THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE DISCOURSE OF THE COMMONWEAL.¹

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WILLIAM LAMBARD, the Kentish antiquary, added this note to his copy of the Discourse. "Note, that this booke was published in print under the title of a Brief Conceipte of Inglishe policie by one W. S. in the yeare 1581, whereas it was long since penned by Sir Thomas Smythe (as some say) or Mr. John Hales ² (as others thinke) either in the reigne of H[enry] VIII or Edward the VI. And I myselfe have long had this copy of it which I caused to be written out in the yeare 1565." Before the discovery by Dr. Lamond of the Lambard text, speculation had been rife as to the identity of the mysterious W. S. who printed the tract as his own in 1581; it was now clear that a manuscript version had existed nearly twenty years earlier. After much research on the Lambard and Bodleian texts, Dr. Lamond decided that it was the work of John Hales of Coventry, a member of Protector Somerset's Commission on enclosures. This conclusion has since perforce been accepted by historians though not without considerable misgiving. In 1922, in the course of a letter to the present writer, Professor Unwin said "I didn't realise till this year how much the debasement (of the currency) of 1540-45 was responsible for enclosure. That is, of course, the central point of the Discourse. Enclosures don't cause dearth (i.e. dearness) but dearth causes enclosure. I doubt if Hales wrote the Discourse.

¹ The reprint of 1929 (Cambridge Univ. Press) has been used.
It doesn't seem to follow the lines of his Defence before the Privy Council." I may add that in Unwin's opinion the tract represented the most advanced statement of economic thought in Tudor England, which may serve as some justification for reopening the question of authorship.

I have since discovered two other manuscript texts, neither of which were known to Dr. Lamond. The first, in the Marquis of Salisbury's collection at Hatfield, was almost certainly William Cecil, Elizabeth's great minister's own copy. The other is in the Yelverton collection, perhaps the most famous sixteenth-century collection remaining in private hands, assembled by Robert Beale, towards the end of the century.¹ I have collated both these texts with the Lamond edition and although the variations are nowhere very great as between them and the Bodleian text, they establish beyond question that the manuscript which Lambard caused to be copied (which was preferred by Miss Lamond) is in many respects unreliable. Both are headed "Dialogue of State," with the subtitle "A Discourse of the Commonweal of this Realm of England." Unfortunately, neither the Hatfield nor the Yelverton manuscript affords any direct evidence as to authorship. But it is surely significant that Beale, whose initials are scrawled on the cover of the Yelverton manuscript, should have bound up the tract without comment along with Sir Thomas Smith's De Republica and his other accredited writings. Now, Beale had good reason to know both Smith and Hales, for his first mission to the Continent had been connected with the latter's championship of the Hertford-Grey marriage and its contingent bearing on the succession to the English throne, for which Hales was committed to the Tower in 1564.² Beale had been commissioned to obtain the opinion of eminent foreign lawyers on the question and when the Queen pounced on its advocates in England, he decided that discretion was the better part of valour and stayed on in France where he

¹ My thanks are due to Lady Calthorpe and the Marquis of Salisbury for permission to consult the manuscripts in their possession. Also to Mr. Vacy Lyle, the librarian at Hatfield, for his help in collating the texts.

² Salisbury MSS. i. 294-6; S.P. Foreign (1564), §§ 388, 648; Haynes, State Papers, pp. 413-17.
eventually became "a sort of resident secretary" to the English embassy.¹ We know that he was on intimate terms with Sir Thomas Smith, who was sent on several missions to France in the 'sixties and early 'seventies and that the latter had a good opinion of him.² In all probability, the copies of Smith's writings now in the Yelverton collection, including some which his biographer Strype supposed to have been lost, were made during Smith's last embassy, for he is known to have taken his writings to France with him. Beale did not obtain any official recognition until after Smith's retirement, by which time Hales was dead and the succession controversy of the 'sixties had blown over. He could then have had little or no interest in suppressing Hales' claim to the authorship had a doubt existed in his mind about it. We can be the more sure of this because Beale has carefully added this note in the margin of another tract, the authorship of which is also in dispute, "Mr. John Hales', his hand."³

The objections to the Hales' authorship on grounds of internal evidence are equally serious. In manner and form it bears no resemblance to his other writings, such as his "Oration" to Henry VIII or that to Queen Elizabeth on her accession, neither of which does Dr. Lamond appear to have known.⁴ Moreover, as Unwin surmised, Hales' own views as expressed in his famous defence before the Privy Council at the time of the fall of Protector Somerset and his subsequent letters from exile in Germany do not coincide but often conflict with the arguments put forward in the Discourse.⁵ For example, Hales was convinced that "scarcity, famine and sickness be plagues of God"; but the writer of the Discourse was emphatic that the present dearth "is not of God's part" (pp. lxvi., 17, 167). Again, Hales had recently opposed the introduction of Civil Law into England;⁶

¹ D.N.B.
² Smith spoke of him as "a rare man . . . of excellent gifts," S.P. Foreign (Addenda) 1583, § 444.
³ Yelverton MSS., xlviii. 72.
⁵ S.P. Foreign (1547-53), pp. 66-8, 97. Hales was deprived of his clerkship at the Hanaper in Mary's reign (Exchequer, E. 228, Bdele. 228, No. 2). His kinsman James Hales was deprived of his lands and drowned himself, Patent Rolls (1555), passim.
⁶ Harleian MSS. 4990, § 1.
to the writer of the Discourse it was the touchstone to which appeal must be made (p. 49). Hales is known to have advocated increased duties on the export of cloth, a policy which is strongly deprecated in the Discourse (pp. xlv., 91). And nowhere does he give reason to suppose that he was prepared to justify enclosure, as does the learned Doctor in the dialogue. Moreover, if, as Dr. Lamond assumed, the author identified himself with the principal spokesmen in the dialogue, now with the Knight, now with the Doctor, Hales can hardly fit the case. He was neither a knight nor a learned "civilian." So far as we know he was unmarried—the Knight in the Discourse speaks of his son—and if he was the Hales "with a club foot" he would scarcely be able to bear arms. Again, the Knight positively asserts that he has heard the griefs of the Commonwealth "of long time and ofte reasoned upon as well in parliamente as in counsayles" (p. 120). But Hales was never in the Council and although he was a member for Preston in the 1548 parliament, he was disgraced a year later and was out of the country for the next decade. Enough is known of his penurious exile to suggest that he scarcely attained the philosophic calm which characterises the Discourse.

But the most serious objection to the Hales' authorship is that nowhere does he hint of specialist knowledge of currency questions (including an acquaintance with the coinage of ancient Rome). It is true that on his return to England in 1559 he advocated a reform of the currency, but this was to be expected from one who had been penalised for the best part of a decade, when he had to depend on remittances from England, by the unfavourable rate of foreign exchange which was one wholly unforeseen result of Henry VIII's debasement. Finally, if Hales was indeed the author, how are we to explain his connection with W. S. who caused the tract to be printed many years after Hales' death?

Let us consider the claims of Sir Thomas Smith whom Lambard named as an alternative. As a Renaissance scholar, steeped in classical learning, a lover of Plato and an admirer of More and Erasmus, he was certainly well qualified to speak the

1 Tudor Economic Documents, ii. 224.
part of the Doctor. Moreover, he was at once a Knight, a
Privy Councillor, a member of Parliament—for the "city" of
Marlborough, an important centre of the cloth industry, where
his friend Protector Somerset is known to have had considerable
estates—he was, besides, trained in the Civil Law, Dean of
Carlisle and Provost of Eton, so that almost alone of his contem-
poraries was he qualified to speak the parts of the several speakers
in the Dialogue. It can scarcely be a mere coincidence that
Smith should have had copies of Vegetius' Columella and
Vitruvius' De Architectura in his library, both of which are
referred to in the Discourse. Again, his preference for the
dialogue as a literary form and his reluctance to publish any of
his writings during his lifetime point to the same conclusion.
Moreover, the elaborate table of contents in the De Republica
suggests an obvious affinity with that in the Discourse. Closer
study may yet reveal the use of common expressions and spellings
and possibly of such archaic words as "discurre," "equipolente,"
"manurance."

As Secretary of State to Protector Somerset, no one knew
better than Smith how much the high prices consequent upon
the debasement were responsible for the "wild uproars" of
1549. We now know that as Secretary, Smith had been particu-
larly concerned in negotiating foreign loans for the payment of
troops and munitions, so that he had a unique opportunity of
discovering the ruinous effects of debasement upon foreign
exchange. There is some evidence, also, that towards the end
of Henry VIII's reign he had occasionally acted as a bullion
broker for Calais merchants. In a long letter to the Protector,
dated 22 June, 1549, a month before the storm of rebellion
broke, he discussed in detail the financial prospects of the govern-
ment. In a word, it was no longer possible for the government
to live on the Mint. He complained of the sharp practices of
mint officials and proposed to bring some of them to a reckoning.
Now the writer of the Discourse, likewise, speaks of the minters
"who can never be burdened to do their duties left to their own
conscience" and relates the death-bed confession of one of them

1 Pink MSS. (John Rylands Library).
2 Letters and Papers, Henry VIII, xix. 482.
3 S.P. Dom., vii. § 38.
named Knight. Again, it must be assumed that Smith, no less than Hales, was in sympathy with Protector Somerset’s anti-enclosure policy. (Recent evidence which has come to light proves that Hales himself had profited considerably from grants of monastic land and that he was not the “chairman,” as Leadam supposed, of the 1548 enclosure commission.) Several drafts for a further inquiry into the evils of enclosure which was contemplated in the summer of 1549 are in Smith’s handwriting and there is his own confession that neither on his own lands nor on those of Eton or Carlisle had he ever raised rentals, or heightened fines, “nor yet to this day put out tenant nor, to my knowledge, have had any in suit.”\(^1\) This assertion finds a surprising echo in the Discourse (pp. 38-9). Again, who was more likely to know of the latest proclamation against stage plays, or of letters for the restraint of grain than a one-time Secretary who had penned such himself? Or who better able to champion the merchant in the dialogue—he is actually a mercer—than one who was intimately connected by family and marriage ties with the Mercers’ company?

Smith remained faithful to the Protector to the last and for a time suffered imprisonment. He was deprived of his secretaryship and his place on the Council and had to pay a heavy fine. These things were serious for one who was not yet forty. In 1551 he was sent on a short embassy to France, and subsequently served on a commission to “rough-hew the canon law,” but he was not in regular state service again until Elizabeth’s accession.\(^2\) At any time in the intervening decade, he could truly say, with the author of the Discourse, that he was “not of the King’s counsaile.” Having now (as he explained in the preface) “sufficient leasur from other business,” what more natural than that a person of vigorous and independent mind should review the causes of the social discontent which had brought about his political downfall? (p. 10).

Unfortunately, Dr. Lamond’s summary rejection of Smith’s claim to the authorship was based on a complete misconception of his attitude to debasement. His biographer Strype states:—

\(^1\) *Archaologia*, xxxviii. 120-2.
\(^2\) Despite his Protestantism he obtained a grant of land from Queen Mary, *Patent Rolls* (1555), p. 263, in lieu of his allowance while “legate” in France.
When base monies as testons (coined in great quantities under Henry VIII) and other pieces were near this time under consultation to be redressed, Smith was also made use of in this and wrote a letter to the Lord Protector touching the benefit arising by the Mint while such monies were coined to give the better light to this work.

Dr. Lamond wrongly assumed from this that Smith favoured a policy of debasement, though Strype expressly states in a footnote, that "according to the advice of Smith for good money to be coined these coarse teston pieces were forbidden to be coined."¹ Now, the principal argument in the Discourse is that debasement is the cause of enclosures and high prices and that the right policy is to return to a currency of standard purity. Historians are uncertain who was responsible for the policy of the Elizabethan recoinage: that is possibly because they are taking too short a view.² The author of the Discourse, whoever he might be, took pride in the fact that the debasement was done in Henry VIII's reign, not in Edward VI's. Above all, he saw through the mistaken motives which had first prompted the debasement (p. 69). Mr. Feaveryear has recently shown that as early as 1548 there was an attempt to return to a standard coinage.³ Part of the credit for this, I submit, belongs to Smith. With the fall of Somerset the reform was held up until 1552. In the "Communication concerning the Queen's marriage," Smith subsequently wrote:—

Many would judge that the getting and keeping of Boulogne . . . now in the time of Henry VIII and the obtaining and holding of Haddington . . . and a great part of the Lowdian of Scotland should have brought in great riches to this realm. It was that almost beggared England, for thereby our fine gold was conveyed away, our good silver appeared not, our massy and plate was melted and everyman seeth that not only our good coin was wonderfully consumed but that which was left piteously altered and made worse, the gold much debased and at the last for sterling silver we had two parts of copper and scarce the third part true metal remaining in the coin (Strype's Life, p. 257).

This is precisely the point of view expressed in the Discourse.

¹ Strype (1820 edition), p. 36.
² Economic History Review (April, 1936), "The Elizabethan recoinage," by Conyers Read. Cunningham, however, gives the credit to Smith, Growth of English Industry (5th ed.), footnote to § 178.
³ Feaveryear, The Pound Sterling, p. 55; Calendar Patent Rolls, Edward VI, passim.
On other grounds, Smith has stronger claims than Hales. His first-hand knowledge of the half-empty colleges and of the University curriculum derived from his having been a fellow and a "visitor" at Cambridge (pp. 22, 26-32). The knowledge of church abuses, of the exactions of diocesan chancellors, and of the latest trentalle on clerical residence was fitting in one who had served on a commission to revise canon law while the note of self-criticism became a pluralist and absentee dean (pp. 131-43). Similarly, who but an ex-ambassador could speak of the reasons why France maintained a standing army which "the stomachs of Englishmen would never bear" and add the remarkable prophecy that these "men of arms may be the destruction of their kingdom at length" (p. 94-5). His classification of artificers, his attitude to the contemporary craze for building and to the luxury trades point to an obvious identification.¹

Finally, there is the connection between Smith and the W. S. of 1581. Curiously enough, even those authorities who still cling to the Hales' authorship suggest that W. S. is probably William Smith, nephew and heir of Elizabeth's Secretary of State.² How William Smith came to be possessed of a Hales' MSS. is not explained; nor is it easily explainable. Clearly, however, the manuscript had undergone considerable revision in an attempt to bring it up to date before publication and there is a notable addition, probably derived from Jean Bodin, the French philosopher, which attributes the prevailing high prices, notwithstanding the Elizabethan recoinage, to the influx of American bullion (p. xxxiii.). Now, it is known that in the last years of his life Smith was engaged on revising his earlier writings.³ He wrote to Cecil and Leicester asking for their assistance in tracking down his table of the wages of Roman soldiers which he remembered to have lent to one of them many years before and which Strype wrongly supposed to have been lost. (There is a copy in the Yelverton collection.) Sir Thomas Smith died in 1577. We know that his nephew William—the son had been killed in Ireland—was at Dublin in the autumn of 1580, where

¹ Compare "Considerations for the Parliament" (1559), Salisbury MSS. i. 162-5, drawn up by a commission of which Smith was a member.
² Tudor Economic Documents, iii. 305.
³ Strype, loc. cit.
he hoped to make good the grant made to his uncle of the district known as the Ards. But the Queen had decided to call a halt in the policy of Irish plantation and the young man was, with some difficulty, brought to heel.¹ In the dedication of the Discourse to Her Majesty he speaks of his “late undutiful misdemeanour” and of the Queen’s “singular clemency” in pardoning the same (p. 145). If, as I surmise, the young man returned to England early in 1581 and found the tract among his uncle’s papers already revised and brought up to date, the temptation to publish it would be strong. Publication of the incomplete De Republica was delayed until 1583. Perhaps the Queen or the Lord Treasurer had decided that W. S. was doing a greater service in publishing his uncle’s work than in harrying the Irish.

¹ Discourse, pp. lxvii.-lxix; Collins, Memorials of State, i. 69, 76; Wilts Archeological Mag., xviii. 25.