

# Collecting Revolution: George Thomason and the ‘Thomason Tracts’

Jason Peacey

Shortly after the Restoration of the Stuart dynasty in 1660, following two decades of political and religious turmoil, plans were apparently drawn up to dispose of a massive collection of books, pamphlets, newspapers and broadsides, as well as some manuscripts. These had been accumulated since 1640, ‘from the beginning of that long unhappy parliament’, and they were said to represent ‘an exact collection’, to comprise ‘several tracts of all sorts and on all sides’, and to involve some 30,000 items. This was all said to represent the fruits of ‘great charges disbursed and pains taken’.<sup>1</sup> The person responsible for such an achievement was not named; indeed, he remained more or less anonymous for a long time. The amasser of this material remained somewhat mysterious even after the collection moved to what was then the British Museum in 1762. Since it arrived courtesy of George III – to whom it was gifted by a purchaser, the Earl of Bute – the material tended to be known as the King’s pamphlets.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, of course, this priceless collection – rightly regarded as one of the jewels amongst the holdings of the British Library – is more properly known as the Thomason Tracts, thereby recognizing the singular efforts of the London bookseller and publisher, George Thomason, by whom the material was acquired, bound, preserved and catalogued. It is both Thomason and his tracts that form the subject of these studies, the aim of which is to enhance our understanding of an extraordinary but also complex collection.

In bringing together such essays, the aim is to subject Thomason and his collection to greater scrutiny, while also recognizing that this involves building upon existing appreciation of both the man and his material. Thomason, after all, has scarcely been neglected, and although he is far from being a well-documented individual, important steps have certainly been taken to reconstruct his life, in terms of his family, his personal and professional networks, and his political and religious affiliations.<sup>3</sup> Treatments of the collection, meanwhile, have been more or less integral to studies of the English Revolution ever since the time of William Godwin (1756-1836), and interest in them has helped to ensure that the period has remained central to the study of British history, and indeed to key historiographical debates. Thomas Carlyle claimed that in ‘that hideous mass of rubbish’ lay the ‘whole secret of the seventeenth century’, and by the late nineteenth century – not least in the work of David

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This collection of essays originated in a conference, co-organized many years ago with Giles Mandelbrote and generously hosted by the British Library and UCL. Since then, their appearance has been delayed by a series of very sad events beyond the COVID pandemic, including the serious illnesses which ultimately took the lives of two of the original contributors, Julian Roberts and Keith Lindley. This volume is dedicated to their memory, and to the patience of the other contributors.

<sup>1</sup> *CSPD 1660-1*, p. 460; TNA, SP 29/26, ff. 137-v.

<sup>2</sup> David Stoker, ‘Disposing of George Thomason’s Intractable Legacy 1664-1762’, *The Library*, 6th series, xiv (1992), pp. 337-56.

<sup>3</sup> Lois Spencer, ‘The Professional and Literary Connexions of George Thomason’, *The Library*, 5th series, xiii (1958), pp. 102-18; Lois Spencer, ‘The Politics of George Thomason’, *The Library*, 5th series, xiv (1959), pp. 11-27; David Stoker, ‘Thomason, George’, *ODNB*.

Masson and Samuel Rawson Gardiner – the material was being used fairly systematically.<sup>4</sup> Writing in 1897, the bibliographer Falconer Madan described Thomason's collection as an 'achievement ... unparalleled in its kind', and with the publication of G. K. Fortescue's catalogue in 1908, the material became much more readily accessible.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter, of course, the collection became even more widely available to those who were unable to visit the British Museum, via the production of a microfilm edition, and then with the development of Early English Books Online, the medium through which the tracts are now almost exclusively accessed by scholars and students the world over.

That the significance of the Thomason Tracts is now widely recognized is not to say that they do not merit further scrutiny, not least because there has never been a consensus about precisely what to make of them, how best to utilize them, or how to calibrate their importance. It might even be argued that, while they have become increasingly familiar, and increasingly central to scholarship, they have tended to be exploited more obviously than subjected to critical analysis. It may even be true – as Michael Mendle argues below – that heightened accessibility has been accompanied by reduced awareness of the collection as a totality, not least in the sense that it is now much easier to scrutinize individual items in a decontextualized fashion, and much harder to situate them properly within the broader mass of material. As such, the purpose of these essays is to reflect upon the meaning and value of the Thomason Tracts as a discrete entity. This might usefully take us back to Carlyle, who professed them to be 'the most valuable set of documents connected with English history', and who opined that they were 'greatly preferable to all the sheepskins in the Tower and other places, for informing the English what the English were in former times'.<sup>6</sup> However well considered this comment might be thought to have been, it nevertheless alerts us to the fact that appreciating the value of the Thomason Tracts is a methodological issue.

Methodological issues – about the value and importance of different types of source material – have often been integral to debates among early modern historians, and ever since the nineteenth century the ways in which the Thomason Tracts have been integrated into scholarship have been more or less inseparable from historiographical debates about the revolutionary decades, from attitudes towards the importance of religious and political radicals to reflections upon the value of print culture. Indeed, recent historiographical trends make serious analysis of the collection particularly important. In the aftermath of 'revisionism', with its tendency to privilege manuscript sources – including Carlyle's 'sheepskins' – and perhaps even its propensity to downplay the importance of print culture, scholars have begun to display greater concern to take seriously the evidence contained in contemporary pamphlets and newspapers, and to recognize that print culture and communicative practices were increasingly important parts of public life. Likewise, intellectual historians recognize the need to look beyond bulky treatises, and towards other kinds of text, in order to appreciate and contextualize developments in seventeenth-century political thought. Moreover, after decades of being somewhat out of scholarly favour – following revisionist challenges to the work of historians like Christopher Hill, whose apparent reliance upon printed tracts was said to have distorted his understanding of the revolution – religious and political radicalism is once more attracting scholarly attention. Beyond this, of course, recent decades have witnessed wider interest in the 'history of the

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Mendle, 'George Thomason's Intentions', in Giles Mandelbrote and Barry Taylor (eds.), *Libraries within the Library* (London, 2009), pp. 181, 184, 186.

<sup>5</sup> Falconer Madan, 'Notes on the Thomason Collection of Civil War Tracts', *Bibliographica*, iii (1897), pp. 291-308 (p. 292); G. K. Fortescue, *The Catalogue of the Pamphlets, Books, Newspapers and Manuscripts Relating to the Civil War, Commonwealth and Restoration, Collected by George Thomason, 1640-1661*, 2 vols (London, 1908).

<sup>6</sup> Stoker, 'Disposing', p. 353.

book', not merely in terms of bibliographical analysis, but also in terms of 'readership', 'reception', and 'collecting', while literary scholars have become increasingly attuned to the value of non-canonical texts, from ballads and libels to the plays and poetry of less heralded men and women. In all areas of early modern scholarship, in short, 'cheap print' and a wider sensitivity to textual genres have assumed central importance, and debate still thrives regarding the existence and nature of an early modern 'public sphere', and over the extent to which print culture had democratizing implications and participatory ramifications. As such, Thomason's collection has been crucial to our appreciation of a wide range of authors, genres and phenomena, from 'news' to petitioning and lobbying, from radicalism to royalism, and from propaganda to censorship.<sup>7</sup>

It is this centrality of the Thomason Tracts to seventeenth-century scholarship that makes it vital to gain a better appreciation of this enormous body of material. These papers do so by addressing a series of interrelated issues, in terms of how and why the collection was created, its size, and the nature of its contents, not to mention the identity of Thomason himself. All of these things are vital to any attempt to understand the light that the material sheds upon the times in which he lived, something that represents a key objective of the contributions gathered here.

A useful place to start is the extraordinary story regarding the fate of the collection after Thomason's death, and the tortuous process by which the volumes made their way into the public domain. This is a story to which David Stoker has devoted heroic efforts elsewhere, and one that he assesses even further here.<sup>8</sup> This story is instructive, not just because it might be considered to be a miracle that the collection has survived intact, but also because the story of its ownership, disposal, and eventual arrival in the British Museum has arguably coloured our appreciation of its nature. Not the least significant challenge involves problematic claims made about the collection by Thomason and subsequent owners, in terms of its scale and importance, discussed here by both Stoker and Joad Raymond. In terms of its historical value, early claims were made about how 'the peruser now may by them be let into the knowledge of many occurrences in those times, which have passed hitherto unobserved'.<sup>9</sup> Referring to the tracts in his will, Thomason pointed to 'the use that may be made of them for the public both for present and after ages', adding that they 'may and will prove of great advantage to posterity, besides there is not the like, neither is it possible to be made'. In his own assessment of the collection, moreover, Madan was echoing a comment by Thomason himself, and the will also described the collection as 'soe intire a work and not to be paralled [*sic*]'.<sup>10</sup> Claims were made about 'greate charges disbursed and paines taken in an exact colleccion of pamphletts', about how it contained 'almost every fugitive sheet printing during that period', and about it being 'a complete collection'. Such claims, of course, were designed as part of attempts to dispose of the collection, and to realize its monetary value, and they were sometimes printed as part of contemporary advertisements, which likewise referred to 'a complete collection'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There is insufficient space to document these trends in detail. However, for a vital recent survey of such issues, see Joad Raymond (ed.), *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture*, vol. i: *Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660* (Oxford, 2011). For indicative evidence about the extent to which the Thomason Tracts inform modern scholarship, see Michael J. Braddick (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Stoker, 'Disposing', pp. 337-56.

<sup>9</sup> Fortescue, *Catalogue*, vol. i, p. xv.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Will of George Thomason', *The Library*, new series, x (1909), pp. 34-43 (p. 40).

<sup>11</sup> Fortescue, *Catalogue*, vol. i, pp. v, xiv-xv; Spencer, 'Professional', pp. 113-14; Mendle, 'George Thomason's Intentions', p. 172; C. M. S., 'Commonwealth Tracts', *Notes and Queries*, 2nd series, iv:99 (1857), pp. 412-14; *CSPD 1660-1*, p. 460.

As such, scholars have appreciated the need to reflect upon Thomason’s methods, intentions, and effectiveness as a collector, since these have always been central to its usability and utility. Here, of course, we are fortunate in terms of how the collection has come down to us, in terms of both the material and the available catalogues. The collection has obviously been modified somewhat over the years, by the imposition of new shelfmarks, and – to a lesser extent – by some items being removed or rearranged. Certain items are now missing, and were perhaps missing by the time that the collection reached the British Museum, although a few items have subsequently re-emerged and been returned.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the bound volumes remain very largely as Thomason intended. As Michael Mendle’s contribution here demonstrates, this was by no means inevitable, and the history of the collection reveals that decisions about how to deal with it – and how to make it available – have always been complicated and controversial. The volumes could have been disbound, and individual items could have been deaccessioned. Indeed, as Mendle also makes clear, a vital facet of the collection is the ability to browse, and to follow Thomason’s logic. Crucial, in short, is the organization of the material, rather than just its size. It remains as important to modern users as it was to Carlyle to be able to navigate the material, in terms of being able to contextualize individual items, something that is assisted by their arrangement, as well as their cataloguing. Here, Fortescue’s catalogue may be thought to be both invaluable and frustrating at the same time, and Mendle and Raymond both demonstrate the value of utilizing the catalogues that were compiled by – or for – Thomason himself, and how useful it would be if these were more readily accessible. These catalogues are revealing about the approach that Thomason took, as well as about how the material can be utilized. Modern technology, meanwhile, which does so much to make the tracts accessible, may also bring risks, in terms of neglecting the kinds of insight that come from being able to relate specific items to the rest of the collection.<sup>13</sup>

Thomason’s methods, in short, are important. These reveal experimentation and adaptation, and while he certainly flirted with the idea of organizing his material along fairly conventional lines – i.e. thematically – and also needed to cope with different formats (from octavos to quartos and broadsides, as well as newsbooks), the prevailing approach was more or less unusual in being chronological. As Thomason explained, the collection was ‘as uniformly bound as if they were but of one impression’, and ‘all exactly marked and numbered’. He also noted that ‘the method that hath been observed is time’, a point intimately associated with the idea that ‘such exact care hath been taken that the very day is written on most of them when they came out’. Thomason legitimately drew attention to the unusual arrangement of his material, and to the efforts that had been made to annotate tracts with invaluable information, and such things have clearly been central to the utility of the collection. Nevertheless, such comments have also been thought to merit interrogation and qualification. Fortescue’s catalogue can mislead as well as inform, not least given the tendency to privilege the dates of events to which material relates, rather than Thomason’s own dating. Thomason did not invariably add dates to individual items, especially in the early phase of his collecting, and he dabbled with organizational methods that did not privilege ‘time’. With care and browsing, however, as well as with a process that involves

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen J. Greenberg, ‘Dating Civil War Pamphlets, 1641-1644’, *Albion*, xx:3 (1988), pp. 387-401; Michael Mendle, ‘The Thomason Collection: A Reply to Stephen J. Greenberg’, *Albion*, xxii.1 (1990), pp. 85-93; Stephen J. Greenberg, ‘The Thomason Collection: Rebuttal to Michael Mendle’, *Albion*, xxii:1 (1990), pp. 95-8; F. B. Williams, ‘Five Lost Thomason Tracts’, *The Library*, 5th series, xix (1964), pp. 230-4. Fortescue himself used Thomason’s catalogues to calculate that 29 volumes – containing 145 items – were missing when the material arrived in the British Museum: Fortescue, *Catalogue*, p. xx.

<sup>13</sup> Mendle, ‘George Thomason’s Intentions’, pp. 180-6.

supplementing Fortescue with evidence from Thomason’s own catalogues, it is possible to develop a remarkable chronological picture of the collection, even if, as contributors make clear, care is needed on occasions when Thomason’s dates relate more obviously to acquisition than publication.<sup>14</sup>

Similar care is necessitated by the scale and comprehensiveness of Thomason’s collection, a theme that has occasionally received scholarly attention through comparison with other collections, and that is addressed here by Raymond.<sup>15</sup> Fortescue himself referred to Thomason ‘acquiring ... every book, pamphlet or newspaper issued in London and as many as he could obtain from the provinces or abroad’.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in terms of the scale of Thomason’s collection, historians have often been somewhat reliant upon Fortescue’s calculations:

Year	Pamphlets	MSS	Newspapers	Total
1640	22	2	0	24
1641	717	0	4	721
1642	1966	1	167	2134
1643	1091	3	402	1496
1644	692	3	673	1368
1645	694	3	722	1419
1646	804	3	503	1310
1647	1058	7	407	1472
1648	1408	16	612	2036
1649	777	15	554	1346
1650	481	5	284	770
1651	402	1	356	759
1652	427	1	494	922
1653	598	15	460	1073
1654	526	3	483	1012
1655	443	6	350	799
1656	402	4	104	510
1657	306	1	25	332
1658	282	3	103	388
1659	652	1	253	906
1660	976	4	164	1144
1661	218	0	53	271
1662	0	0	35	35
1663	0	0	8	8
Total	14,942	97	7216	22,255

Source: Fortescue, *Catalogue*, vol. i, p. xxi.

Such figures are invaluable, of course, and reveal key patterns over time, not just in terms

<sup>14</sup> Fortescue, *Catalogue*, vol. i, p. xv; Mendle, ‘George Thomason’s Intentions’, pp. 176-80, 184-5.

<sup>15</sup> Jason Peacey, ‘Sir Thomas Cotton’s Consumption of News in 1650s England’, *The Library*, 7th series, vii (2006), pp. 3-24.

<sup>16</sup> Fortescue, *Catalogue*, vol. i, p. v.

of publication trends, but also in terms of Thomason’s developing and fluctuating zeal. They do not necessarily represent the last word, however, and whether or not scholars have yet reached a definitive verdict on the number of items that Thomason acquired – or are ever likely to do so, given the methodological challenges involved – recent decades have witnessed debates and developments that add significantly to our understanding. The number of items Thomason collected is probably nearer 24,000, contained within 2142 volumes.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond this, of course, scholars have inevitably reflected upon the completeness, or otherwise, of Thomason’s collection. Here, of course, further care is needed, given that awareness has been shown that this is a qualitative as well as a quantitative matter. There was certainly more to the reading in which he and his family engaged, and to his own personal library, than is reflected in the volumes that he amassed. Bibles, for example, were evidently not one of Thomason’s concerns as a collector, even though his will referred to his close reading of the scriptures, and to ‘my Bible which I daily used’, to which many ‘loose papers’ had been added. The will also referred to a separate collection – ‘my library called my late dear wife’s library’ – which may have been fairly substantial, and from tantalizing evidence about its contents it seems clear that this too was rather different in nature from the Tracts.<sup>18</sup> What this suggests – as Fortescue certainly appreciated – is that Thomason was aiming to ‘form an historical rather than a bibliographical library’. He was mostly not seeking to acquire multiple editions of specific texts, and it is vital to reflect on the types of material that drew his attention, and those in which he was somewhat less interested.<sup>19</sup> Most obviously, Thomason was fascinated by short, topical and fairly ephemeral material, rather than with larger and more scholarly works, or indeed Bibles. He was fascinated, in other words, by novelty, and by what was happening to the output of the press in extraordinary times, in terms of genres as well as in terms of the shape of discourse and debate. The collection thus contained ‘pieces of all sortes and all sides’, and Thomason recognized that pamphlets and newsbooks ‘merit a careful preservation’, not the least important aspects of which included the timing and the circumstances of their appearance. Thomason certainly understood that appearances could be deceptive, and that the true origins of specific items might deliberately be concealed. Here too, however, there are noteworthy patterns in terms of inclusion and omission, and certain strands of the topical and polemical ‘cheap print’ by which he was so struck are poorly represented, including Quaker tracts.<sup>20</sup> Here too, these essays – particularly those by Raymond and Marcus Nevitt, as well as Mendle’s piece on one extraordinary ‘toy’ that Thomason preserved – add considerably to our understanding, not least in terms of the need to avoid simplistic conclusions about his preference for topical political and religious material rather than literary texts, as well as in terms of the need to pay close attention to manuscript material within the collection.

Such issues regarding Thomason’s intentions, and about the scope of his collection, raise other questions about his ‘identity’, further areas where these essays make valuable contributions. Although it has not proved possible to add significantly to our understanding of his dealings as a publisher, or indeed his activity within the Stationers’ Company (not least as assistant warden (1651), junior warden (1657) and senior warden (1661)), it seems clear

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<sup>17</sup> Greenberg, ‘Dating Civil War Pamphlets’; Mendle, ‘Thomason Collection’; Greenberg, ‘Thomason Collection’. For an earlier, much less accurate assessment, see William Bedloe, ‘The King’s Pamphlets’, in *Anecdotes of Literature and Scarce Books*, 6 vols (London, 1807-12), vol. ii, pp. 248-56. See Thomas N. Corns, ‘Publication and Politics, 1640-1661: An SPSS-based Account of the Thomason Collection of Civil War Tracts’, *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, i:2 (1986), pp. 74-84.

<sup>18</sup> ‘The Will of George Thomason’, pp. 37-8.

<sup>19</sup> Fortescue, *Catalogue*, vol. i, pp. xxi-xxii; W. G. Mason, ‘The Annual Output of Wing-listed Titles, 1649-1684’, *The Library*, 5th series, xxix (1974), pp. 219-20.

<sup>20</sup> Mendle, ‘George Thomason’s Intentions’, pp. 171, 173.

that part of his fascination with the kinds of material that he collected reflected how different it was from the genres that he himself published, or indeed sold from his shop at the Rose and Crown in St Paul's Churchyard. As Mendle has argued, 'Thomason's genius was to work against his own professional grain'.<sup>21</sup> His business interests can be glimpsed, for example, in complaints about the 'prejudice' that he and others suffered from the illegal importation of foreign books, as well as from his involvement in supplying material for the university libraries in both Oxford and Cambridge, as discussed in the chapter by Keith Lindley and Jason Peacey. They are also evident in terms of the business that he did with the curators of the Norwich City Library in 1662, who agreed to exchange a donated copy of the Polyglot Bible (valued at £14) for other learned works, including Tostatus's biblical commentaries.<sup>22</sup> Such evidence reveals just how different his own stock was from the kind of material that makes up the 'Thomason Tracts', and the evidence marshalled here by Alan Argent, Jane Giscombe and Barry Taylor indicates the extent to which he was immersed in wider European print networks.

This attention to Thomason's activity as a bookseller – not least specific customers to whom he can be linked – also informs another key dimension of his 'identity', in terms of his political and religious affiliations, and his participation in the civil wars. Here too, these essays prove valuable, not least in terms of how Raymond and Nevitt relate Thomason's collecting to the claims that he himself made about his purposes and his 'royalism'.<sup>23</sup> Thomason referred, therefore, not just to the expense that was involved in his great endeavour, and to 'charges heavy and burdensome', but also to the fact that it was 'hazardous', and that it needed to be carried out 'privately'. He referred to the fact that many of the manuscripts in the collection involved texts on the king's side, 'which no man durst venture to publish without endangering his ruin'. He claimed that in order to prevent the 'discovery' of his collection by 'the army' and 'the usurper' Cromwell, he was occasionally forced to have them 'packed up in trunks' and sent to trusted friends in Surrey and Essex. Apparently, he even contemplated sending them to Holland at one point, 'no place being safe in England'. Eventually, he said, the material was more obviously hidden in plain sight: 'placed in a warehouse in form of tables round the rooms, covered over with canvas'. Indeed, Thomason not only referred to his having once been arrested during the Interregnum, and kept 'close prisoner at Whitehall for seven weeks', but also suggested that the collection was intended 'only for His Majesty's use'. His stated goal, therefore, had been to 'preserve them for the use of succeeding ages, which will scarce have faith to believe that such horrid and detestable villainies were ever committed in any Christian commonwealth since Christianity had a name'. It was in this context, of course, that Thomason referred to the occasion when Charles I borrowed one particular tract that he 'could no where obtain ... but from the collector of these'. Thomason thus described being visited in 1647 by two prominent royalists, William Legge and Arthur Trevor, to obtain 'a pamphlet which His Majesty had then occasion to make use of ... having heard that I did employ myself to take up all such things from the beginning of that parliament'. Thomason claimed to have obliged, even though he was reluctant to 'lose a limb of my collection', adding that the item then 'fell in the dirt' en route to the Isle of Wight, and that as a result it had 'the mark of honour upon it'. Thomason also added that the king, 'having seen it and perused it', not only returned the pamphlet, but also encouraged him to continue with his collection, expressing 'a good liking to the undertaking'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mendle, 'George Thomason's Intentions', p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> C. Wilkins-Jones (ed.), *Norwich City Library, 1608-1737*, Norfolk Record Society, 72 (2008), pp. 67-8.

<sup>23</sup> See also Mendle, 'George Thomason's Intentions', p. 178.

<sup>24</sup> TNA, SP 29/26, ff. 137-v; Fortescue, *Catalogue*, vol. i, pp. viii, xv-xvi. The tract in question related to peace talks in 1643.

As with Thomason’s claims about the scale and importance of the collection, such comments must be seen as part of a conscious process by which he positioned both himself and his collection after 1660, in ways that suited the times, his circumstances and his aspirations. They certainly need to be set in the context of other evidence about his activities during the 1640s and 1650s, and the essays by Lindley and Elliot Vernon constitute important contributions to our appreciation of Thomason’s biography, his relationships with prominent contemporaries, and his involvement in political and religious affairs, not least as a prominent member of London’s civic community. This is a story of godliness and active parliamentarianism, from the outbreak of the Irish rebellion onwards, some evidence relating to which has certainly been overlooked hitherto, not least because of the erratic spelling of his name. For example, a letter from John Aylwin in December 1644 – about the price of corn to be sent to Ireland – was addressed to ‘Mr Tomeson’, but the fact that it was addressed to the Rose in St Paul’s Churchyard indicates that this was our man.<sup>25</sup> It is also a story of Thomason’s involvement in Presbyterian agitation within the City of London in the later 1640s, as well as of his work with the parliamentarian Commissioners for Compounding, which even seems to indicate a willingness to work with the Rump regime following the king’s execution, at least until October 1649.<sup>26</sup> Thomason was thus a very particular kind of ‘royalist’, and indeed one whose troubles with the republican regime, whose involvement in the so-called ‘Love plot’, and whose attitudes towards the restored Stuart regime all require careful contextualization.

Finally, of course, this process of contextualizing Thomason’s claims about the significance of the collection involves reflecting on what the material reveals about the relationship between the ‘print revolution’ and the upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century. As Don McKenzie once pointed out, this is an area where great care is needed, in terms of how to reflect upon the ‘explosion’ of print that occurred in the early 1640s, and in terms of the risk that Thomason’s collection distorts our appreciation of the print trade.<sup>27</sup> Key here is the danger of concluding that the sharp increase in the number of items that Thomason acquired in the early 1640s indicated an increase in press output. The crucial point is that, given the constraints on the print trade, in terms of what could possibly have been produced, Thomason’s collection reveals a shift from more substantial works towards ‘ephemeral’ or ‘cheap print’, rather than an explosion of print per se. What he documents, therefore, is a ‘proliferation of titles’. McKenzie recognized, of course, that this is in itself vitally important, in terms of ‘a significant change in the nature of public discourse’, and it is to somewhat neglected things which the Thomason Tracts reveal about the transformation of contemporary political culture that these essays also draw attention.<sup>28</sup>

Here, therefore, three important strands emerge. First, Thomason’s extraordinary attentiveness to the transformation of cheap print makes it possible to probe the nature of the print trade in novel ways, something that Michael Braddick’s essay does by exploring the work of one particular printer and bookseller, John Hammond. This involves examining the ‘identity’ of a specific imprint, and analysing the vital but somewhat neglected relationship between commercial and ideological imperatives – between profit and politics – in an age marked not just by crisis but also by striking new possibilities and opportunities. Secondly, by revisiting Thomason’s fascination with novelty, and by linking this to his determination to annotate individual items with contextual information of various kinds, it becomes possible to highlight

<sup>25</sup> *CSPD 1644-5*, p. 201.

<sup>26</sup> TNA, SP 23/228, ff. 101, 185, 201, 234, 334; SP 46/108, ff. 78, 87, 91, 117, 133-4.

<sup>27</sup> D. F. McKenzie, ‘Printing and Publishing 1557-1700: Constraints on the London Book Trades’, in John Barnard, D. F. McKenzie and Maureen Bell (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. iv: 1557-1695 (Cambridge, 2002), p. 560.

<sup>28</sup> McKenzie, ‘Printing and Publishing’, p. 561.

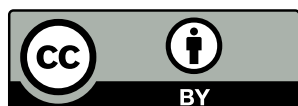


not just how contemporaries felt compelled to interrogate and comprehend developments in political culture, but also the importance of free – rather than just cheap – print, in terms of handbills and ‘tickets’, and items that could be posted or indeed scattered about the streets. Peacey’s article thus highlights the unique contribution that Thomason makes to our appreciation of the transformation of everyday politics during the English Revolution, not least in terms of the social depth of participatory practices. Thirdly, it is this possibility of using Thomason’s collection to deepen our understanding of political processes, and the dynamics of public politics, that also emerges from the essays by David Como and Ann Hughes. These pieces tie together strands that are evident across the various essays, capitalizing upon the distinctiveness of the material that Thomason acquired, upon his acute observations on and comments about the relationship between print and politics, and upon his own involvement in an increasingly polarized world. This generates new insights about censorship and press control, and the forensic analysis of print and politics that is facilitated by Thomason’s determination to document his own turbulent age serves to highlight innovative and dramatic uses of print, not least in relation to the kinds of mobilization with which he and others became involved.

As noted above, these essays very obviously build upon existing scholarship, and they certainly cannot claim to offer the last word on either Thomason or the Thomason Tracts. The sheer scale and richness of the material means that there remains much to learn, in terms of the light that can be shed upon developments within the print trade and within contemporary political culture. Indeed, since Thomason himself recognized the possibility that developments in print culture might have a lasting impact – and that it was vital to document ‘actions that may be presidents to posteritie’ – what unites these essays is the importance of ongoing engagement with the material that he amassed, both in terms of the events of the 1640s and 1650s, and in terms of their legacy for subsequent generations.<sup>29</sup> The Thomason Tracts are a priceless gift, but they certainly need to be handled carefully and thoughtfully. This is a matter for librarians, whose decisions affect how they are preserved and made available, as well as for the various kinds of scholar by whom they are utilized. Given the impact that this huge body of material has had in shaping our understanding of the mid-seventeenth century, and its importance for future generations, it is vital to understand its original purposes, its nature, scale and scope, and its subsequent history, all of which have a bearing on its uses, usability and utility. It is also essential to consider the possibility that the Tracts might distort as well as enhance our understanding. George Thomason was very obviously and purposefully collecting revolution, and as scholars our responsibility is to interrogate the ‘collecting’ – and to properly appreciate the collection – if we are to fully comprehend the English Revolution.

#### Author note

Jason Peacey is Professor of Early Modern British History at UCL. He has published widely on the English Revolution, including edited collections such as *The Regicides and the Execution of Charles I* (2001), and books such as *Politicians and Pamphleteers. Propaganda in the Civil Wars and Interregnum* (2004), and *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (2013). His most recent book is *The Madman and the Churchrobber. Law and Conflict in Early Modern England* (2022). He is also one of the editors of *The Letters, Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (2022).



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<sup>29</sup> Mendle, ‘George Thomason’s Intentions’, p. 172.