

A Proposed Re-foundation of St. Mary Hall

By I. G. PHILIP

IN the British Museum is an undated mid-seventeenth century document endorsed 'An imperfect draught of a project of Oliver Cromwell's for erecting a new College at Oxford'.¹ This contains a proposal to convert St. Mary Hall into a theological college with the special purpose of strengthening the bonds and increasing the understanding between English and foreign Protestant churches. There is nothing to indicate that Cromwell himself was the author of this proposal other than the attribution of the endorsement, which is in a different hand from that of the draft. The real originators are presumably those mentioned in the preamble of the draft where the scheme is said to be put forward 'uppon the humble motion of Hugh Peter minister of the Gospell, of Bulstrode Lord Whitelocke, Nathaniell Bacon and Francis Bacon, Esqs., Masters of our Requests'.

The scheme then set out is succinct and businesslike. The 'publique Hall in our University of Oxford commonly called St. Mary Hall whereof Mr. Cole is Master, and is not at present made use of or endowed' was to be re-named and endowed with lands. The name is left blank, and in a draft scheme the details of endowment are not unnaturally omitted, but the revenue from endowments was to be such that £1,000 a year 'shall be allowed and payd unto tenne godly able men, to be chosen out of our two Universities and our City of London, which said ten persons shall be employed . . . for the makeing of a generall Synopsis of the true reformed Protestant Christian Religion professed in this Commonwealth, the same to be collected and written both in English and Latine within the time of three or foure yeares or thereabouts, or sooner if may be, and after the said Synopsis shall be written and finished then to be communicated and sent abroad unto forraigne churches'. After the completion of the synopsis the revenue was to be applied to maintaining 'poore Protestant Ministers and Schollars, being forraigners and strangers borne, who shall reside in the said Colledge, and applye themselves principally to the study of divinity'.

The draft cannot be earlier than 1657 when Francis Bacon was made Master of Requests and if we assume that the scheme was very probably put forward while Cromwell was Chancellor of the University it likewise cannot

¹ MS. Add. 32093, ff. 399-400. The document is incomplete; f. 400^v ends with the word 'Item'.

I. G. PHILIP

be later than 1657 for in July of that year Cromwell gave up office as Chancellor in favour of his son Richard. This date fits in with what is known of the activities of those who are named in the draft. Hugh Peters, Cromwell's chaplain, favoured close alliance with foreign Protestants and the propagation of the gospel abroad, and might well have conceived such a scheme at any time, but Whitelocke would have found it fitting in particularly well with the work he was engaged on in the years 1656 and 1657 when the 'grand committee for religion' met at his house to consider translations of the Bible and when he was urging the Protector 'to further the relief of the poor persecuted protestants in the valleys of Piedmont'. It is not clear whether Thomas Cole, who became principal of St. Mary Hall in 1656, was to have had any part in the scheme. As a Christ Church man he may have been less attached to the traditions of the Hall than were his predecessors, who were all, with one exception, Oriel men, and he certainly had some of the qualifications, both in scholarship and doctrine, which would have been required in this new foundation. At Christ Church he had been a college tutor, numbering John Locke among his pupils; as a staunch Independent he was ejected at the Restoration, set up a school at Nettlebed for the sons of neighbouring Presbyterian and Independent families, and later became a notable Independent minister in London. Independency was clearly the cause which the proposed new college was to serve. Peters had been a leader among the Independents in the army; the two Bacons, both Cambridge men, as was Peters, and both chosen by Cromwell for important legal office, were probably of like mind; Whitelocke had had many a brush with the Presbyterians and was abused and misrepresented by them for his love of toleration.

It is not easy to understand the optimism of those who hoped to produce a synopsis of the true reformed Protestant religion in that age of warring sects, and it is very unlikely that any such attempt would have furthered the cause of toleration, particularly in Oxford. Probably that was recognised. The whole project was still-born and does not seem to have been generally known at any time. Anthony Wood, who had a keen ear for any rumour that related to his own University, does not mention the project for using St. Mary Hall as part of a new foundation, nor is it mentioned by any later historian of Oxford. Even if the project owed its origin, not to Cromwell himself, but to those who are named in the draft, they could certainly have counted on his sympathy, for Cromwell always looked for piety before learning in the University of which he was Chancellor, and the wording of the draft scheme shows how deeply this spirit animated the promoters, with their anxiety for the welfare of 'those who sitt in darkness'. It was an attitude which provoked Gerard Langbaine, whose love of learning was greater than his respect for conventional piety,

A PROPOSED RE-FOUNDATION OF ST. MARY HALL

to protest on behalf of the University, 'Let (a Gods name) Divinity be the mistresse, only but let humanity be allowed her for a handmayd'.

That the scheme fell so suddenly and completely into oblivion may have been because Cromwell's interests in educational reform were in 1657 concentrated on his more ambitious design, the establishment of a University at Durham. But it may be that the scheme lapsed because it was premature in that St. Mary Hall, despite the promotor's assertion, was still being 'made use of'. Little is known about the Halls in Oxford during the Commonwealth, and the history of St. Mary Hall at this period is particularly obscure. It is known that there were 4 M.A.'s, 11 B.A.'s and 25 undergraduates in the Hall in 1613 and 3 M.A.'s, 11 B.A.'s and 25 undergraduates in 1667.² There is very little doubt that numbers fell off very seriously after the Civil War and there are no records of matriculations from the Hall during the Commonwealth. But that the Hall still functioned in a limited way is shown by the case of Edward West, B.A., St. Mary Hall, who supplicated in 1657 for dispensation of time towards his M.A. degree. The Visitors recommended his supplication to Convocation on the grounds that he had performed all the exercises for the Master's degree and that 'being in a Hall where there is noe Master nor any soe nigh that degree as himselfe, it can be preiudiciall to noe man, nor can it bee but to the great disadvantage to the house to continue in its present state of equality without any but the Principall in a capacity to praeside in Bachellors disputations, to present any one of their degrees or any the like duty'.³ West had matriculated from Christ Church in 1652 and he was still at Christ Church when he took his B.A. in October 1655. He probably migrated to St. Mary Hall in 1656 when Cole became Principal. The two men may have had a common faith, because West, like Cole, became a non-conformist minister after the Restoration, and when this scheme for a new college was promoted, St. Mary Hall may have been, albeit with a mere handful of members, serving the cause of Independency, even if it fell far short of the conception of the proposed new foundation.

TEXT

Endorsed 'An imperfect draught of a project of Oliver Cromwell's for erecting a new College at Oxford'.

Whereas the propagating of the true reformed Protestant Christian Religion, and the Gospell of Jesus Christ ought to be the chiefe care and endeavour of all Christian Magistrates and People, whereby those who sitt in darkness, and in the shaddow of death, may through the free goodnes of God be translated from the Kingdome of darknesse into the Kingdome of his dearest sonne, and the divine

² *V.C.H. Oxfordshire*, III, p. 130.

³ Univ. Arch. Convocation Register T26, p. 300.

I. G. PHILIP

trueths being spread abroad and made knowne, all Nations may see and embrace the Salvation of our Lord Christ.

And we being satisfied that the erecting and endowing of a Colledge in the Manner and for the purposes heerafter mentioned will be a good meanes, tending to the glorious and above specified—by the advice of our Privy Councill and uppon the humble Motion of Hugh Peter Minister of the Gospell, Bulstrode Lord Whitelocke, Nathaniell Bacon and Francis Bacon Esqs. Masters of our Requests, and—out of our earnest desire and zeale to further so good and pious a worke tending so much to the honor and interest of Christ, and of all his People, whereunto soe great encouragement is given by the pious and worthy persons, whose names we have thought fitt to be publisht as a testimony to the World, of their charitable and pious dispositions, by the free and voluntary contribution of them respectively subscribed towards the carrying on of this worke.

We have thought fitt to give and graunt lisencc power and Authority and doe heerby for us and our Successors give and graunt lisencc, power and authority into— or any five of them to receive the voluntary and charitable contributions of all such persons whose hearts the Lord shall move towards the furtherance of so good a worke and with the moneys which shall be so given from time to time to buy and purchase Lands Tenements and Hereditaments, of any value whatsoever, not exceeding the yearely value of — and to cause Conveyances, Deedes of Purchase, Fines, Recoveries, or other Assurances of Landes Tenements and Hereditaments, which shall be soe purchased as aforesaid, to be made levyed, or suffered to such persons as — shall appoint to such uses and uppon such trusts and to such purposes as are or shall be heerafter mentioned.

Inprimis. We doe heerby declare our pleasure to be that the publique Hall in our University of Oxford commonly called St. Mary Hall whereof Mr. Cole is Master, and is not at present made use of or endowed, shall be, and we doe heerby appoint and ordeine the same to be a publique Colledge to be called by the name of — and to be endowed with the Lands, Tenements and Hereditaments and Revenues which shall be purchased as aforesaid.

Item. That out of the said Revenues one Thousand pounds per annum shall be allowed and payd unto tenne godly able men, to be chosen out of our two Universities and our City of London, which said ten persons shall be employed by — for the making of a generall Synopsis of the true reformed Protestant Christian Religion professed in this Commonwealth, the same to be collected and written both in English and Latine within the time of three or foure yeares or thereabouts, or sooner if it may be, and after the said Synopsis shall be written and finished then to be communicated and sent abroad, unto forraigne Churches, in such manner, by such meanes, and together with such manifests and declarations, concerning the intention thereof, and to prevent misconstructions theruppon as the said—shall thinke fitt, and appoint —.

Item. That to the said Synopsis, if the said — shall so thinke fitt Cases of Conscience may be added and communicated as aforesaid.

Item. That after the finishing and publishing of the said Synopsis, then the said thousand pounds a yeare soe to be employed about the same shall be disposed and employed in such manner and to such purposes and uses of Charity and Pietie as the other Revenues of the said Colledge are appointed to be employed, and to no other uses whatsoever.

A PROPOSED RE-FOUNDATION OF ST. MARY HALL

Item. That into this Colledge shall be received and there maintained, poore Protestant Ministers and Schollars, being forraigners and strangers borne, who shall reside in the said Colledge, and applye themselves principally to the study of divinity, and be made use of according as they shall be capable for the promoting of the ends above mentioned.

Item. That noe strangers shall be admitted into this Colledge, but such who shall bring sufficient testimonialls from Protestant Churches, of their Piety, ability and good conversation, and that they are fitt objects of this Charity.

Item. That the said Strangers before they be admitted into the said Colledge shall be approved of by our Commissioners for triall of Ministers etc., the said approbation to be certified under the hand of their publique Register unto the said — who likewise approving of them they shall then be forthwith received into our said Colledge and maintained there. Item.