereham, and at Norwich.

Soon after the loss of his first wife, he married a second, of the name of *Moon*, on which changeable planet he plays, by contrasting it with the object of his choice. It may be fairly inferred from his own words, that his happiness was not permanently promoted by this match. He seems to complain of the charges incident " to a wife in youth ;" and had she transmitted her real thoughts to posterity, we should probably have heard some insinuations against an old husband.

The patrons of Tusser, in Norfolk, were Sir Richard Southwell, and afterwards Salisbury, Dean of Norwich, who probably procured him the place of singing man in the cathedral. With that feeling of gratitude which distinguishes his character, he thus apostrophizes his benefactor :

But Salisbury how, were kept my vow,
 If praise from thee were kept by me,
 Thou gentle dean, mine only mean,
 There then to thrive.

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Again he commenced tithed farmer at Fairsted, in the vicinity of his native place ; but his mind was too liberal, and he was too little a match, for the artifices of his vulgar brethren to thrive in this vocation ; and in consequence he retired to London, which he mentions with due commendation. Indeed, it has often been remarked, that though literary men in general affect to be fond of the country, they never feel themselves perfectly at home but in cities. In London, more especially, every taste may be gratified, and every accommodation procured. A person of a cultivated mind may learn to endure, but he can never relish the low habits and pursuits of common men : he sighs for enlightened society and congenial feelings, but he sighs in vain, if fortune has cast his lot remote from the metropolis.

Who that with thee, can hardly agree,
 Nor can well praise thy friendly ways,
 Shall friendship find, to please his mind,
 In places few.

The plague, however, raging in London in 1574, and more particularly in the following year, he sought refuge at Cambridge, as he says,

When gains were gone, and years grew on,
 And death did cry, from London fly *,
 In Cambridge then, I found again,
 A resting plot ;
 In college best, of all the rest,
 With thanks to thee, O Trinity !
 Through thee and thine, for me and mine,
 Some stay I got.

* See note *in loco*.

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When the danger vanished, it is likely that Tusser's predilection for London returned ; and he died there, according to the best authorities, about 1580* ; not at a very advanced age, as has been vaguely asserted, without considering circumstances, but on the data I have assumed, and which I trust are pretty strong, about sixty-five years old. His remains were interred in St. Mildred's church in the Poultry ; and the following epitaph, according to Stow, recorded his memory. It is perfectly in character with the man and his writings ; and, if conjecture may be allowed, was penned by himself.

Here Thomas Tusser, clad in earth, doth lie,
 Who sometime made the Points of Husbandry :
 By him then learn thou may'st,—here learn we must,
 When all is done, we sleep, and turn to dust :
 And yet, through Christ, to heaven we hope to go,
 Who reads his books, shall find his faith was so †.

For an author, the vicissitudes of his life present an uncommon variety of incident. “ Without a tincture of careless imprudence,” says Warton, “ or vicious extravagance, this desultory character seems to have thrived in no vocation.” Fuller quaintly observes, “ That his stone, which gathered no moss, was the stone of Sisyphus ; and in Peacham's *Minerva*, a book of emblems printed in 1612,

* The precise time of his death is as little ascertained as that of his birth. It is certain, however, that he died before 1585, as appears from the title of the edition of that date.

† This epitaph is copied from Stow's *Survey of London*, Ed. 4to. 1618. p. 474. In the *Censura Literaria*, it is given with some verbal alterations.

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there is a device of a whetstone and a scythe, with these lines :

They tell me, Tusser, when thou wert alive,
 And hadst for profit turned every stone,
 Where'er thou camest, thou couldst never thrive,
 Though hereto, best couldst counsel every one,
 As it may in thy HUSBANDRY appear,
 Wherein afresh thou liv'st among us here.
 So, like thyself, a number more are wont,
 To sharpen others with advice of wit,
 When they themselves are like the whetstone blunt*.

The precepts of Tusser, indeed, are so excellent, that few can read them without profit and improvement ; but between the cool collected good sense that sometimes appears in an author's works, and his conduct as influenced by the temptations and perplexities of life, the discordance is often extreme. Some men are the shuttlecocks of fortune, and with the best intentions are always wrong ; with the most serious private resolutions of consistency and propriety, are easily driven from their course when they come in contact with the world. That prudence which yields to no temptation, and never deviates from the proper path, is seldom to be found among men of cultivated minds and lively imaginations. Between a courtier and a practical farmer, the contrast is so great, and especially between a poet and a plodding man

* Thus altered in "Recreations for ingenious Head Pieces ; or a pleasant Grove for their Wits to walk in," &c. 8vo. 1641, &c.

Tusser, they tell me, when thou wert alive,
 Thou, teaching thrift, thyself couldst never thrive :
 So, like the whetstone, many men are wont,
 To sharpen others, when themselves are blunt.