

# Thomas Hobbes

*one of Wiltshire's  
illustrious sons*

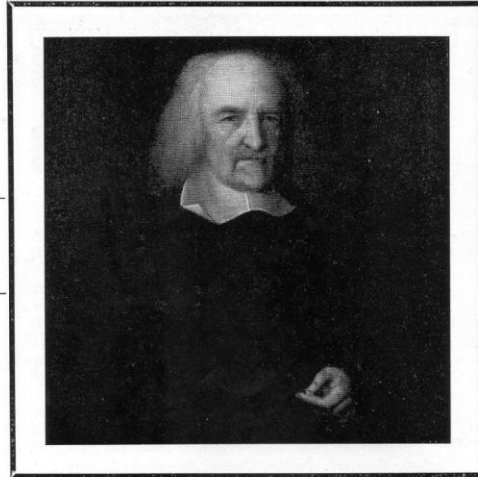
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## Thomas Hobbes

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*by Ann Russell*

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Thomas Hobbes, the renowned philosopher, was born at Westport, now part of Malmesbury, on 5th April, 1588. His father, also Thomas, was vicar of Westport and Charlton at the time, until he became involved in an undignified brawl in his church doorway. This, not unnaturally, caused a considerable scandal and the vicar tactfully, if rather irresponsibly, disappeared. From that time on, his three children were cared for by his brother, a glover in Malmesbury.

Young Thomas, therefore, was brought up in this northern corner of Wiltshire during the turbulence and triumphs which marked the reign of Elizabeth I. His birth coincided with widespread rumours and alarms of the mighty Spanish Armada, and later he often attributed his great love of peace to the fact that he and fear were twins.

At the tender age of four, he was initiated into the world of learning at the church school at Westport. From there he progressed to a private school run by Robert Latimer, rector of Leigh Delamere, and stayed with him until he entered Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1603.

During the five years he spent at Oxford, Hobbes took surprisingly little interest in the scholastic philosophy as taught there. In fact he spent most of his time in the study of maps and charts and books on foreign travel. His formal education, though by no means his days of studying, finished when he graduated on February 5th 1608.

On leaving Oxford, he became private tutor to William Cavendish, later 2nd Earl of Devonshire, who was not many years younger than himself. A real friendship grew up between the two and in 1610 the tutor accompanied his pupil on a tour of Europe. It was during this tour, when Hobbes discovered the contempt in which the philosophy taught at Oxford was held there, that he determined to make himself a scholar. On his return to England, therefore, he devoted himself to classical studies.

It was some years after this, between 1621 and 1625, that he first met and worked with Francis Bacon to render some of his essays into Latin, and also occa-

sionally wrote copy for him, from dictation. Hobbes own chief classical work was his translation of Thucydides. This was published in 1629 and inspired, apparently, by the troubles of that time; for Hobbes considered that the fate of ancient Athens should serve as a salutary warning against democracy.

Although the 2nd Earl of Devonshire died in 1628 and Hobbes left the household soon afterwards, his connections with the Cavendish family had been firmly forged and were to last for the rest of his days. This first break, in fact, was only of short duration, for although he went abroad in 1629 as travelling companion to the son of Sir Gervase Clifton, he came home again the following year to tutor the 3rd Earl of Devonshire, also William.

Four years later history repeated itself and Thomas Hobbes, tutor, took his pupil, William Cavendish, on excursions to France and Italy. And as the earlier expedition had turned him towards the classics, so this one, through the people he met and talked with, aroused his interest in science and philosophy. Among the people with whom he discussed his ideas on physical science and body and motion, were Marin Mersenne and his circle of associates in Paris, and Galileo whom he visited in Florence in 1636.

But Hobbes studies and interests took a further turn when he returned home the following year; this time politics. Charles I had been governing by personal rule for eight years and the unrest and anti-royalist feelings which culminated in the Civil War were already endangering the peace of the country.

Hobbes, basically a Royalist, now set out to prove that the royal prerogatives being called to question were inseparable from the sovereignty of the King. Despite this, however, certain parts of his treatise on "The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic", irritated and annoyed the King's supporters almost as much as his advocacy of supreme monarchy antagonised the parliamentarians.

By 1640, therefore, Hobbes felt that he was a marked man and although his fears were probably much ex-

aggrated, he fled to Paris. Here he stayed for most of the next eleven years, rejoining the Mersenne circle and continuing with his philosophy and writing. Then in 1646 the Prince of Wales, later Charles II, joined the fugitives and exiles in Paris.

Hobbes soon found himself once more in the role of tutor. This time his pupil was the young Prince, whom he had been invited to instruct in mathematics. The resulting increased contact with his fellow countrymen in exile, caused him once again to concentrate on political theory rather than natural philosophy. In two of his treatises written about this time, "Of a Christian Commonwealth" and "Of the Kingdom of Darkness", he severely attacked the attempts being made by some papists and presbyterians to challenge the right of the sovereign.

A few years later, however, in 1651, with Charles I dead and the royalist cause in England at a very low ebb, Hobbes set out to define the circumstances under which submission to a new sovereign became acceptable. Although in so doing he was only stating publicly a view which he had always held, Prince Charles's advisors took serious offence and the incident resulted in the philosopher being barred from the exiled court. Despite this, Hobbes himself had obviously not been conscious of any disloyalty, for he had personally presented the Prince with a copy of the manuscript which contained the offending statement.

By the end of 1651, however, he was finding life in Paris far from comfortable and so finally terminated his exile, returned to England and made his peace with the new regime.

Hobbes was now sixty three years old, but his zest for argument and constant courting of controversy were

to continue unabated for another quarter of a century. His discussions and arguments over free will, with John Bramhall, Bishop of Londonderry, lasted over many years and are still considered of interest and importance. Most of his other controversial criticisms were directed against the university system, which he claimed was founded originally for the support of the papal as opposed to the civil authority, and what he termed the newfangled methods of mathematical analysis.

Although he antagonised many people during these years, he also acquired a new prominence in court circles. Only a day or two after the restoration and Charles II arrival in London, he met his former pupil in the street and was immediately received into favour. Charles enjoyed the old man's company and encouraged his sharp wit. In fact so high was his regard for his one time tutor that he granted him a pension of £100 a year.

Despite the volubility of his enemies in this country, who sought to identify him unfavourably with free-thinking and even with atheism, Hobbes was greatly respected abroad. Many distinguished foreigners, including the Grand Duke of Tuscany, made a point of meeting and conversing with the vigorous and courteous old philosopher whilst visiting this country.

In his latter years he also occupied himself once more with the classical studies which he had begun in his youth, and at the age of eight-four he wrote his autobiography in Latin verse.

Thomas Hobbes, the tall, erect "Son" of Wiltshire whose genial character and controversial philosophy had held the stage for nearly three quarters of a century, finally died at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, on December 4th, 1679, at the age of ninety-one.