

**THE MIDLAND REVOLT
AND THE INQUISITIONS
OF DEPOPULATION OF
1607, PP. 195-239**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649260485

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Cover @ 2017

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Reprinted from
TRANSACTIONS of the Royal Historical Society,
New Series, Vol. 18, 1904

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Proc. May 31-08

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BY EDWIN F. GAY

Read May 19, 1904

I

THE opinion has recently been expressed by a competent student of the sixteenth century that the inclosures of that period, both those which turned the old open fields into sheep farms, thereby evicting husbandmen from their holdings, and those which hedged in severally the common pastures, were almost entirely responsible for the greater revolts which occurred under Tudor rule.¹ Mr. Pollard specifies this cause of social discontent as mainly operative in the Pilgrimage of Grace, Wyatt's rebellion and that of 1569, as well as those of 1549, both east and west. Such a view ascribes, I think, an exaggerated importance to the inclosing movement of the time and fails to take due account of the combination of motives, political, religious, and social other than agrarian, which acted concurrently, though often at cross purposes, upon all classes, high and low, of a people which was passing reluctant and uncomprehending through an agitated era of transition. The thread of inclosure discontent, it is true, may be traced more or less plainly in these popular uprisings, but as only one of a tangled skein. Yet it is certainly a hasty generalisation, which, laying emphasis on this single element in a complex problem, declares that the masses who took part in all these rebellions were composed of 'men who had been evicted from their tenements or who had been ground

¹ A. F. Pollard, *England under Protector Somerset*, 1900, pp. 205-210.

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down to the verge of poverty by the loss of their rights to common—men who had nothing to hope from the existing social condition, and nothing to lose in case of failure.¹

A closer examination will show that inclosures played an appreciable part, as one of the agrarian grievances, only in portions of the revolts of 1536 and 1548–9, and even in these it was not the characteristic inclosure of the period, that of the open fields, which is most prominent, but the much older and long-continued inclosure of commons, while the rebellions of 1554 and 1569 show scarcely a trace of agrarian motive.² It was not until 1607 that resentment expressed itself unalloyed with other motives against the depopulating inclosure of the common fields, in a hitherto inadequately chronicled revolt which swept for a brief period through some of the midland counties.

During the greater part of the Pilgrimage of Grace the spirit of opposition to the inclosures or 'intacks' from the common waste, which was embodied in one of the demands of the rebels at Doncaster,³ made little noise and was easily held in check by the gentlemen leaders of the insurrection.³ It was not until after the second Doncaster conference, when the main revolt was broken, that, as the end of the rebellion trailed off to the 'high and wild countries' of the north, the anti-inclosure feeling, coupled with bitterness at the increase of 'gressoms,'⁴ found vent in the casting open of parks and

¹ *England under Protector Somerset*, 1900, p. 240.

² *L. and P. Hen. VIII.* xi. 1246, art. 13. It was demanded that the statute for inclosures and intacks be put in execution, and all inclosures and intacks since 4 Hen. VII. be pulled down 'except mountains, forests, and parks.' In the mass of evidence collected on the causes and course of the rebellion the confession of Wm. Stapulton, one of the rebel captains in Yorkshire, alone mentions in addition to the intacks the 'pulling down of towns and husbandries' (*ibid.* xii. i. 392). One small case of hedge-breaking is mentioned (xi. 960).

³ The oath of the Yorkshire rebels had expressly forbidden them to 'doe any displeasure to any private person' (Stow, *Annals*, ed. 1605, p. 967), and the council of the rebel leaders at York took order against the 'casting down of inclosures of commons' (*L. and P. Hen. VIII.* xi. 1155 (2, ii.), xii. i. 6, 901).

⁴ The resentment at the increase of fines or 'gressoms,' especially in the north-west, seems to have been greater than that aroused by the inclosure of commons. See the proclamation of the rebels, 'Claim ye old customs and tenant right to

closes.¹ The special grudge on this score against the Earl of Cumberland made the Duke of Norfolk reluctant to entrust him with the wardenship of the Marches.² Norfolk himself, while roughly stamping out the later leaderless rebellion, expressed his pity for 'the poor caitiffs' who had been 'so sore handled' by gressoms and increasing of the lords' rents by inclosings.³ The split between the gentlemen and the commons, observable at the close of the Pilgrimage,⁴ had also largely contributed to end the earlier fortnight's fiasco of the Lincolnshire rising which had ushered in the greater Yorkshire rebellion.⁵ We may, indeed, suspect that the King's instructions to Norfolk, under their fair show of conciliatory words, by enjoining the reception of complaints against inclosures, were deftly intended to widen the breach between the confederated classes in the north.⁶ But during

take your farmes by a God's penny, all gressums and heghtnynges to be lald down' (*L. and P. Hen. VIII. xi. 892*), and Article 9 of the Doncaster demands (xi. 1246; cf. also 1080). Cromwell's 'extreme assessment of their fynes' was mentioned by Aske as one of the grounds of popular hatred against him, so intense 'that in maner they wold eat him, and extemys ther greves only to aryse by him and his counsell' (*ibid. xii. i. 6*, in extenso *Engl. Hist. Rev. v. 340*).

¹ *L. and P. Hen. VIII. xi. 1081, 1296, 1337, xii. i. 136, 163, 1361.*

² *Ibid. xii. i. 319, 919.*

³ 'What with the spoiling of them now and the gressing of them so marvelously sore in time past and with the increasing of lords' rents by inclosings, and for lack of the persons of such as shall suffer, this border is sore weked and specially Westmoreland; the more pity they should so deserve, and also that they have been so sore handled in times past, which, as I and all other here think, was the only cause of this rebellion,' *i.e.* of the later risings (*ibid. xii. i. 478*. See also 687, 914, and the complaints of the previous year, xi. 1080).

⁴ Of the willing co-operation of the gentry with the commons before the Doncaster conference there is abundant evidence, but afterwards it was possible for Ralph Sadler to report that 'everywhere on this side Doncaster bills have been set on church doors urging the commons to stick together, for the gentlemen had deceived them' (*ibid. xii. i. 200*). This is confirmed by Norfolk (xii. i. 336).

⁵ *Ibid. xi. 971*. The sense of betrayal by their leaders animated the cry of the commons: 'Kill the gentlemen' (xi. 975).

⁶ 'One ground of the late rebellion was that certain lords and gentlemen have enclosed commons and taken intolerably excessive fines.' The Duke is to receive complaints, inquire who have been most extreme and moderate between them, so that 'gentlemen and yeomen' may live together as they be joined in one body politic' (*ibid. xii. i. 98*). Similar instructions to the Earl of Sussex for Lancashire (xii. i. 302, (4)).

the greater part of the revolt opposition to inclosures had been subordinated to the ill-will excited by the religious changes,¹ an ill-will in which all classes heartily united. The commons responded only too readily to the instigations of their priests,² and, though their loyalty was not unmingled with distrust, recognised the claim of their traditional dependence upon their leaders, the nobility and gentry.³ Aske's statement as to the causes of the rebellion of which he was the captain mentions the grudge against Cromwell⁴ and the desire for the abolition of the Statute of Uses.⁵ He was voicing however not merely the grievances of the leaders but the general discontent when he emphasised the hostility to the religious innovations, to the royal supremacy, and above all to the suppression of the monasteries. This last, he declared, was 'the greatest cause of the insurrection which the hartes of the comens moste grudged at,' since 'in the north partes much of the relief of the comyns wais by sucor of abbeys.'⁶

¹ That a bitter opposition to the religious changes was the dominant motive is apparent in the numerous statements as to the cause of the rising. See, for example, xii. i. 29, and several of the articles both from Lincolnshire and Yorkshire (*L. and P. Hen. VIII.* xi. 705, 1246, 553, 585, 780, 853) and the oath taken by the insurgents (xi. 705 (4), 1059 (ii.)).

² The clergy are described as the 'greatest corypers' of the temporality, the secret occasion of all this mischief (*ibid.* xi. 1371). They were active in both the Lincolnshire and the Yorkshire risings (xi. 972-5, 1047). See the instances cited by Sir Wm. Fairfax (xii. i. 192).

³ In Lincolnshire 'the poor men were content to be ordered by the gentlemen who might have stopped the insurrection' (*ibid.* xii. i. 70). Sir Brian Hastings wrote that the captains of the rebels were 'the worship of the whole shires' from Doncaster to Newcastle, except the Earls of Cumberland and Westmoreland (xi. 759). Aske declared that 'the commons would have none but the nobility here to rule' (xi. 1128), and the Pomfret meeting shows this leadership (xi. 1209).

⁴ We find the gentlemen explaining to the Lincolnshire commons that Cromwell is a 'false traitor and deviser of all the false laws' (*ibid.* xii. i. 70, p. 38). For the popular hatred aroused against him see also xi. 841.

⁵ The article against the Statute of Uses was put into the Lincolnshire demands at the request of the gentlemen, the commons knowing little what it meant (*ibid.* xii. i. 70, pp. 37-9). If it had not been included among the Lincolnshire articles, Aske thought it would not have been remembered in Yorkshire (xii. i. 901, p. 406).

⁶ *Ibid.* xii. i. 6, 901 (and *Engl. Hist. Rev.* v. 558). The monasteries, according to Aske's statement, also lent money to gentlemen, took charge of

In truth the northern monasteries seem still to have retained some of their mediæval vitality, still to have met social needs no longer to the same extent felt for them or satisfied by them in the more advanced south. Together with the general religious embitterment and the political¹ and class resentment stirring the gentry the commons were influenced not only in some degree by agrarian discontent, but also in large measure, as in the rebellions of the fifteenth century, by the dread of new fiscal exactions.²

The same cross-play of motive is noticeable in the widespread outbreaks of 1548-9. When at a time of general dearth and distress Protector Somerset initiated his well-intentioned but politically fatuous anti-inclosure policy, his gaping after the fruitless breath of the multitude, as Hayward puts it,³ could have but one result; his 'lenity and softness'⁴ invited a popular uprising in which diverse elements of disaffection were intermingled. Inclosure riots had apparently

evidences and money, were a convenience in disposing of younger sons and in educating daughters, and were great maintainers of sea-walls, highways, and bridges. The ballad on the Pilgrimage of Grace emphasises the charity of the abbays; the poor had of them 'Boithe ale and bryede At tyme of nede, And succer grete In alle distresse' (printed in *Engl. Hist. Rev.* v. 345). Norfolk declared that this indiscriminate almsgiving bred vagabonds (*L. and P. Hen. VIII.* xii. li. 14).

¹ *Ibid.* xi. 1182 (2), 1244.

² Aske said that the rumours of increased taxes were 'not in question among the people' in Yorkshire (*ibid.* xii. i. 901), but there is much evidence that they played a large part in fomenting disorder in both Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. The fullest statement concerning them speaks of the suppression of churches with the confiscation of church jewels, a rigorous assessment, the sealing of cloth, payments on weddings, buryings, and christenings, on unmarked cattle, and on the eating of white bread, geese, and capons. 'These things slanderously reported through the country make every man think they shall be undone for ever' (xi. 768 (2), and see xi. 534, 567, 826, 841, 892, xii. i. 369, 393). These bruits were attributed to 'the traitors of the clergy' (xi. 650, 1047, xii. 481). The Lincolnshire rebels required 'that the king shall not now or hereafter demand any money of his subjects except for defence of the realm in time of war' (xi. 585).

³ Sir John Hayward, 'The Life and Reign of Edward VI.,' in Kennett's *Hist. of Engl.* ed. 1719, ii. 289.

⁴ Letter of Sir Wm. Paget to Somerset, July 7, 1549 (Strype, *Ecol. Mem.* 11. ii. 420, ed. 1816).

been breaking out some time¹ before the appointment in May 1548 of Somerset's first inclosure commissioners. These at once directed their attention to the midland counties, the chief seat of the depopulating attack on the open fields. They had been at work barely two months when riotous levellings of inclosures were heard of in Buckinghamshire,² followed by sporadic risings in other parts of the country. The commission had been empowered only to investigate; the people proceeded to act. Partly by persuasion, partly by force, their impatience was quelled, but again early in 1549 the outbreaks were renewed and again suppressed throughout a large part of southern England.³ By May it was found advisable to issue a proclamation against these 'tumultuous assemblies of lewd persons.'⁴ About a month later an order was issued to the gentlemen of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Berkshire for the putting down of possible commotions in their counties.⁵ In the necessity of maintaining public order the government was forced to fall back, as usual, for its sole support in such an emergency upon the class whose misdeeds the inclosure commissioners had just been laying bare. But here in the midlands the complexion of revolt had altered. While in 1536 the dominant religious

¹ John Hales in his defence says that long before the commission of 1548 there was 'an insurrection in Hertfordshire for the comens at Northall and Chesthunt' (Introd. to the *Discourse of the Common Weal*, ed. Lamond, p. lviii). Early in 1547 we hear of recent disorders 'in many places of the kinges realme' (letter of the Council to the Justices of the Peace, 8 March, 1547, *Hist. MSS. Comm.* vii. i. 605).

² Letters between Somerset and Hales, August 1548 (*Lansdowne MS.* 238, ff. 318 b, 319 b-321 b).

³ King Edward's account is that during the third year of his reign 'the people began to rise in Wiltshier, where Sir William Harbert did put them downe, overrun, and slay them. Then they rose in Sussex, Hamptshier, Kent, Glocestershier, Southfolk, Warwickshier, Essex, Hartfordshier, a Pece of Leicestershier, Worcestershier, and Rutlandshier, where by fair persuasions, partly of honest men among themselves, and partly by gentlemen, thei were often appeased, and again, because certain commissions wer send downe to plucke down inclosures, then did arise again' (*Literary Remains of King Edward VI.* ed. Nichols, ii. 225-7).

⁴ Proclamation of May 22, 1549, *S. P., Dom.*, Edw. VI. vii. 18.

⁵ *S. P., Dom.*, Edw. VI. viii. 9.

motive of the northern rebels had been crossed at the end by agrarian grievances, in the midlands in 1549 a movement which had commenced with hostility to inclosures came ultimately under the control of anti-Protestant influences.¹ 'Here in Bucks and Oxfordshire,' writes Somerset on July 12, is a stir 'by instigacon of sondery priests for these matyers of religion.'² The gentlemen who had been entrusted with the task of restoring order were busy hanging priests upon their parish steeples.³ By August 7 an Oxford correspondent of Bullinger was writing that 'the Oxfordshire papists are at last reduced to order, many of them having been apprehended and some gibbeted, and their heads fastened to the walls.'⁴ From Rutlandshire and Leicestershire comes word in September of trials and executions.⁵ This rigorous suppression made effectual end to the distracted Midland rebellion. Lord Grey's doings in Oxfordshire, wrote Sir Thomas Smith admiringly, were worth ten thousand 'proclamations or pardons for the gettingyng the people.'⁶

Meanwhile in the south-west and in the eastern counties more serious risings were in progress. Along the southern

¹ Somerset's letter of June 11, 1549, to the Marquis of Exeter and the Earl of Huntingdon shows the religious motive for revolt gaining the upper hand over the agrarian: 'Whereas in the most partes of the Realme sundry lewd persons have attempted tassemble themselves and first seking redresse of enclosures have in some places by seditious prests and other yvill peple set forth to seke restitucons of thoid bluddy lawes and some fall to spoil to prevent all inconvenyences w^{ch} yowe pray yo to cause the proclamacons sent herw^t to be published by the sheriff w^{ch} shal wststand yvel Brutes, for yorself and the gentlemen of the shire of Leycestre by y^r admonicons.' (*S. P., Dom.*, Edw. VI. vii. 31.)

² Somerset to Lord Russell (printed in Pocock, *Prayer Book of 1549*, Camden Soc. N.S. 37, p. 26, from the *Petyt MSS.* no. 538, vol. 46). A letter of July 18 informs Russell that Lord Grey has 'chased the Rebels of Bucks, Oxfordshire, and these partes to their houses and taken cc of them' (*ibid.* p. 29).

³ Order of July 19, 1549, prescribed by Lord Grey for the execution of rebels in Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Northamptonshire (*S. P., Dom.*, Edw. VI. viii. 32). The places mentioned in the order are confined, however, to Oxfordshire.

⁴ *Zürich Letters*, 1st ser. vol. ii. p. 391 (Parker Soc.).

⁵ The Earl of Huntingdon to the Earl of Shrewsbury, September 12, 1549; *Talbot Papers*, A, 415 (printed in Lodge, *Illustrations*, 2nd ed. i. 163).

⁶ Sir Thomas Smith to Cecil, July 19, 1549 (*S. P., Dom.*, Edw. VI. viii. 33).