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The Honorable Burden of Public Office

ENGLISH HUMANISTS
AND TUDOR POLITICS
IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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Introduction

Some background might be useful for those readers unfamiliar with the setting in England in the early sixteenth century. As mentioned, education was central to humanism, and a great deal was happening on this scene which paved the way for civic humanism during the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I. In particular, four features seem to stand out: (1) the infusion of the new learning into the curriculum at St. John's College, Cambridge; (2) a new emphasis on Greek and Greek literature; (3) a new secular appreciation of the classics; and (4) the English Reformation.



In many ways, it all began at Cambridge University. St. John's College, Cambridge owed its existence to Bishop John Fisher and Lady Margaret Beaufort, a remarkable and impressive woman who gave England two enduring legacies: the Tudor dynasty and this college. From about 1487, when she first established and supported two perpetual lectureships in sacred theology at Oxford, she had been a generous patroness of higher learning. Her support for Cambridge began in 1505, when she re-founded God's House as Christ's College (at Bishop Fisher's suggestion), and it lasted until 1509, when she died. St. John's College, which was largely the work of Bishop Fisher, was posthumously created in 1511 in her honor.¹

John Fisher was bishop of the small diocese in Rochester and “a man of unexampled piety and learning,” according to the great humanist scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam. He is better remembered as a famous martyr and a Catholic saint, as the friend of John Colet, Thomas More, and Erasmus, and as a strong advocate of the new learning. But he was also a Christian humanist whose own academic credentials were impressive: He was well acquainted with Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, knew a great deal of logic and philosophy, and was learned in the humanities and other sciences.² It was his reputation for virtue and learning that brought him to the attention of Lady Margaret, whose chaplain and confessor he became in 1498, turning into one of the momentous events of his life.³ Through that connection he directed Lady Margaret's charity away from Oxford and toward Cambridge, bringing her much-needed money to the flagging university. Of course the bishop did not single-handedly save Cambridge, but he did help to shore it up at a time when higher education as a whole was foundering in England. The university showed its gratitude by electing him chancellor in 1504, and then chancellor for life in 1514, although he was removed in 1533 for political reasons during the English Reformation.

Having built his college, Fisher needed to fill it with students and define its character, which he did by writing the statutes himself and promulgating them in 1516. These statutes of St. John's College were apparently modeled after those of Christ's College (1506), which he had also probably written, and largely religious in nature and intended to reform the secular clergy. A major difference was that they contained traces of the new learning being espoused by Fisher's friends and contemporaries, above all Erasmus of Rotterdam. By the time Fisher revised these statutes in 1524, and again in 1530, very little of their original content and purpose changed; however, the final revision of 1530 had both simplified and coalesced the humanist elements within them.⁴ For that reason we should look at these statutes against the backdrop of the medieval curriculum at Cambridge and other universities. This will highlight what was so "new" about the new learning and give us a better sense of the kind of education that was instilled in the second generation of humanists whose lives and careers are the basis of this study.



Like medieval education in general, academic training at Cambridge was rigorous. The requirements for the arts program were basically oral, consisting mainly of lectures, disputes, and declamations. Bishop Fisher retained this core part of the traditional or Scholastic program which had dominated university education in the Middle Ages and remained more or less intact since the thirteenth century. Scholasticism itself was a product of the medieval universities. The men who advanced it, the so-called Schoolmen, took what was known as a dialectical approach to learning, which in turn was underscored by logic and logic formalities and characterized by such literary forms as commentaries and questions.⁵

Overall the curriculum at medieval Oxford and Cambridge was broken up into three parts: the Trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), the Quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy), and the Philosophies (natural, moral, and metaphysical).⁶ The Trivium and the Quadrivium, which together made up the seven liberal arts, provided a general education and were related by a common or shared idea about the acquisition of knowledge. On one level medieval education prepared students for the academic world, to be articulate in the Latin language during disputes or debates; on a deeper level it was intended to systematize all learning itself. To this end the Trivium was most important while all other sciences were secondary. Therefore logic, dialectics, sophisms, philosophy, and metaphysics were at

the heart of Scholastic education, and it was these subjects which dominated the curriculum throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries.

In addition, Scholastic or medieval education was split into theoretical and practical arts. The theoretical arts began with subjects in the Trivium, moved on to those in the Quadrivium, and then led to philosophy (especially metaphysics). Such classification of learning affected all subjects in the curriculum, whether a basic subject like grammar, which was likewise divided between its fundamentals (reading and writing, and *speculative grammar*), or higher subjects like astronomy, music, and medicine.⁷ But it was mainly the practical separation of grammar, rhetoric, and logic—as well as the medieval preference for grammar and logic over rhetoric—that sparked a friction within learning itself which humanists of the Renaissance would later criticize and exploit.

One example will serve among many, the medieval attitude toward rhetoric. As part of the Trivium, rhetoric had little practical application for the Schoolmen in the way that Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian advocated, even though these ancient authors had been read and commented on in the Middle Ages. For the Schoolmen, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was a book of moral philosophy to be studied along with his *Ethics* and *Politics*, not a textbook of rhetoric to be studied on its own. Of course the Schoolmen were familiar with rhetoric as a subject, but here as elsewhere they preferred the great Christian masters, in particular St. Augustine, who was more appealing than the secular authorities because he used rhetoric for Christian moralizing.⁸ Rhetoric therefore remained the Cinderella of the arts program in the medieval university and less attractive than its stepsisters in the Trivium, grammar and logic.⁹

It was logic that really mattered to the Schoolmen more than any other subject in the medieval curriculum.¹⁰ Logic was not only the basis for natural and moral philosophy and metaphysics, it was a “propaedeutic” or introduction to Scholasticism itself. Scholasticism was basically an approach to theology and philosophy based almost entirely upon the authority of the Christian fathers and of Aristotle and his commentators. One feature that distinguished the Scholastic approach from the humanist was that it was more philosophical than historical. In fact, it was almost exclusively philosophical, meaning that the validity or truth of major philosophical points or issues were derived from premises which did not necessarily take into account the appropriate historical setting from which these points or issues

sprang. That was why moral philosophy—which dealt with such mundane subjects as ethics, economics, and politics—made up only a very small part of the bachelor’s training and rarely impinged on the study of theology.¹¹ If morality and ethics could be determined philosophically or through logic or revelation, then there was no need for historical examples.

Logic was also applied to such “authorities” as sacred Scripture and the church fathers, and to such subjects as theology and metaphysics. Logic not only dominated the medieval curriculum for the first two years, it gave structure to nearly all university study in medieval Europe, including in England.¹² Logic complemented speculative grammar, realist natural philosophy, and metaphysics; it served as the bedrock of medieval Scholastic theology and law, as well as of the entire arts curriculum. It was supposed to synthesize medieval education into a unified whole, but gradually it degenerated into exercises that elucidated the subtleties of language and the ordinary usage of speech; or into silly sophisms, such as the so-called “Liar’s paradox,” a favorite of the Schoolmen, which went something like this: Socrates says, “What Plato says is false.” Plato says, “What Socrates says is true.” Neither says anything else. Is what Socrates says true or false? The masters would then set forth a proposition about this statement and analyze it according to the rules and formalities of logic. No doubt the example is oversimplified. But one can understand how exercises like this, followed by the kind of logic-chopping that became typical of the Schoolmen, would soon be derided as useless and frivolous by such English humanists as Thomas More who deplored the metaphysical mumbo-jumbo of the Schoolmen and the hair-splitting exercises of grammarians who “think they understand all branches of learning, just because they know false words and structure of clauses.”¹³ Logic had become an end in itself, preparing practitioners to become expert in, well . . . logic.

Still, these are the points to keep in mind: first, both the Scholastic emphasis on logic and the preference of the Schoolmen for natural philosophy and metaphysics were congruous with the religious nature of medieval education; second, medieval education was almost exclusively—not entirely, but almost exclusively—a Christian education. All studies culminated in theology, the queen of the sciences, which buttressed medieval Scholasticism. Indeed for the Schoolmen, theology and philosophy were more or less inseparable. Medieval education directed one’s thoughts toward matters that were more relevant to the next world, as Niccolò Machiavelli and others would soon point out.

It is true that some Schoolmen trained in semantics served secular princes, and some even rose to prominent careers as bureaucrats in the Church; but most were “unsuited to conduct business, to serve on embassies, administer public or private affairs,” as the famous Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives observed.¹⁴ This is worth mentioning here because Renaissance humanists, including the civic humanists of this study, worked both wittingly and unwittingly to supplant Scholastic philosophy and metaphysics and replace them with “the arts from which all these things can be learned”—moral philosophy, history, oratory, political science, and government—the subjects of the *studia humanitas* which prepared men to conduct private and public affairs.



Back at Cambridge Bishop Fisher’s ostensible purpose was to continue training students for careers in the Church. His curriculum at St. John’s—which was included among the statutes he wrote—was almost as traditional or medieval as those of other medieval universities.¹⁵ The arts course was mainly oral, Scholastic, and an introduction to theology. In fact, theology remained the goal toward which philosophy and all other subjects lead, even as late as 1524 and 1530 with the final revisions of his statutes. In other words, Fisher initiated no great revolution in education at St. John’s from 1516 to 1530. He was not doing anything especially radical at this time.¹⁶

For example, students spent the first two years at St. John’s on grammar and the “old logic.” This meant that they would have studied such works as Porphyry’s *Isagoge* and Aristotle’s *Praedicaments* during winter term; Aristotle’s *Perihermenias*, Gilbert de la Porrée’s *Sex principia*, and Boethius’s *Divisions* during Lent; and Aristotle’s *Topica* during summer term. Their second year was spent on natural philosophy and the “new logic,” which consisted of Aristotle’s *De Sophisticis Elenchis* during winter term, his *Analytica priora* during Lent, and his *Analytica posteria* during summer term. Their third year would have been spent poring over Aristotle’s *Physica* for both winter term and Lent, while during summer Aristotle’s *De generatione*, *De anima*, or *De coela*, and perhaps even his *Meteora* or the *Ethica*, would have been taken up. Finally, in their fourth year, students studied Aristotle’s *Physica* or *Metaphysica* during winter term and Lent; then they would repeat what they studied during summer term from their third year. Other short treatises on logic, such as *Summule*, *De Fallacies*, and William of Heytesbury’s *De insolubilibus*, were added in the late fourteenth century and

studied until the sixteenth century. And of course, the numerous commentaries on Aristotle were widely studied.

That said, there was a subtle but discernable change in undercurrents at St. John's College which can be traced back to Fisher's revisions as early as 1516, and which was the first major change in education taking place in the early sixteenth century that paved the way for civic humanism in England. To begin with, there was a new emphasis on "books of humanity" and other ancient classics—which were eventually codified in Fisher's statutes and served as the basis for the curriculum throughout the Tudor period; and there was an emphasis on mathematics, including arithmetic, geometry, cosmography, and perspective.¹⁷ In addition, there was a new appreciation of classical Latin, and an effort to imitate it, which in turn gradually led to the decline of medieval Latin and grammar. With the introduction of these new methods and texts, there was also a shift away from medieval logic as the primary study of the undergraduate toward the study of rhetoric and moral philosophy. Not only were students now using such books as Aristotle's *Ethics*, Cicero's *De Officiis*, and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, they sought to understand them within their proper historical context.¹⁸ Above all, there was an infusion of Greek language and literature into the curriculum. This created the first serious fracture with Scholastic education at Cambridge and was the second major feature that paved the way for civic humanism in England.

Thomas More was among the first to recognize this shift as it was taking place. As Oxford's new chancellor he lambasted the "Trojans" for undermining the "Greeks" in their quarrel over the curriculum by reminding them that "humanist education" was "the chief, almost the sole reason" why men now came to the university. Several years earlier in *Utopia* (1516) he wrote that "in Latin there is nothing except the poets and historians that would be likely to interest" the Utopians much. At one point his protagonist Raphael Hythloday proclaimed that in that philosophy "there is nothing of any importance in Latin except some works of Seneca and Cicero."¹⁹ Not even the church fathers! Richard Pace also recognized this shift. He criticized the Schoolmen for their illiteracy and ignorance and exhorted the young boys at St. Paul's School to study Greek, Latin, and other humanist texts instead.²⁰ Cardinal Wolsey recognized it too. He looked to Cambridge (not Oxford) to fill academic posts at his newly formed Cardinal's College where the new learning dominated the curriculum. Even Erasmus recognized it. By 1529 he noted that Fisher's college was no longer preparing men for "sophistical contests," making them "dull and witless in serious matters," but instead was

teaching them subjects from which “they may proceed forth well versed in true learning and in sober discussion.”²¹ By 1530, with the final revisions to his statutes, Fisher had introduced significant humanist elements into the curriculum.

Perhaps the bulk of the credit belonged to Erasmus, who wrote to Henry Bullock in 1516 that students at Cambridge were “devoting themselves ardently to Greek literature.”²² That was an overstatement, but still it was true that interest in Greek had sprouted after Fisher first invited him to lecture at Cambridge in 1511. Fisher had hoped to push Erasmian theology and textual criticism into the mainstream curriculum, opening the door for a more scriptural-based study of the Bible in Greek while moving beyond the study of theology from barbaric translations and corrupted texts. Naturally the Dutchman was the ideal candidate for the job. He stood at the vanguard of this new movement, this new tradition, which eventually changed the way the Bible and the ancient Greek and Latin classics were approached. He was not only the foremost classical scholar and philologist of his day, he was the great Christian humanist reformer and critic who wrote his celebrated satire *The Praise of Folly* while living at Thomas More’s a few years before. It was therefore a coup of sorts for Fisher when he accepted the offer to return to England and lecture at Cambridge—especially because Erasmus considered England an intellectual backwater and never liked living there. To make matters worse, he lodged neither in comfort at More’s house at Chelsea, nor anywhere near London, but in a small cold dreary room at Queens’ College, which to his mind was not much better than exile. Perhaps worse than that, the great Dutchman had little success as a lecturer, even though his classes in Greek and theology were free to all students interested in attending them. Few did.

Erasmus, a notorious whiner, complained about this, just as he had complained about his first visit to England—which makes one wonder why he accepted the post in the first place.²³ It is likely he assumed that it would be temporary until he was given the Lady Margaret divinity chair, which sadly for him never came. It is also likely he thought that this kind of teaching was beneath him, since he was dealing mostly with novices in Greek, boys and young men who had little or no grounding in the language, and compelled to teach the kind of course that most veteran scholars disdain: the introductory course—in this case, an introductory language course—which consisted of small groups of students, and perhaps even a few graduates, who were interested in Greek. One must remember that the graduate student, to whom

such undesirable courses are often passed, had not yet been invented, and drudgery like that would have been beneath an egoist like Erasmus who probably expected to perform before standing-room only crowds. Poor old Erasmus was disappointed in England . . . again. All too often academics act like lovers and make the same erroneous assumption as those under Eros's magic spell: simply because they love their subject they think that everyone else ought to love it too.

Still there *was* a growing interest in Greek at Cambridge, which Erasmus had already noticed, and he should have been grateful for those students who had taken an interest in it, despite being on the fringe of the curriculum.²⁴ Among them were: John Bryan; Henry Bullock; John Fawne; Humphrey Walkeden; John Vance; John Watson (later master of Christ's); Robert Aldrich (future bishop of Carlisle); and possibly Robert Wakefield and Thomas Lupset. Many of these men, the foot soldiers of Greek and the new learning in England, thanks to Erasmus, became prominent in their own right.

Consider John Bryan. He had attended both Eton and King's College, from which he took his BA in 1515 and his MA in 1518. He was first noticed by Erasmus through his enthusiasm for classical languages, became Erasmus's scribe, and then worked as a lecturer in Cambridge, where he read Aristotle for two years and caused a scandal with his lectures. It was not because he was lecturing on Aristotle that he upset the faculty, that was nothing new; it was his humanist approach to Aristotle that outraged them. He ignored all the Scholastic subtleties and commentaries on Aristotle and dared to read "The Philosopher" directly from the sources and in Greek. It pleased Bryan's close friend Henry Bullock, who had attended Queens' College and used Erasmian methods while lecturing on the Gospel of St Matthew in Greek. It pleased his students. They were "keenly studying Greek," Bullock reported his mentor, adding that they were also "great supporters" of Erasmus's edition of the New Testament. "What a book it is! . . . so elegant, so delightful, and so highly necessary in the opinion of all men of sound judgment."²⁵ And of course Bryan's method pleased Erasmus.



While Erasmus was laying the foundation for Greek in England, and Fisher and Bryan and Bullock were doing their part to transmit it at Cambridge, it took a brash and outspoken advocate like Richard Croke (1489-1558) to rouse the mossbacked dons of the university.²⁶ Croke was a scholar of King's College and a Fellow of St. John's, was voted first Greek Reader and Public

Orator at Cambridge University, and served as Canon of the College of St. Frideswide (later Christchurch), Oxford. No Greek scholar himself, he had nevertheless prepared and published a few aids to the study of Greek grammar and an edition of Ausonius. His most valuable published work turned out to be the reprint of two orations he had given at Cambridge urging students to study Greek.²⁷ These orations represent the third major feature of the broader changes taking place in England at this time, and that was the new emphasis on the secular value and use of the classics, notably the Greek classics, which would directly affect what the second generation of humanists studied and learned at Cambridge.

The Greeks surpassed all those who came after them, Croke declared, in wisdom and inventiveness, in theoretical wisdom and practical ability. They produced the most just, the most learned, the most dignified citizens in antiquity. Who but the Greeks, he asked, produced great heroes like Themistocles, Pericles, Aristides, and Xenocrates? Who but the Greek historians had dignified both their country and their native tongue? Even Cicero acknowledged the virtue and superiority of Greece over Rome, and affirmed that if Jupiter had spoken in a mortal tongue he would have used Plato's Greek. Latin itself was an inferior language and grated harshly against the ear when compared to Greek. The superiority of Greek, Croke believed, was indeed bolstered by its own antiquity. Indeed, Cicero himself had advocated the study of Greek because it "has served me well not merely in the study of philosophy but also in the practice of oratory," rendering "signal service to my countrymen in this respect, so that not merely those who are novices in Greek but also men who are learned in it believe that they have made some progress in both learning and discernment" (*De Officiis*, Book I). Croke aspired to achieve a purer Latin through the study of Greek, a message that would soon be resonating throughout England. As Roger Ascham later wrote to Johann Sturm, "since the Latin language, in those happiest of times, in Rome itself, in the hands of Cicero himself, did not achieve full perfection without drawing on Greek, why should anyone seek from Latin alone what Cicero himself did not without the aid of Greek?"²⁸ This sentiment was echoed by John Cheke and Thomas Smith when they allegedly discovered of the "correct" pronunciation of ancient Greek.

Croke's message was expressive of the passion for Greek that Erasmus and Fisher had injected into the English scene; but Croke was making the additional point that Greek was useful for more than religious studies—although he did not deny its usefulness for this either. He gave few religious

reasons for studying Greek language and literature but advocated their secular value instead. He paid homage to the church fathers but said little about their doctrinal importance. True, Greek gave greater authority to the Old and New Testaments, but for Croke this was only one argument among others. It was one thing, as an academic, to praise the language for its philological or esthetic or literary qualities, as some like Erasmus, who had never entered the political arena, had done; it was something quite different—and very new in England at this time—to extol Greek for its utility for politics, as Croke was now doing. This is not to say that Croke exclusively held this view, or that Erasmus or Fisher believed the Greek classics were useless for political life. However, Erasmus, like most academics (then as now), criticized from the academy and never stepped foot in the political arena, as Thomas More and even Croke himself had done. Croke told the students in his Cambridge audience that they had no excuse not to make this effort, since the capacity, the leisure, and now the preceptor were all at their command.

But no one, it seems to me, proclaimed the secular usefulness of the classics more forcefully than Thomas Elyot in *The Boke named the Governuor* (1531). Although Elyot had no direct connection with Cambridge, he nonetheless made the case for men like himself who had studied the classics to help the prince govern the commonwealth. He even sketched out a detailed course of study that could be used to educate and train a future ruling class.²⁹ However, Elyot had more than education in mind: He aspired to use education to produce the best commonwealth—which implied transforming England into “a public weal equivalent to the Greeks or Romans.”³⁰ The best state needed the best men to govern it, and these men in turn needed the best education, which Elyot believed could be found in those classical texts now also being cultivated at Cambridge. Elyot saw that England was on the verge of a new mode and order and he boldly offered his counsel to the king and commonwealth. Humanism gave him a new vantage point from which to assess the world around him. He argued that these new intellectual tools could be used to solve the problems of the day, and he backed up his beliefs with his own study of the “most noble” Greek and Latin authors and his own experience in public life.³¹ At bottom Elyot envisioned educated secular men running state affairs—not clergymen or unlettered aristocrats who had hitherto dominated England’s medieval government.

Why was that? Why was this new ideal type more congenial to sixteenth-century political life? After all, Christian humanism had been wrapped up

with politics and education, as works from Dante and Petrarch to Erasmus and More amply demonstrate. Even churchmen like Cardinal Wolsey had employed humanists and founded a humanist-leaning college at Oxford, and Reginald Pole (later Cardinal Pole) attracted eager young Englishmen to his humanist center in Padua. The difference was that by 1531 a new course was set. Reformation was underway.

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It is easy to dismiss the events of the first English Reformation as irrelevant to humanist education—or to dismiss humanist ideas as irrelevant to the Reformation and the political situation under Henry VIII, as some historians are wont to do—but they are not. Together they produced further social and intellectual changes in the universities, and it was these changes that most influenced the education of that second generation of humanists who would propagate civic humanism during the reigns of Edward and Elizabeth. It was not insignificant or merely coincidental that classical texts on ethics and politics, as well as other humanist writings, were steadily seeping into political life. As a matter of fact, the new learning that Chancellor Fisher and Erasmus and Croke had been promoting at Cambridge was suddenly more congenial—or perhaps more accurately, was seen by some contemporaries as being more congenial—to actual English political life and took on a new significance for them.

This was underscored by Thomas Cromwell who hired humanists to realize his political ends in the 1530s. As W. G. Zeeveld correctly observed, never “had the opportunity been greater for men solely on their merits as scholars to influence national policy, and never did scholars live up to their opportunities more brilliantly.”³² Cromwell patronized and rewarded such humanists as Thomas Elyot, Christopher St. Germain, Thomas Starkey, William Marshall, and Richard Morison with promotions and government posts, not merely because they possessed the skills to run the bureaucracy, but because they could prime his propaganda machine.³³ In turn they relished the opportunity to use their erudition on behalf of the state. For example, they drew on their knowledge of antiquity and classical political theory to justify the Reformation—which was at bottom political.³⁴ They appealed to public duty and to strong national feelings, using ideas imported from antiquity to support national sovereignty. They helped write the legislation that consolidated the split with Rome and the Tudor revolution in government.³⁵ They even flirted with converting English law to Roman law—or at least codifying the common law (in either English or Latin) as Justinian had done—because

it would be beneficial to the commonwealth.³⁶ Indeed, both the abolition of the study of canon law and the creation of the Regius Professorship of Civil Law at Cambridge at this time underscored this temptation.³⁷

It was also significant that many of Cromwell's literati, above all Thomas Starkey and Richard Morison, knew and associated with the second generation humanists, including John Cheke, Thomas Smith, and William Cecil. This was one crucial link between the first and second generations of civic humanists in England—another being Bishop Fisher's curriculum at Cambridge and St. John's College. And still the point remains: The English Reformation stimulated the first meaningful connection or alliance between humanism and politics in England, an alliance that was enhanced and grew stronger as a new generation of humanists gained power and influence under Edward and Elizabeth.³⁸

It was probably true that Cromwell saw the universities as another tool to achieve his political ends; but it was also true that the men inside them had their own agenda in mind and took advantage of the political situation to achieve some of their goals. At Cambridge, where Cromwell was chancellor from 1535 to 1540, having replaced Bishop Fisher who had been removed from that post for his opposition to the king's divorce, the new learning was consolidated into the curriculum of the entire university through the royal injunctions of 1535.³⁹ These were no flimsy statutes. They underscored a new movement at Cambridge—a movement propelled forward by both the Reformation and the humanist spirit to return to the sources (*ad fontes*) of the arts and theology faculties, Aristotle and the Bible.⁴⁰ They proved that the study of true religion (i.e. evangelism) and good learning (i.e. humanist learning) went hand in hand and reinforced the compatibility of both Christian humanism and civic humanism.

Christian humanists in England laid the egg that Cromwell and his underlings hatched. Wittingly or unwittingly, they spawned the movement for evangelical Reformation which crystallized in the last stage of Henry VIII's reign and continued during Edward's.⁴¹ Like Josiah, another boy-king (2 Kings 22-23), Edward was portrayed as the second godly prince come to purge the church in England of images, idols, and other superstitions, what Thomas Smith called in 1549 "the godly order" of Reformation.⁴² Evangelical reformers, influenced by the Erasmian strand of humanism, promoted a vision of the commonwealth and service to the king that could be interpreted through the lens of Scripture. Although their activities, if not their vision, lapsed during Mary's reign, they were revived with the accession of Eliza-

beth to the throne in 1558 when “true religion” was restored. As William Cecil said, England had “by exalting our sovereign lady to this kingdom abandoned Idolatry and brought our savior Christ Jesus into this kingdom.”⁴³ More significant, for our story anyway, was the network of Edwardian elites—including Haddon, Wilson, Smith, Bacon, and Cecil—who regained control of the centers of power.

But the civic humanists were, perhaps, more responsible for Henrician reform in the 1530s and 1540s. Armed with the new tools of philology, history, and archeology, they not only fostered a new understanding of those texts and the historical setting from which they arose; they inspired a new faith in history (*fides historiae*) and moral philosophy. More importantly, they linked scholarship to politics. Thomas Starkey, for example, the intellectual source of most Tudor political reform in the 1530s, built his on a legal positivism and a political realism that was closer to Machiavelli than to, say, Erasmus or even Thomas More. As Alistair Fox writes, “Erasmianism, being insufficiently concerned with practicalities, looked in the direction opposite to the one in which most English humanists wanted to gaze as they sought to translate wisdom into political action.”⁴⁴ Indeed, Fox got it right, in my view, when he wrote that “Erasmian humanism had little direct influence” on English politics because “English reform drew its substance from a type of humanism based on very different assumptions.” These assumptions, I would add, were more secular and practical than what Christian humanists ultimately had in mind.

And it was this strand of humanism that largely inspired English civic humanism in the sixteenth century, as we shall see. It was, for instance, one of the impulses behind John Cheke and Thomas Smith’s revival of the “correct” pronunciation of Greek in the 1530s.⁴⁵ Cheke and Smith showed that history and philology were the best means to get back to the sources of classical learning, or as Smith put it, to “accept what reason and the authority of the ancients exacted.” Later they would couple these tools with their political aspirations. Their purpose was reiterated by Cheke who said it was their aim, first to get at “true antiquity,” and then “to introduce that which was ancient and profitable.” He and Smith in turn promoted and taught what was ancient and profitable to their students at Cambridge, including Walter Haddon, William Cecil, and Thomas Wilson, who believed that the classics acquainted men with “the best and most excellent writers” whose “value and worthiness” they should aspire to imitate.⁴⁶ Wilson wrote these words in

1571, but they extended from the same impulse that gave rise to humanism at Cambridge University in the 1520s, 30s, and 40s.



So we return to Cambridge University, to St. John's College, which was becoming the center for training men to serve their country, "as the ancient Cities in Greece and some yet in Italy, at this day, are accustomed to do."⁴⁷ All the influences were lined up, as if waiting for these six men—John Cheke, Walter Haddon, Thomas Wilson, Thomas Smith, Nichols Bacon, and William Cecil—who were at the right place at this formative time.