

TONY CHADWICK PRIZE 1996 RUNNER-UP ESSAY

IN SEARCH OF THOMAS HOBBS, THE MAN

by Pamela Barlow

Bright boy, born probably prematurely on a Good Friday at the threat of the approaching Armada in provincial Malmesbury in 1588, later to become a *savant*, known through his travels in all the capitals of Europe; teacher of Dukes, and of mathematics to King Charles II in a period of political upheaval, Hobbes later became one of the greatest political philosophers of all time. Such was the remarkable ascent in the life of Thomas Hobbes who, by his own admission, was a shy and timid man. But of the man behind the philosopher surprisingly little is known. There are few contemporary accounts of Hobbes the man, except that of John Aubrey, who was younger than Hobbes and whose writings, we know, were vastly diverting but had often to be taken with a generous pinch of salt.

Hobbes's mother was an amorphous figure from a nearby village, who seems to have disappeared from the philosopher's life from the time he went to Oxford at 14 (not unusual in those days). Though one uncle was a prosperous glover and sometime Alderman of Malmesbury, Hobbes's father, a minor cleric at St Mary's Church, Westport (now a nursery school), disappeared even earlier than his mother in 1630 'at Thistleworth beyond London',¹ fleeing in disgrace after a brawl in the porch of his own church. It fell to Hobbes's more prosperous uncle to pay for his nephew's education at Oxford.

Hobbes's first teacher, after two years at the church school he attended until the age of six, was Robert Latimer (Latymer) of Leigh Delamere, who was a keen classicist who liked teaching 'ingeniose lads. When Hobbes left for Oxford his parting present to his teacher was a translation of Euripides' *Medea* from Greek into Latin verse.² At Oxford, whence he went in 1603, no personal records, either by fellow students or teachers appear to have been left. So henceforth we shall try to rely not only upon a few anecdotal sources, such as Aubrey's, but on Hobbes's own autobiographies in Latin (in verse and prose), and the anonymous English verse translation published in 1680.³

From his autobiographical writings and in many other places years later, we can see Hobbes's opinion of Oxford was extremely low. He despised the 'schoolmen', the 'barbarous Latin', and above all Aristotle and 'Aristotelity', as well as the teaching of classics. He refers to his *alma mater*, and universities in general, in a derogatory way throughout his life and *passim* in various works, notably in *Leviathan* (Chapter 46). In that work too his lifelong preoccupation with religion obsessed him: though ostensibly paying lip service to Christianity, on one occasion, when being given the sacrament by Cosin, later Bishop of Durham, he turned his back to the preacher: not calculated to endear him to the Church!⁴

Sadly, there appear to be no comments on Hobbes as a scholar by his teachers. He went to Magdalen (or Magdalene) Hall, which eventually, in the early 19th century, became part of Hertford College. In the unpleasant conditions in which students then had to exist - several in a room sleeping on verminous palliasses, in cold so extreme they often had to run for half an hour in order to store up enough heat to sleep at night, Hobbes devised his own original

health regime which persisted for most of his life. This was that most bodily ills stemmed from excess vapours, which had to be eliminated by vigorous running uphill until sweat poured out and was then removed by brisk rubbing down. He would also sing a 'prick song' to air his lungs when he was in privacy late at night. Hobbes liked to play tennis even at the advanced age of 75; indeed, the tennis court is used as an example in his acrimonious exchanges with Bishop Bramhall on free will. From this habit Hobbes, throughout his life, preferred to work out problems while he was in motion - not only his theories on Motion, but on numerous other subjects, which he always preferred to resolve for himself rather than having recourse to books and teachers. At the same time Hobbes carried out his own type of 'bulimia', by means of which excesses of food or alcohol were swiftly discharged by self-induced vomiting. Nevertheless, despite bad teaching and insanitary conditions, Hobbes remained at Oxford for five years, and in 1607 obtained a Bachelor's Degree.

After Oxford, Hobbes procured a job as tutor to the teenage (though married) William, Lord is well-known and documented; suffice it to say he spent a large part of his life in service to three generations of Devonshires (20 years with one alone) when, 70 years later, he came back to die at Hardwick Hall, which was also a Devonshire property. Hobbes must have been a competent teacher, for two Devonshires became Fellows of the Royal Society, and their scientific bent was evident when, in 1870, the 7th Duke (then Chancellor of Cambridge University) gave £8,450 to build and equip the Cavendish Laboratory.

No doubt comfortable surroundings, in one of the greatest households of the land, with the use of a large library and not too arduous work, suited him. He was later to travel in England there is reference made of a journey he made with the Duke to 'Arse's Peak' in Derbyshire - and abroad in the service of the Devonshires, there eventually to meet some of the finest minds in Europe. He first went abroad in 1610, subsequently in 1631 and 1637. Help between tutor and pupil was sometimes mutual: the Duke of Newcastle, for instance, engineered the meeting in Florence in 1630 of Hobbes and Galileo; Hobbes was thus able to obtain a copy of Galileo's works. At Chatsworth Hobbes could go for his habitual long walks, able as ever to contemplate. It was said by more than one person that he never liked to think of more than one thing at a time. This he would then concentrate on with all his power for a week or even two, until he felt satisfied with his solution or conclusions. In his stick he always carried a pen and ink supply and a small notebook, into which he jotted down any ideas which came to him.

Through his noble employers his mode of transport and travelling expenses were assured: thus he travelled for long periods in France, Germany and Italy (though wars prevented him from reaching Venice), visiting not only Paris but Orléans and Lyons as well as Geneva and Milan. Thus too, as well as the protracted periods he spent in Paris (in some of which he deemed fit to remain because of real, or imaginary, dangers - Hobbes was not physically courageous) he was thus able to acquire a good smattering of French and Italian. (In his verse autobiography he wrote that 'he did learn to speak four languages, to write and read them, too, which was my sole delight' but 'there's none that pleased me like Thucydides'. From the same source we read that Devonshire was a 'Debonaire Lord' who was 'Not a Lord only, but a Friend to me'. Even the most cursory glance at the correspondence he received (in the Chatsworth archives) shows he was the recipient of letters from, *inter alia*, Lige, Bordeaux, Dieppe and Amsterdam (Blaeu printed some of his work).

From about 1630 his most productive period began, culminating in *Leviathan*, first published in 1651. (The title comes from the beast in Job, Chapter 41 and Isaiah, Chapter 27.) Although in his life Hobbes made a number of public enemies he made few personal, private ones.⁵ Moreover, opinions of him and his works (which often aroused much controversy and were even banned) were not always flattering. He was said to have guarded his own thoughts and ideas jealously and (before publication) similarly writings: understandably he did not want others to appropriate them. Some thought he was jealous of Descartes (before the latter's death in 1650), envying his education in mathematics and science: the very education in which Hobbes had missed out at Oxford, only receiving two decades later. Hobbes's awakening to modern science apparently came to him as a sudden almost apocalyptic vision which he alleged had come to him when reading Euclid Book I, proposition 47, which turns out to be our old friend Pythagoras' Theorem! He also said he had wasted two years reading plays and such diversions; whether because he numbered among his friends Ben Jonson, John Dryden and Fletcher we cannot know.

Besides his own (admitted) timidity he was fearful of ghosts; a little rhyme by the Duke of Buckingham about this summed it up: 'While we in dark Ignorance we lay afraid of fancies, ghosts and every empty Shade; Great Hobs appeared, and by plain Reason's Light Put such fantastick Forms to shameful Flight'. His deep suspicion of all religions can hardly be said to have endeared him to Catholic or Protestant. There is an amusing story told that when Hobbes lay seriously ill in Paris his friend Mersenne visited him and offered to give him the last rites. Hobbes refused these in any form and, turning away, said 'Now tell me, when did you last see Gassendi?' Similarly, his attitude to both King and Commonwealth were equivocal. *Leviathan* was considered a highly dangerous book and was even publicly burned in Oxford although Hobbes had said that the collapse of government would be a disaster, life would become 'Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

With fame his public enemies increased. He was never admitted to the newly-formed Royal Society (formerly Gresham College, in Oxford). To his regret, he was always considered to be a philosopher, not a Scientist: he had come too late to Science. But he never lacked influential friends, from the Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon (for whom he had worked) to the King and nobility and, in France, those such as Suresnes, Louis XIV's physician. When in the Duke of Devonshire's service he wrote: 'No-one needed a university in the household of such a splendid Lord'. Nevertheless, Hobbes was not always entirely uncritical of his employers. He stated he could see that 'perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death'. But to the then Duke must go the credit of allowing Hobbes to stay on with the family even in extreme old age: 'He had, by his long services, so well deserved of his family'.⁵ Hobbes died at Hardwick in his 91st year in 1679. There is something touching about the fact that the Earl required Hobbes to be carried on a feather bed in the coach in which he travelled to Hardwick Hall to ease his travelling. He is buried in Ault Hucknall Church, the slab bearing the Latin inscription:

Condit hic sunt Ossa
Thomas Hobbes
MALMESBURIENSIS
Qui per multos annos servivit
DUOBUS DEVONAIE Comitibus
Patri et Filio
Vir Probus et Fama Eruditionis

Domi Forisque bene cognitus
Obiit Anno Domini
Mensis Decembris die 4
Aetatis suae 91

(Before his death Hobbes is said to have asked his friends to compose his epitaph. He most liked 'This is the true philosopher's stone'.)

Neither Cavendishes nor King were always meticulous in paying Hobbes. In a letter at Chatsworth there is a complaint that Hobbes had not received his pension from Charles II, just as had happened when a former Devonshire widow had, for economy, to dispense with Hobbes's services. But he must have been a reasonably wealthy man. His Vita states that he took 500 pounds in coin to Paris, and, later, had 'twice forty pounds Pension' with 100 pounds added from the King's private store.

Hobbes continued to write and occupy his mind even in old age. At 72 he wrote six dialogues on new geometry. At various times he had studied, and written about, Logic, Physics, Politics, Optics, Mathematics, Ethics, and even seemingly trivial subjects. In the archives at Chatsworth one can read his own papers - some meticulously penned and drawn - on Sundials, the biological separation of the egg from the hen and the baby from the mother's placenta; problems of Chronology; papers on Virtue and Religion; coinage and its weights; definitions of Logic and Philosophy, even some dispute about non-payment of rent for land he owned at South Leverton. His booklist (all 28 pages) also makes interesting reading. It contained mainly philosophical books, but others on Astronomy and Astrology feature, as well as Euclid and Military and Grammatical matters. Another list of books (presumably for re-cataloguing) contains much of Bacon, as well as Archimedes, Aphorisms and Fallacies. A diverse man indeed.

We should not assume either that he had no love life. He might have had an illegitimate daughter or granddaughter. An Elizabeth Alaby was left money in Hobbes's Will, and before his death he had himself written a love poem of twelve lines. What indeed would the irascible Dr Fell, who had already told Hobbes that he had 'one foot in the grave' and should not produce any more treatises, have thought of that? Perhaps the last word should go to Aphra Benn with these lines.

'Is he then dead at last, whom vain report
So often deign'd immortal, in mere sport?
Whom we on earth so long alive did see.
We thought he here had immortality'

Notes

1. John Aubrey. Aubrey was not always respectful to Hobbes: he once referred to him as 'the old gent' when writing to Anthony Wood.
2. There are no Latimers (or Latymer), or Hobbes/Hobs in the Malmesbury area. Of eight contacted, only one had heard of the philosopher.
3. The question of the autobiographies is complicated: see Bibliography.
4. Ault Hucknall Church Visitors' Guide.

5. A Note on Pictures of Hobbes: These were made by various artists, including the renowned Samuel Cooper (Cowper) said to be the best likeness; Michael Wright; Gaspar (engraved Hollar); Dobson and Beck. These are in the Chatsworth Collections; National Gallery; Royal Society; and elsewhere. The one hanging in Hardwick Hall, by an anonymous Derbyshire artist, depicts Hobbes in serene old age, holding a copy of *Leviathan*.
6. 3rd Earl of Devonshire, who died 5 years after Hobbes. Mentioned in *Stags & Sinners, the Story of the House of Cavendish*. (cf Bibliography).

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3. *Mind* (Journal, May 1939).
4. Pagels, Elaine: *The Origin of Satan* (Alan Lane/Penguin, 1995).
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10. Various Wiltshire County Archives.