

‘Honest George’: George Thomason and London during the Civil War and Revolution

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Writing from Hamburg in September 1647, the great parliamentary pamphleteer and propagandist, Henry Parker, addressed a letter to ‘Honest George’ Thomason. He did so to discuss one of the thousands of pamphlets which poured from the presses and which Thomason collected with such alacrity during the 1640s and 1650s, and in order to consider the nature of Presbyterianism and Independency, recent tumultuous events involving the army, and the politics of the City of London. That Parker did so provides a hint that Thomason was more than merely an obsessive collector and bookman, and other evidence can also be uncovered which suggests that he was an incredibly well-connected and publicly active member of London’s community of stationers. His personal and professional circle included the indefatigable reformer and projector, Samuel Hartlib, as well as the art expert, architect and diplomat, Sir Balthazar Gerbier, not to mention one of the century’s most eminent clergymen, Edward Reynolds, sometime preacher at Lincoln’s Inn, vice-chancellor of Oxford University, and Bishop of Norwich. The strength of this last connection is evident from the fact that, in 1659, Reynolds preached at the funeral of Thomason’s daughter, Katherine. The friends mentioned in Thomason’s will included the great chronicler of the civil wars, John Rushworth, another Lincoln’s Inn man, and Thomas Barlow, sometime provost of Queen’s College, Oxford, and Bishop of Chichester, to whom the ‘Thomason Tracts’ would eventually be entrusted.¹ Yet another close friend was the great poet and polemicist, John Milton, whose pamphlets were gifted to Thomason during the 1640s, and who wrote a sonnet in memory of his wife, Katherine Thomason. Such contacts and connections highlight the importance not just of understanding Thomason’s collection of pamphlets and newsbooks, but also of contextualizing their collector, and what follows represents an introduction to Thomason’s life and times up to the establishment of the republic in 1649, and an analysis of the political and religious milieu of civil war London, to which he contributed fairly significantly. As with his personal friendships and professional networks, this account of Thomason’s public life can be told by building upon ground-breaking scholarship into the man and his city in this most dramatic of periods, and by utilizing civic, corporate and parliamentary records, as well as the Thomason Tracts themselves. The latter are rich in colour and detail about both his opinions and his activities as a prominent and sometimes controversial parliamentarian citizen.²

¹ This chapter is an extended and footnoted version of a conference paper by Keith Lindley, which he was unfortunately unable to develop thereafter. ‘The Will of George Thomason’, *The Library*, 2nd series, x (1909), p. 40; Edward Reynolds, *Mary Magdalens Love to Christ* (London, 1659). For Gerbier, see *To all Fathers of Noble Families* ([London, 18 July 1649], E.783[2]); Jason Peacey, ‘Print, Publicity, and Popularity: The Projecting of Sir Balthazar Gerbier, 1642-1662’, *Journal of British Studies*, li (2012), pp. 284-307.

² 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; James Farnell, ‘The Politics of the City of London (1640-1646)’ (MA dissertation, University of Chicago, 1953); Keith Lindley, *Popular Politics and Religion in Civil War London* (Aldershot, 1997).

I

George Thomason was born around 1602 in Sudlow, Cheshire, the son of George Thomason, husbandman, and like many an ambitious young man before him he sought a future in one of the leading London companies. He was apprenticed on 29 September 1617 to Henry Fetherston (d. 1647) of the Stationers' Company, a bookseller dwelling at The Rose in St Paul's Churchyard, who would later serve as warden of the company in the late 1630s, and then as its master in 1641. Thomason became free of the company on 5 June 1626, and shortly thereafter Fetherston left the management of his business to Thomason, who in turn entered into partnership with Octavian Pulleyn at The Rose. Their names appeared as publishers in the Stationers' register from November 1627, and in the years that followed Thomason's bookselling business certainly seems to have flourished, not least in terms of his connections to the wider continental world of learned books.³ By the early 1630s he and Pulleyn were regularly involved in selling books to the Bodleian library, the accounts for which reveal payments to them of almost £400 between 1633 and 1650, at rates of between £16 and £50 per annum, at least during the 1630s.⁴ Later, in the 1640s, Thomason sold books to the parliamentary authorities at Westminster (specifically the Commissioners for Compounding), and in 1648 Parliament at least promised to pay him £500 for a substantial collection of books in Eastern languages, which he had acquired from Italy and which were destined for Cambridge University Library.⁵ That Thomason had become an established figure within London's book community is clear from the fact that in 1638 he took on his own apprentice, James Allestree, and from the petition that he (along with Richard Whitaker and Humphrey Robinson) submitted to the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, in April 1640. They did so to complain about the interloping activities of a Dutchman called Adrian Vlacke, whom they accused of importing foreign books into England, 'to the great prejudice and discrimination of the petitioners'.⁶ His growing status was also reflected in appointments to various Stationers' Company committees in the early 1640s, as well as to a delegation which was to join the Lord Mayor when he greeted Charles I upon his return from Scotland in December 1641.⁷

What also emerges fairly clearly from Thomason's life before the civil wars was that he was a godly man, and part of a godly family. By 1631 he had married Fetherston's niece and ward, Katherine Hutton, with whom he enjoyed a very close relationship, as his will was to reveal. Theirs was apparently a godly household, in which Thomason daily read his bible along with the loose papers contained within it while, before her death in late 1646, Katherine's fairly substantial library contained one of the three-volume versions of Foxe's 'book of martyrs', which could be consulted to stiffen their godly resolutions. Thomason was later to make provision in his will for two sets of religious exercises: one to pay for two able and orthodox divines to provide yearly sermons at St Paul's upon Good Friday, and the other to commemorate the great deliverance from the attempted Spanish invasion in 1588.⁸ It was probably during these years that Thomason and his family became friends

³ ODNB; D. F. McKenzie, *Stationers' Company Apprentices, 1605-1640* (Charlottesville, VA, 1961), p. 69; Edward Arber (ed.), *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554-1640*, 5 vols (Gloucester, MA, 1967), iv, 31, 188, 354, 418-19, 451, 461.

⁴ Oxford University Archives, NEP/Supra/16, ff. 75v, 79v, 82, 84v, 87v, 90, 93, 96, 98v, 101, 113, 122v.

⁵ TNA, SP 46/106, ff. 310-12; *The Journals of the House of Commons [CJ]*, v, 512, 518, 617; *The Journals of the House of Lords [LJ]*, x, 160, 162, 342.

⁶ McKenzie, *Apprentices*, p. 126; *CSPD 1640*, p. 40; TNA, SP 16/450, f. 208.

⁷ Spencer, 'Professional', pp. 105-6.

⁸ 'The Will of George Thomason', p. 37. Katherine was buried on 12 December 1646, at St Dunstan's in the West: John S. Smart, *The Sonnets of Milton* (Oxford, 1966), p. 145.

with people like William Prynne, Edmund Calamy, and Edward Reynolds.⁹ What is certain is that, by 1637, Thomason was meddling in politically dangerous literature, and his name emerged in the course of an investigation launched by the Attorney General (Sir John Bankes) and Solicitor General (Sir Edward Littleton) into the illicit copying and circulation of a tract or 'remonstrance' concerning Ship Money. Concerned that scribal copies of this text were 'abroad in the world', the authorities questioned the bookseller, Robert Bostock, who confessed to having obtained a copy of the tract from Anthony Withers (a prominent puritan from Covent Garden), and to having made copies of it (including one for the future parliamentarian MP, Thomas Hatcher), and who also indicated that he had lent a copy to Thomason. Thomason himself made at least one copy, which the two men delivered to John Williams, the former Lord Keeper and suspended Bishop of Lincoln, who had recently been imprisoned in the Tower of London.¹⁰

As with so many godly puritans of the time, the political events of the 1640s brought Thomason to much greater prominence within London, and also created professional and personal tensions. It seems likely that Thomason's relationship with Fetherston became strained during the constitutional revolution within London's corporation in 1641-2, which revolved around the powers of City grandees and ordinary citizens, and of the aldermen and Common Council, and which led to contested elections, and to notable tension over the issue of the militia and of the aldermen's power to veto council decisions. Here was clear evidence that London's politics connected easily and dramatically with national affairs, and as such Londoners were encouraged to take sides. Whereas Thomason seems to have supported reform, Fetherston probably backed the forces of conservatism, as expressed in the petition presented to Parliament in February 1642, and attributed to the City recorder, Sir George Benyon.¹¹ It is also possible that political tensions played a part in the dissolution of Thomason's partnership with Octavian Pulleyn, probably in 1643.¹²

The descent into civil war saw Thomason emerge as an early active opponent of the Irish rising. A personal contact in Kells, a sometime Lincoln's Inn lawyer called Jerome Alexander, wrote him a letter in early November 1641, in order to describe 'the traitorous conspiracy of the rebellious papists', and as such he provided one of the earliest accounts of the intended revolt in Kells and Dublin, and of what became known as the Irish Rebellion. Alexander wrote of the 'murmurings' and fears which prompted him and his family to flee for their lives to Chester, leaving the family estate to be plundered of livestock and property worth £2000. According to Alexander's letter, the Dublin plot involved a plan to seize Dublin Castle, along with the rest of the king's forts in Ireland, and the aim was to cut all Protestant throats in the kingdom. In addition, Christ Church was to have been blown up, and Alexander claimed that several barrels of gunpowder had been found under the church in readiness. Although as yet there were no reports of atrocities, Alexander's news was alarming enough, and his letter constituted one of the very first reports of the Irish troubles, and it seems likely that Thomason recognized its importance and was willing to capitalize on its message. He surely bore at least some responsibility for the letter's publication in a short pamphlet, and as such he helped to instigate the first dramatic escalation in the print wars of the 1640s, by setting something of an example for the many cheap pamphlets which soon began to emerge in order to provide English readers with lurid accounts of the rebellion, and of the alleged massacres

⁹ 'The Will of George Thomason', pp. 34-43.

¹⁰ LPL, MS. 942, no. 18. For Anthony Withers in this context, see LPL, MS. 1030, f. 133.

¹¹ Lindley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 180-4, 188, 201-6; Valerie Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution* (London, 1961), pp. 107-59.

¹² H. R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Booksellers and Printers... 1641 to 1667* (London, 1907), p. 149.

of Irish Protestants.¹³

It was news of the Irish Rebellion which prompted plans for a military campaign in Ireland, and Thomason's Protestant zeal and personal contacts ensured that he quickly became involved in arrangements for its funding. Indeed, he was one of the original investors in what became known as the 'Irish adventurers' scheme in March 1642, wherein Englishmen were invited to fund a military campaign to subdue the rebellion, in return for the promise of land and property that would be confiscated from the rebels. London took the lead in this campaign, despite the insecurity of the investment, and whereas the average London investor at this stage contributed £200, Thomason's contribution was £700, while his former master, Henry Fetherston, subscribed a generous £1200.¹⁴ Moreover, as a zealous anti-papist, as well as being mindful of his investment, Thomason thereafter maintained an active and continuing interest in Irish affairs. When a select committee of London adventurers for Ireland was appointed on 3 September 1642, Thomason was one of twenty activists who were chosen.¹⁵ In February 1643 he was also named among those who continued to serve on the Irish adventurers' committee in London – by then known as the Grocers' Hall Committee – and in November the House of Commons ordered that the committee should be merged with the Commons adventurers' committee, to sit 'constantly' in the Exchequer Chamber at Westminster. Thomason remained active on this committee until at least September 1644.¹⁶ By June 1644 Thomason was evidently a key figure with Samuel Avery, a staunch Presbyterian, in providing arms, ammunition and other military resources for the re-conquest of Ireland, under the scrutiny of the Committee of Both Kingdoms.¹⁷ Both men eventually drew a substantial number of acres under the adventurers scheme.¹⁸

Thomason's Irish interests and investments may be viewed as a relatively unfamiliar story, but the same could not be said of his contribution to Parliament's war effort. In December 1642, he was named as one of three collectors in his parish of St Faith's who were entrusted by the Committee for the Advance of Money with the 'promotion and furtherance of the subscriptions for arms and pay for soldiers', in collaboration with local churchwardens and constables. His two fellow collectors were the ward deputy of Castle Baynard, William Taylor, and Luke Fawne.¹⁹ Taylor lived at the Hen and Chickens on Paternoster Row, and was a veteran supporter of 'root and branch' church reform, having signed up to the second City petition in December 1641. He was also accused at the time of warning most of the parish to his house, where they were exhorted to set their hands to the petition, and afterwards he delivered the petition to another ardent supporter of root and branch, so that it could circulate for signatures. Not only did Taylor seek to collect funds as a promoter of the weekly pay, but he also acted as an assessor and collector of other parliamentary subscriptions, and played a wider role as a member of the Common Council committee for the purge of scandalous ministers.²⁰ Like Thomason, Fawne was a stationer, who later supported London

¹³ *A Letter Concerning the Traiterous Conspiracy* (London, 1641, E.175[13]), pp. 1-4. This is attributed by Thomason merely to Mr Alexander, but other evidence indicates that this is Jerome Alexander: *A Breviate of a Sentence* (London, 1644, E.1066[2]), esp. p. 84.

¹⁴ Karl S. Bottingheimer, *English Money and Irish Land: The 'Adventurers' in the Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland* (Oxford, 1971), Appendix, p. 192; K. Lindley, 'Irish Adventurers and Godly Militants in the 1640s', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxix:113 (1994), pp. 1-12.

¹⁵ BL, Add. MS. 4771, f. 3; Add. MS. 4782, f. 81.

¹⁶ *CJ*, ii, 966; *CJ*, iii, 321-2. For Thomason's work with this committee, see Alexander, *Breviate*, pp. 86, 97-8, 103, 106-7.

¹⁷ Lindley, 'Irish Adventurers', pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ Bottingheimer, *English Money*, Appendix, p. 211.

¹⁹ 'An order of the Committee for the Advance of Money' (5 December 1642, 669.f.5[112]).

²⁰ Lindley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 138-9, 153-4, 222, 266-7.

Presbyterianism, as well as a collector of levies. Fawne was also one of the London militia officers who were present at the funeral of the parliamentarian Lord General (the earl of Essex) in October 1646.²¹

II

Thus far, Thomason's activity betrays evidence of puritanism and anti-popery, and of support for the parliamentarian war effort. From the early weeks of the civil war, however, Thomason's politics need to be understood in terms of the factionalism that divided those who lined up against the king, both in London and the country at large. In December 1642 Thomason was drawn into a dispute over an organized London peace campaign, which drew support from some of London's most substantial citizens, despite claims that peace demonstrators were in fact 'London cavaliers' posing as peace petitioners. Parliament's decision only to accept City petitions that had been endorsed by the Common Council brought large numbers of peace petitioners to the Guildhall on 12 December, and serious violence ensued between conflicting parties. Thomason made his own position clear in brief manuscript denunciations of the London petition as 'the frivolous petition', and of those responsible for the tumultuous behaviour of the citizens at Guildhall, 'at delivery of their frivolous petition'.²²

Thomason's political activities took a number of forms, and were also manifest at a more parochial level. From June 1645, for example, he was one of the ringleaders of a small group within the Stationers' Company (including his former master, Fetherston) who were in favour of changes to how the company's master, wardens and assistants were elected. The innovators set out to persuade the commonalty of the company that they possessed the sole right to elect or remove the company's governors. This involved a short pamphlet, addressed 'To all Printers, Booke-sellers, Booke-binders, Free-men of the Company of Stationers', which Thomason recorded as having been 'delivered', or handed out around London, as well as 500 printed 'tickets' calling all freemen to a 'common hall' meeting on 23 June.²³ This campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, but it was almost certainly politically inspired – not least because of the involvement of Presbyterian stationers like John Bellamy, Luke Fawne, Thomas Underhill and Michael Sparkes. Indeed, it mirrored another campaign by Bellamy, over the power of the commonalty of London in relation to the mayor and aldermen. Thomason was clearly aware of this campaign, because Bellamy gave him a copy of his pamphlet, *A Plea for the Commonalty of London*, and in both cases the battle was less about political principles than about parliamentarian factionalism. Thomason and Bellamy were both pragmatic 'democrats', and Bellamy would certainly change his views in later years, when Presbyterians were in the ascendancy.²⁴

Thomason's association with Bellamy, indeed, signals broader agreement between the two men, and from the summer of 1645 it makes sense to describe both men as part of a group within London's citizenry whose allegiance was to a 'Presbyterian' political and religious

²¹ Plomer, *Dictionary*, p. 73; 'An order of the Committee for the Advance of Money'; Luke Fawne et al., *A Beacon set on Fire* (London, 1652, E.675[14]); *The True Manner and Forme of the Proceeding to the Funerall of the Right Honourable Robert Earle of Essex* (London, 1646, E.360[1]), p. 11.

²² *The Londoners Petition* (London, 1642, 669.f.6[95]); *An Exact and True Relation of that Tumultuous Behaviour* (London, 1642, E.130[15]); Lindley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 337-45.

²³ *To all Printers* ([London, 21 June 1645], E.288[44]), esp. sigs A2v, A4; Spencer, 'Professional', p. 106; Cyprian Blagden, 'The Stationers' Company in the Civil War Period', *The Library*, 5th series, xiii (1958), pp. 8-13; Arber, *Transcript*, i, 589-95.

²⁴ John Bellamy, *A Plea for the Commonalty of London* (London, [27 March] 1645, E.1174[3]).

agenda, and who competed with 'Independents', both over religious policy, church reform and toleration, and over the terms on which a peaceful settlement of the war could and should be reached. Thomason was to be found playing his part in these new political positions, not least because of his religious views. From the early 1640s 'separatists' and lay preachers had begun to arrive on the scene, and the fact that they were relatively unmolested filled Thomason with disgust. He registered his disapproval by waging a campaign against men like Henry Walker, a sometime preacher and controversial author of numerous cheap pamphlets. Walker rose to prominence for having provocatively thrown a work called *To your Tents o Israel* into the king's coach in January 1642, and was frequently punished for his intemperate and seditious pamphlets, and he subsequently became a leading and much loathed journalist.²⁵ Although Thomason recognized that Walker had been 'admitted into [holy] orders by Laud', he insisted on annotating Walker's pamphlets to erase any references to him as a 'cleric' or 'minister' as his self-declared profession, substituting 'ironmonger' on any of the pamphlets that came into his possession.²⁶ Walker was no 'mechanic preacher', despite the label attached to him, but he and other religious dissidents were to fall victim to Thomason's satirical pen. In April 1646, for example, he took pleasure in describing John Grant as a comfit-maker in Bucklersbury.²⁷ Thomason also enjoyed the acquaintance in the mid-1640s of one of the leading Scottish covenanters, David Buchanan, the author of the controversial and lengthy work, *Truth its Manifest* (1645), which was condemned to be burnt by the common hangman.²⁸ During the course of the parliamentary investigation into Buchanan's self-funded tract, it was suggested that, upon a financial disagreement between the author and his bookseller, Robert Bostock, the whole impression was purchased by Thomason. Whether or not this story covered up collusion between Bostock and Thomason, it is clear that Thomason was prepared to go out on something of a limb for a controversial author towards whom he was personally sympathetic.²⁹

Thomason's involvement with London Presbyterians also extended beyond the world of publishing and personal commentary and into political activism, not least in relation to repeated petitioning campaigns.³⁰ Presbyterian citizens first sprang into action in September 1645, when they circulated around all parishes copies of a petition that expressed how they were 'perplexed and amazed that the great business of church government and discipline ... should to this very day remain unestablished by your civil sanction'. This was a sophisticated campaign of mobilization, which was intended to produce a monster petition with thousands of signatures. The text was printed, and copies were circulated with a blank space into which could be inserted the name of a particular parish, and all subscribers of the Solemn League and Covenant were invited to sign it, and to note down their social status when doing so, to emphasize their respectability. Importantly, Thomason was amongst the petition's local canvassers, and copies of this printed sheet were 'sent to Mr George Thomason to get hands to it about 20 September'.³¹ However, the petition was condemned by the House of Commons

²⁵ Lindley, *Popular Politics*, p. 148; Ernest Sirluck, "'To Your Tents, O Israel": A Lost Pamphlet', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, xix (1955-6), pp. 301-5.

²⁶ Henry Walker, *A Gad of Steele* (London, 1641, E.204[11]); *Perfect Occurrences*, 15 (15-22 June 1644, E.256[39]); Henry Walker, *A Sermon* ([London], 1649, E.565[18]). Walker was indeed an ironmonger: *ODNB*.

²⁷ John Grant, *A Defence of Christian Liberty* (London, 1646, E.330[22]).

²⁸ David Buchanan, *Truth its Manifest* (London, [12 November] 1645, E.1179[5]); *CJ*, iv, 507.

²⁹ *CSPD 1645-7*, p. 330.

³⁰ For these campaigns, see Lindley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 356-79; Michael Mahoney, 'Presbyterianism in the City of London, 1645-1647', *Historical Journal*, xxii (1979), pp. 93-114.

³¹ *To the Right Honourable the Lords and Commons ... the Humble Petition of []* ([London, 1645], 669.f.10[37]).

as 'scandalous to the proceedings of the House, and untrue', and a Common Council was convened to hear the House's objections.³² Presbyterian petitioning remained controversial in the months that followed, but Thomason remained actively involved, not least in the next major stage in the development of City politics: the City remonstrance of 26 May 1646, which was drawn up by London's governing body for presentation to both Houses. The remonstrance combined religious with political demands and enlisted support from both religious Presbyterians and those who simply craved a return to peace and normality. Among its grievances were the 'private and separate congregations daily erected in divers parts of the city', which were 'commonly frequented' by 'swarms of sectaries', and its principal demands included an exclusive Presbyterian church settlement, a swift peace agreement with the king, continuing close relations with Scotland, the reconquest of Ireland, some relief from financial burdens, and the re-establishment of the City's control over its militia. Eight thousand respectable citizens subsequently signed a petition endorsing the remonstrance, amongst whom was to be found George Thomason in clearly active mode.³³

Thomason also sheds valuable light upon the political campaigning within London by the Independents, and upon his reaction to it.³⁴ The City remonstrance provoked protests from the Independent minority on the Common Council as it was being debated there. On 22 May, as councillors met to endorse the text of the remonstrance that was to be presented to Parliament, a petition was presented to it by a group of London citizens. These citizens thanked God and the City for bringing the war to an end, and asked councillors to 'still continue forward in all expressions, upon all occasions, to acknowledge God's blessing upon us by the Parliament'. They also stressed that, 'being informed of a remonstrance or petition about to be presented' to Parliament, 'you would therein renew the testimony of your affections to them, and encourage them now in the end of their work, and that nothing may be presented by you which may tend to their disturbance, or declare this city short in thankfulness or submission to them'. This subsequently appeared in print as *A Petition of Citizens of London*, and Thomason signalled his dissent by adding 'Independent' to the title, and he also mocked those involved by questioning the level of their support. Showing a keen eye for detail, therefore, Thomason challenged the claim that this petition had been 'subscribed by many citizens' by noting that 'this many was but 93'.³⁵ Days later, Thomason added acerbic comments to the printed edition of another 'Independent petition', the *Humble Acknowledgement* that was presented to the Commons on 2 June, and that expressed support for Parliament's declaration in favour of limited toleration (17 April 1646). Thomason suggested that it had been subscribed by 'Nicholas Nemo and Sallomon Simple', probable references to Nicholas Tew (a sectarian bookseller) and Solomon Smith (another London radical). He echoed the claims made by other Presbyterians that the petition had been promoted with 'false and indirect ways and means', and amongst humble citizens of limited status.³⁶

Once again, however, Thomason's involvement in Presbyterian agitation extended beyond mere commentary, and he was actively involved in a petition of citizens and freemen that was 'composed and finished' on 5 June 1646, and addressed to the lord mayor and Common

³² Lindley, *Popular Politics*, p. 357; *CJ*, iv, 280.

³³ *To the Honourable the House of Commons... the Humble Remonstrance and Petition of the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Commons of the City of London* (London, [26 May] 1646, E.338[7]).

³⁴ Lindley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 379-92.

³⁵ *A Petition of Citizens* (London, 1646, 669.f.10[57]); Lindley, *Popular Politics*, p. 383.

³⁶ *The Humble Acknowledgement* (London, [3 June] 1646, E.339[12]); Lindley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 385-6. For Tew, see David Como, *Radical Parliamentarians and the English Civil War* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 280, 283, 286-91, 300-2, 308, 439; Plomer, *Dictionary*, p. 175. For Smith, see Keith Lindley, 'Whitechapel Independents and the English Revolution', *Historical Journal*, xli (1998), pp. 288, 290.

Council. The petitioners gave 'thankful acknowledgement' of the aldermen's efforts 'for promoting the cause of God', and sought to strengthen their resolve in 'so glorious a work', not least by expressing support for the 26 May remonstrance. Thomason's involvement was clear from his comment about 'having a hand in it, both in composing it and promoting it', and the latter involved making printed broadside copies for circulation and subscription, with enough space for signatures to be added to the printed text. This ensured that the petition was signed by 'many thousands' in London, 'all of them citizens of the best rank and quality', and presented on 23 June.³⁷

III

In the late 1640s, Thomason was elected for two terms as common councillor for the ward of Farringdon Within. Although he is not known to have been named to any of its committees, and was far from being a leading figure, his emergence as a civic grandee reflected the strength of his ties to London's Presbyterian community, and represented their resurgent fortunes.³⁸ As such, Thomason played a part in the tumultuous events in the capital in the summer of 1647, when London's Presbyterians played a crucial role in events of national importance. During his first term, for example, Thomason was clearly identified as an influential Presbyterian, and on 24 June 1647 he was approached as a 'much respected friend' with the earnest request that an anonymous political narrative intended for Common Council should be submitted to that body with his own hands. The narrative itself was clearly pro-Presbyterian in its political leanings, and also wide-ranging. Among other matters it addressed the vexed questions of liberty of conscience, proceedings against the 'eleven members' (the Presbyterian MPs who had been impeached by the army), and the exposure of the City to possible plunder, as well as the kingdom's debts due to the army and the Scots, complaints against committees, and the bringing in of the king on safe and honourable conditions. It discussed the possibility of the Scots coming in to England again with an army, the need to insist that anyone accused by the army should be tried in a parliamentary way, and the vital need to reduce Ireland to obedience. Furthermore, readers were assured that once the contents of the narration were made known in Common Council (to whom it was addressed), it would 'make you think your pains not ill-employed, for there is nothing in it but what each true English-man wisheth and desireth'.³⁹

Thomason's position during these tense months was also evident from a rare piece of personal correspondence, from his old friend Henry Parker. Parker had left London in 1646 in order to serve as secretary to the Merchant Adventurers in Hamburg (a post that perhaps had quasi-diplomatic duties), and in August 1647 Thomason evidently wrote to him in the hope of persuading him to abandon his allegiance to the political and religious Independents, with whom he was intimately associated. Thomason did so by sending Parker a copy of a pamphlet by Nathaniel Ward, entitled *A Religious Retreat*, which responded to recent events in London – specifically the army's entry into the capital in response to Presbyterian agitation and the 'forcing of the Houses' on 26 July – and which pleaded with the military to 'leave us a free Parliament'. Ward challenged those who believed that the army was invincible or saintly, and expressed distrust at what he perceived to be the sinister intentions of the troops. He

³⁷ *To the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor* ([London, 1646, 669.f.10[58]]; *The True Copy of a Petition Delivered* (London, 1646, 669.f.10[63]); Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 135.

³⁸ James Farnell, 'The Politics of the City of London (1649-1657)' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1963), pp. 100, 366. It was at this time that Thomason also seems to have served as a commissioner for compounding with delinquents: TNA, SP 46/108, ff. 78, 87.

³⁹ *A Narrative* (London, [6 July] 1647, E.396[26]).

suggested that their demands were 'too imperative', and he bemoaned the way in which they had become the focal point for political attention, and indeed for petitioners, 'as if the sense of the army were the supreme law of the land'. The danger, as Ward saw it, was that the army would 'take away the liberty of the parliament', thereby increasing the chance of renewed fighting.⁴⁰ Unlike some others, Parker refrained from issuing a public attack upon Ward, but he did write to Thomason about the book on 24 September 1647, saying that while Ward gave the army 'a fair testimony in some things', many passages seemed intent to 'bespatter' the army 'with dirt', and rendered them 'as black as any villains can be rendered'. Parker was unconvinced that 'the army was so guilty as their professional enemies proclaim', and he accused many Presbyterians of being ignorant and factious. He concluded that 'I cannot think every man an Independent that is now so infamed, nor judge all Independents so pernicious as some do'.⁴¹

Thomason continued to sit as a member of Common Council into 1648 – he received a printed summons to attend one of its meetings on Saturday 9 April – and he can be assumed to have played an assiduous part in organizing the city's defences and security in the tense weeks before the outbreak of the second civil war, when London once again became a focal point for protests and mass petitions. On 20 May, therefore, he was one of the councillors who received an order from the London militia committee, which gave instructions 'to enquire what arms are in your ward which belong to auxiliaries, and to take care that good and sufficient guard be set upon them'. This was because information had been received 'that there is a purpose of some evil disposed persons speedily to seize the said arms, and use them upon a mischievous design'.⁴² And on 5 August it was as a common councillor that he received a personalized warrant from the London militia committee to do his 'utmost endeavour' to prepare the trained bands and auxiliaries, and to organize the gathering of horses, arms and money for the defence of the city, 'in these times of imminent danger'.⁴³ Indeed, at a time of increasing tension between the City of London and the army, Thomason also claimed to have been present when evidence was given concerning an alleged threat to the City's safety. The report in question concerned John Everard, an exciseman, who claimed to have been in Windsor on 20 April 1648, and to have overheard a discussion in the next chamber between two or more army officers, including someone whom he assumed to be Quartermaster General Edward Gravenour (or Grosvenor) and Colonel Isaac Ewer. According to Everard, after 'some merrie discourse they began to be serious, and propounded what they thought fit to be done in reference to the present exigencies of the kingdom'. They were confident that the Scots were about to invade, and feared that Londoners would rally to their aid, and that as a result it was necessary to 'disarme the citie both friend and foe'. They suggested that they would 'intimate that those who were the friends of the army should come forth into the fields and there they should be armed again, and that they should have the power of the citie of London put into their hands, to keep the rest of the citizens in awe, and that they should be maintained at the charge of the citie so long as it shall be thought fit to keep them up, and because money is the sinews of war, having which they doubted not but to procure men enough.'

They even uttered threats that the City would be 'plundered' if it did not comply with the army, and intimated that their plan had met with the approval of the army grandee (and Oliver Cromwell's son-in-law), Henry Ireton. Thomason claimed to have been present at Everard's

⁴⁰ Nathaniel Ward, *A Religious Retreat* (London, [27 Aug.] 1647, E.404[34]), pp. 4, 8-13, 19.

⁴¹ *Henry Parker's answer to the retreat of the armie* (24 September 1647, E.408[6]); Spencer, 'Politics', pp. 12-13.

⁴² *Sir, you are Desired* ([London, 8 Apr. 1648], E.435[30*]); *The Committee of the Militia* ([London], 2 May 1648, 669.f.12[29]).

⁴³ *By Vertue of Severall Ordinances* ([London], 5 Aug. 1648, 669.f.12[101]).

examination on 23 April, after Sunday sermon, and his papers contain a transcript of Everard's deposition, and as such it is possible that he participated in the committee that the Common Council subsequently appointed to prepare a petition to Parliament to investigate the claim. This petition – 'the humble petition of the lord mayor, aldermen and commons, in the common council assembled' – was presented to the Commons on 27 April, and evidently called for the bolstering of security in the City, under the control of the Presbyterian commander, Philip Skippon, and a committee was duly appointed to consider Everard's testimony.⁴⁴

Moreover, as the summer of 1648 witnessed renewed political and military tensions, and ultimately renewed fighting and open civil war, Thomason made more frequent interjections and annotations on the pamphlets he collected, with comments that reflected his personal religious and political convictions. In May 1648, for example, he reflected upon a petition to Parliament from 'divers citizens of the City of London'. This bemoaned the years of spilled blood and the exhausting of the nation's treasure, and expressed concerns about 'fresh dangers' and renewed fears, and about the activities of discontented people who were 'ready impatiently to plunge themselves and the whole kingdom into inevitable misery', not least through 'irregular proceedings' and 'mutinous and tumultuous risings', as well as through suggestions that Parliament 'intend to dethrone his majesty' and 'disinherit his posterity'. The petitioners' response was to encourage MPs to settle the government 'according to the ancient constitution of it, by King, Lords and Commons'; to settle the militia and disband the army 'in such a convenient time as the safety of the kingdom may require: in one word, to advance all the contents of our Solemn League and Covenant'. According to Thomason, this was presented on 29 May, and 'the Presbyterian and Independent did compose and agree in this petition together', and this perhaps attests to his awareness of renewed unity amid a renewed threat from the king and his Scottish allies, as well as from army radicals and Levellers.⁴⁵ On 21 June it was the turn of many well-affected mariners, commanders of ships, and members of Trinity House, to address their resolution to the Commissioners of the Navy, praying for a personal treaty between the king and Parliament, and expressing their determination that if any of the revolted ships should attempt to impede the king's personal treaty with his two Houses they would bring them to condign punishment. Thomason provided a transcript of their resolution to make such demands in a petition to Parliament, adding that ninety were in favour of it and twelve were against it.⁴⁶

The next two petitions to attract major interest from him were of a radical bent: the so-called 'cross petition' of July 1648, and that of radical citizens in the following August. The 'cross petition' was submitted to Parliament on 5 July by 'divers well-affected magistrates, ministers, citizens and other inhabitants of the City of London and parts adjacent'. These petitioners were concerned about the threat to 'religious and civil liberties' from the revival of an 'evil spirit', and although they professed to seek the 'happy reconcilment of all differences between the king and Parliament', they were nevertheless concerned that those who were involved in petitioning for a personal treaty with the king had attempted 'to make use of the tumults, commotions [and] revolts of castles and ships', in order to provoke 'a new war'. As such, they sought a resolution not to 'recede from those first and just principles' upon which the war had been based, and that 'neither His Majesty nor any other may have occasion or opportunity of renewing the old, or raising a new, war'. Thomason made his contrary views known from the start, by substituting 'ill-affected' for 'well-affected' petitioners in the title of the printed edition, and he also revealed that the petition

⁴⁴ *Having some occasion* (669.f.12[10]); *CJ*, v, 546.

⁴⁵ *The Humble Petition of Divers Citizens* ([London, 29 May 1648], 669.f.12[38]).

⁴⁶ *Marriners & seamen of Trinitie House theire resolution* (669.f.12[51]); *The Humble Tender and Declaration of Many Well-affected Mariners and Seamen* ([London, 23 June 1648], 669.f.12[53]).

was 'made by Mr Nye for the Independents in opposition to what the Common Council and commanders had offered the Parliament for the security of the kingdom during the treaty, to destroy the treaty'.⁴⁷ The second radical petition was that which was presented to Parliament by 'divers well-affected citizens' on 15 August, in response to 'the many treacherous plots and contrivances working by the common enemy', and the use of open warfare to achieve 'wicked ends', such as 'the destruction of this parliament' and the 'ruin of our religion, laws and liberties'. The petitioners drew attention to a paper that they wanted MPs to consider, and that aimed at removing 'divisions and jealousies', but while the petition seemed to express a desire for a peaceful settlement with the king, and for the preservation of government by king, Lords and Commons, Thomason argued that it was 'the petition of the Independent, Leveller, and the rest of the sectaries, to join the Parliament, Army and City together, and then all together to join against the Scot'.⁴⁸

Given this record as a Presbyterian activist, and as bitter critic of the army and the Independents, it was perhaps inevitable that Thomason became a casualty of the purge of London 'Presbyterians' which came in the aftermath of Pride's Purge, the army's bold move to remove its enemies (and the king's friends) from the House of Commons (December 1648). By removing Presbyterians and crypto-royalists from Parliament, it became possible to pass an ordinance 'concerning the election of common council men' (20 December 1648), which declared that in the forthcoming civic elections for the choice of a new mayor, aldermen and councillors, no malignants were to be elected, or to have a voice in the election. Specifically, it excluded from City elections all those who had 'subscribed, promoted or abetted any engagement in the year 1648 relating to a personal treaty with the king at London'.⁴⁹ The effect of this ordinance was dramatic. It was reported that the City of London had been so generally engaged in the said petition for a 'personal treaty' that all the old common councilmen who were due for re-election on 21 December were generally engaged in the treaty with very few exceptions, and not enough men were not so restricted or were prepared to serve as common councilmen or in more junior City office. Isaac Pennington, John Venn and other leading London Independents complained that the temper of the City of London was very malignant, and would be worse if some course were not taken to exclude all of the royalist and Presbyterian party from having a voice in choosing or being chosen common councilmen, or being appointed to any other places of authority. One estimate was that, amongst 3000 or 4000 citizens, there could not be found 500 men who were capable of being elected for Common Council, should the restrictions continue to apply. When wards met for the election of common councilmen for the year ensuing, one thing objected was that in some small parishes there were scarcely three householders who had not subscribed the petition for a 'personal treaty'. A further problem was the need to take into consideration the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, and provide for their abolition as being both illegal and a burden to conscience. On 5 January 1649, City authorities made it plain that they would not admit newly chosen common councilmen until they had taken the two oaths.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *To the Right Honourable the Lords and Commons ... the Humble Petition of Divers Well-affected Magistrates* ([London, 5 July 1648], 669.f.12[63]).

⁴⁸ *To the Right Honourable the Lords and Commons ... the Humble Petition of Divers Well-affected Citizens* ([London, 15 Aug. 1648], 669.f.12[104]).

⁴⁹ *An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons* (London, 20 Dec. 1648, 669.f.13[59]); C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait (eds.), *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, 3 vols (London, 1911), i, 1252-3, 1045-6.

⁵⁰ *CJ*, vi, 103-5, 111; John Rushworth, *Historical Collections of Private Passages of State*, 8 vols (London, 1721-2), vii, 1370, 1376, 1384; Farnell, 'The Politics of the City of London (1649-1657)', pp. 97-8.

IV

Thomason's purge from the Common Council after 1648 did not signal the end of his partisan politics. He was clearly an opponent of the king's trial and execution in January 1649, scribbling an oval wreath on the flyleaf of one of his pamphlets, into which he wrote 'a sad month indeed'. He was also prepared to risk being unmasked as a seditious opponent of the new regime, by signalling his support for the view that the Speaker of the House of Commons, William Lenthall, was an 'evil member' and a traitor (July 1649).⁵¹ Indeed, such was his religious and political zeal that he responded to the king's execution on 30 January 1649 by joining those who invested the event with a religious meaning and significance. As he moved about England from one place of imprisonment to another, the king took the opportunity to further the belief in the 'royal touch', for which apparently there was an enthusiastic demand until the authorities condemned it. However, in the following July a remarkable story featuring the king's execution gained credence and circulation. Both newsbooks and tracts reported the story of a maid at Deptford whose blindness had miraculously been cured using a handkerchief that was dipped in the king's blood on the day he was beheaded. The maid was said to have been given a piece of the handkerchief, which she applied to her sores, and she subsequently recovered her sight. As a result, many hundreds of people from London and elsewhere came to see her. Remarkably, Thomason gave the story his endorsement, adding 'This is very true' to the pamphlet he acquired about the incident, and he may even have been one of those who travelled to Deptford to observe the maid for himself.⁵²

Given such attitudes, it is not clear whether – or how willingly – Thomason responded to the demand that he (along with his fellow bookseller, Philemon Stevens) should supply horse and arms to the London militia committee in June 1650.⁵³ Within a matter of months, however, Thomason's political views and activities would become notoriously clear and controversial, as he demonstrated a willingness actively to oppose the republican authorities. That story is the topic for another chapter, but what should already be clear is that, even before 1649, Thomason's activities as a bookseller, publisher and collector were intimately bound up with his place in London society, with his active participation in corporate and civic politics, and with his involvement in tumultuous events on a national and indeed British stage. In addition to being a stunning chronicler and cataloguer of the print revolution during the mid-seventeenth century, Thomason was also an important public figure, and a contributor to some of the key events in the very crucible of civil war. In this capacity, moreover, he was intimately involved in the development of novel tactics for mobilizing people and opinion, through printed petitioning, canvassing and lobbying, as well as the use of cheap print, some of the defining tactics of the English revolution.

Author note

Keith Lindley (d. 2017) taught for many years at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, and published extensively on the English civil wars, and on the social, religious and political history of early modern London. His major works included *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (1982) and *Popular Politics and Religion in Civil War London* (1997), as well as an edition of *The Journal of Thomas Juxon, 1644-1647* (co-edited with David Scott, 1999), and *The English Civil War and Revolution: A Sourcebook* (1998).

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⁵¹ Spencer, 'Politics', p. 15; Edward Jenkes, *Ten Articles* (London, 1649, 669.f.14[52]).

⁵² *A Miracle of Miracles* (London, [5 July] 1649, E.563[2]).

⁵³ *Sir, you are Desired* ([London], 26 July, 1650, E.608[14]).

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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