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DISCOVERY OF A MANUSCRIPT EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF MAIDSTONE

ROBERT K.G. TEMPLE

In the Record Office of Kingston-upon-Hull in East Yorkshire there is preserved what may be the only surviving manuscript eye-witness account of the battle of Maidstone in 1648. How this document came to be at Hull is unknown. The most likely possibility would seem to be that it was sent to the Mayor and Corporation of Hull by the regicide M.P., Peregrine Pelham, who, as Hull's industrious and indefatigable representative in London, sent a steady stream of letters and news home once a week for years on end.

A large number of Pelham's letters are preserved at Hull, where they were found by accident in 1884.¹ Many of these letters have been printed by Wildridge, though by no means all.² The remainder are being transcribed and edited by this author with a view to publication. The letters often shed important light on the politics and personalities in London, and provide information otherwise unknown. One of Pelham's constant cares was to keep his friends back at Hull up to date with the latest news, especially of military engagements, and he was particularly concerned to provide cheerful and encouraging news whenever possible. On May 27, 1645, he even said apologetically: 'I have no good newes at psent. . .'³ On June 10, 1645, he said: 'For newes we heare S^r Tho. Fairfax and the King's forces are very neare. It is thought they will be speedily ingaged.'⁴

Pelham's accounts of military exploits are rather like the reports by a modern newspaper correspondent, and he showed a constant

¹ T.T. Wildridge (ed.), *The Hull Letters*, (1886), preface.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 77-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

fascination for the unfolding of these developments (always gathered secondhand), writing on July 1, 1645: 'We hope Taunton will hold out untill it be releved by S^r Tho. Fairfax or Collonell Massy. . .'⁵ We have definite evidence that Pelham also sent enclosures with his own letters, giving details of developments, for on July 29, 1645, he wrote: 'I send you the good newes inclosed whereby you may pceive the great successe that it hath pleased god to give to S^r Thomas Fairfax to make him victorious where he goeth.'⁶ Again on September 23, 1645, Pelham wrote: 'I send you some books w^{ch} are to be read. . .'⁷ And earlier, on February 13, 1644/5, he had said: 'The ordinance for S^r Tho Fairfax is past wch I thought to have sent you in print, but th^t I find errors in it.'⁸ And on March 18, 1644/5: 'I send you here inclosed the order th^t past this evening at the Committee for Examinations.'⁹ None of these enclosures are preserved at Hull, with the probable exception of the account of the battle of Maidstone; though there is no letter from Pelham or anyone else preserved at Hull mentioning it at all, so we will never know for certain that it was Pelham who sent it there.

The name of the person to whom the account of the battle was addressed does not appear on the document. The text is as follows:

S^r.

The pticulers are to many to bee related at this time concerning this last nightes ingagmts wth the Enemie at Maydston w^{ch} in brief was such as was never since the warre began, This Army struggled wth so much difficulty to overcome a stronge and resolute Enemie the fight began at 7 at night about a mile from Maydston & before wee could beete them from hedge to hedge and get at the Barracadoes it was past 9 o'. after wee had entered ye towne wee disputed every street and turning the Enemie had 8 peices of Ordinance w^{ch} they discharged aboute 20 times when o^f men came into the streets, & by Gods mighty helpe & assistance wee over came them betweene 12 & one beeing every minut of the time firing upon them & they upon us it beeing extreme wet wether during all that time, Wee tooke 700 prisoners — about 400 horse — our forlorne hope of horse gave the red standard of horse as gallant a charge as ever was seene w^{ch} is saide to bee Gen.¹¹ Hales Troope the reason why o^f. Army began soe soone was because our forlorne hope of horse and foote were engaged in veiwing the towne: the Enemie beeing wth. the whole body of horse and foote wth. in 2 miles on the top of the Hill towards Rochester all day laying wth. in veiw of our Army aboute 8000 men who as they pceived wee did not dispute the pass at Alisforde w^{ch} was very difficent for us to have done the[y] sent in a suply of 1200 men into Maidston who came in Just as

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

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wee ingaged beeing Seamen aprentices & moste of them Comanders in the Kings Army there were in all 200 slayne in and about the towne, Captaine Prize a gallant honest man & Coll Hewsons Captaine Lft was alsoe slaine of ours & about 30 men moste of them fell at the Cannons mouth wth Caise shott wee tooke 8 peices or [sic, should be 'of'] ordinance 6 Iron & 2 brass abundance of Armes having beene up all night and wanting time I cannot at p'sent give you any more only I desire God to make you see how the ould quarrell is revived by the same parties wth. more violence then formerly you will shortly heare what Earles Lords & others of quality apared in this business, his Excellencie from the first minut to the last could not bee drawne of from his psonall & hazardos attendance in this service and is much in his health
Maydstone June 2 1648
6 in the morning

George Thompson

The catalogue number of the document at Hull is L. 497. Explanatory Notes to the Text: General Hales is Edward Hales. Alisforde is Aylesford. 'Captaine Prize' is Captain Thomas Price of Colonel John Hewson's regiment of foot. It has not been possible yet to discover the name of Hewson's Captain-Lieutenant who also died at Maidstone. 'His Excellencie' is, of course, General Sir Thomas Fairfax.

In addition to the above notes, it would seem necessary to explain what 'Caise shott' is. It was a form of shot used for artillery and which was often fired from three-pound drakes, though in this case it seems to have been fired from much larger artillery. The shot consisted of a case containing a collection of small bits of metal like shrapnel and was therefore like an immensely powerful modern shotgun blast of great size. It was, in fact, a direct forerunner of today's 'anti-personnel' mines. The chief use of case shot at this time was for repelling charges of men, which is exactly what seems to have been its use at Maidstone. Captain Price and Hewson's Captain-Lieutenant must have been leading charges towards barricades in the streets in which cannons were fixed, and the cannons would have been fired just as they reached them, blowing them and the men around them to pieces in the most incredibly unpleasant way.

The account preserved at Hull is not entirely new. With several alterations, it was twice printed and signed by John Rushworth, secretary to the Army. We shall consider the printed versions and the alterations in the text in a moment. But first, who was George Thompson?

Colonel George Thompson was M.P. for Southwark, and in 1650/1 was even elected a member of the Council of State. He came from a family noted for its parliamentary sentiments. His brother Maurice Thompson was a prominent business and trading magnate in the City and 'was always violent against kingly government';

another brother, Major Robert Thompson, 'was so great with Cromwell that he had nearly married his daughter'.¹⁰ The only one of the Thompsons who has an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* is George, and his entry is under the spelling of Thomson.

George Thompson had a record of military service from at least 1643 and was forced to retire by the loss of a leg in battle. He was evidently looked upon in Parliament as a valuable asset, a man with military experience who was unable to take to the field and was therefore available in the House when many like men were away fighting. Thompson was not only a political radical, but a religious millenarian. After Richard Cromwell was deposed, 'Col. George Thompson was with some thousands in St. George's-in-the-Fields, Southwark, and with Bibles in their hands, and good swords also, they declared for King Jesus, which signified what they pleased, except King Charles.'¹¹

On the morning of Saturday, June 3rd, the House of Commons voted gifts of money to the messenger who brought Fairfax's letter informing them of the victory of Maidstone and also £20 to be distributed 'amongst the rest of the messengers that brought the intelligence of the victory at Maidstone'.¹² Therefore, we learn from this source that there were several people returning from the battle with further news of it, one of whom was presumably George Thompson, hot on the heels of his own letter. That same afternoon, Thompson was authorized by the House to liaise between Major-General Skippon, the House of Commons, and the Committee of the Militia of the City, 'for the present defence of the borough of Southwarke'.¹³ Thompson's brother Maurice was a prominent radical member of this Committee of the Militia; Southwark was George Thompson's own constituency; and a close friend and associate of both the Thompsons who was simultaneously liaising with the City and taking the letters about Maidstone on the Commons' behalf to the Mayor and Common Council was Colonel John Venn, the regicide M.P. who was a fellow-member with Maurice Thompson of the City's Militia Committee.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Cal. State Papers Dom.*, 1665-6, 457.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 458.

¹² *Commons Journals*, v, 583a.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 583b.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 583a.

¹⁵ Valerie Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution*, (1961), 172, 174-5, 310.

George Thompson was, therefore, in the very centre of events at this time, both in terms of his activities and his personal contacts.

But he appears to have been very modest. Not only was he a 'low profile' personality of whom one does not often hear, except when his activities are glimpsed by accident, but it is hardly to be believed that John Rushworth could have appended his own name to Thompson's letter describing the battle at Maidstone without Thompson's explicit consent or suggestion. This indicates that Thompson did not crave having his name in print as so many of his contemporaries did, and that he was content to be important behind the scenes, scurrying about on his wooden leg from committee to committee, and forwarding the causes in which he believed so strongly.

What was George Thompson doing at the battle of Maidstone? He probably was there in company with his colleague John Boys, M.P. for Kent. A week and a half after the battle of Maidstone, Thompson was appointed to the Commons Committee for Settling the Militia of the Whole Kingdom, whose chairman was Boys.¹⁶ We know that Boys and Thompson were associated together on May 31 in the House of Commons, when they were both requested to communicate with preachers about sermons in the House.¹⁷ But Boys had been given leave by the House a week earlier 'to go into the County of Kent, to employ his best Endeavours for the Preservation of the Peace of that County'.¹⁸ Clearly, he had not yet left on this urgent mission by May 31, and he probably rushed off on that very day.

No more appropriate destination could be imagined than to join up with Fairfax's forces and see how they were faring. Boys probably reached Fairfax not long before the battle. It is likely that he would not have elected to travel alone, and that he would have wanted to have a friendly M.P. with him. If that M.P. had a military background, so much the better. And who better than Colonel Thompson, frustrated at having only one leg and eager to participate vicariously in a major battle that was not too far from London, so that he could reach it conveniently. Furthermore, during the week between Boys's authorization by the House and his presumed actual departure for Kent, Thompson was nominated by the House as one of only seven M.P.s to constitute a Committee for

¹⁶ *Commons Journals*, v, 571b, 597b.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 580 a-b.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 569b.

the Militia of Westminster, one of whose duties was to consider the state of affairs and defence not just at Westminster but also in 'the parts adjacent'.¹⁹ It could reasonably be maintained that the drastic military developments in Kent constituted a serious concern in one of the 'parts adjacent'. Thompson was thus in a position justifiably to claim that what Fairfax was doing in Kent was important Committee business, and as things were in such a desperate state, his being present officially as an observer, well qualified by his own experience to judge what he was observing, would be the best means to expedite his Committee's most urgent business.

Such may have been the background to Thompson's presence at the battle of Maidstone. The fact that Thompson sent a letter to the Speaker of the House reinforces the view that Thompson, in his Committee role, was in an official status as observer for Parliament. Since he did not preface his letter with any explanation of his position, Lenthall must have required no such explanation. We may safely presume that Lenthall and the leading members of the House of Commons were fully aware of Thompson's position and would have been eagerly awaiting his news. Hence, he began his letter actually by apologizing for not providing a fuller narrative, rather than by explaining why he was sending one at all.

Thompson's letter was printed, with changes, the day after it was written, on June 3rd, as a pamphlet entitled *A Letter Sent to the Honorable William Lenthall Esq; Speaker of the Honorable House of Commons, of the Fight between His Excellency's The Lord Fairfax Forces at Maidstone, And the Kentish Forces, June 1, 1648*. It was 'Printed by the Command of. . . Lenthall', by the Commons printer, Edward Husband. Strangely, in their accounts of the battle of Maidstone, neither Gardiner²⁰ nor Everitt²¹ mentions this pamphlet, which is to be found amongst the Thomason Tracts, as E. 445 (37), in the British Library.

Two days later, the letter was reprinted along with other material in a pamphlet entitled *A Letter Sent from the Lord Goring*, which is E. 445 (42) in the Thomason Tracts and on which Thomason has written that it was printed June 5th. This pamphlet is mentioned by both Gardiner²² and Everitt.²³

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 575b.

²⁰ S.R. Gardiner, *History of the Great Civil War*, (1891), iii, 389-90.

²¹ Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion 1640-60*, (1966), 260-3.

²² Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 390n.

²³ Everitt, *op. cit.*, 262 n. and 265 n.

The following, in sequence, are the changes made in the letter for publication:

1. Manuscript: 'Wee tooke 700 prisoners — about 400 horse — . . .' Printed version: '. . .we took about Four hundred prisoners, and near as many horse. . .'
2. Manuscript: '. . . the reason why of. Army began soe soone was because our forlorne hope of horse and foote were engaged in viewing the towne. . .' Printed version: 'The reason why the Ingagement began so soon, the Train and the Rear of the Army being three miles off (and not come up) was, that the Forlorn of horse and foot being engaged in viewing the Town before it was dark, came off safe.'
3. Manuscript: 'Seamen, Apprentices, and most part Comanders in the Kings Army' Printed version: 'Seamen, Apprentices, and most part Commanders and Cavaliers that have formerly been in Arms against the Parliament.'
4. Manuscript: 'Captaine Prize a gallant honest man' Printed version: Captain Price is 'a very honest and stout Gentleman'.
5. Manuscript: '. . . the ould quarrel is revived by the same parties wth. more violence then formerly. . .' Printed version: '. . . the old quarrel is revived by the same party, with greater violence than at first'.
6. Manuscript: General Fairfax 'is much in his health'. Printed version: General Fairfax 'is much impaired in his health'.

With the exception of the last, which is diametrically opposite to what Thompson said, the changes are largely the sort of details which a man such as Rushworth might be expected to have made to an account before committing it to print, and simple changes in wording to be expected if dictating from someone else's original. Presumably, the increase in the numbers of enemy prisoners taken was a correction made with benefit of more accurate and later information. The detail added about the train and rear of the army is just the sort of thing that would have been known to Rushworth, as Fairfax's secretary, but not to Thompson.

Since Thompson's letter was amended in the ways we have just seen, the original draft would thus not have been the one sent to the printer. It would have been a superseded and surplus document as far as anyone in London was concerned. But it would still have been useful to someone in the provinces who was anxious for news, and might have been sent off before the printed version came from the

press, perhaps to make a post which might otherwise involve a delay in sending an account of the battle. (The postal delivery to Hull from London seems to have taken place once a week.) Or a special messenger may have been leaving for the North with accounts of the victory at Maidstone and anyone wishing to inform the Mayor and Corporation of Hull may not have had time to write a note himself but, if he had had access to Thompson's document, could have sent it quickly along with the messenger and a verbal explanation. Interest in Fairfax's achievements was always especially keen in Yorkshire, Fairfax's native county, and nowhere more than at Hull, of which Fairfax was the titular governor. It is highly likely that a post express would have left for York and Hull on June 3rd with the news. It is not, therefore, unreasonable to imagine this document sent about that time by someone in Parliament, probably Peregrine Pelham. Why would Pelham have had access to Thompson's document? He might have been given it by Thompson himself. We have definite evidence that Pelham's close friends in Parliament were not from Yorkshire as one might have expected, but rather the furthest reaches of England from his own home parts. He informed the Mayor and Corporation of Hull in one of his letters quite clearly: 'Those th^t serve for remote pts are my best friends.'²⁴ Pelham barely had even cordial relations with most of the M.P.s representing his own part of the country. The fact that Thompson was M.P. for Southwark and from an entirely 'remote part' therefore makes it more, rather than less, likely that he would have been a friend of Pelham's.

There is another possibility for transmission of the document. Francis Thorpe, recruiter M.P. for Richmond, was Recorder of Hull and another frequent correspondent with the Corporation.²⁵ Only three days after the battle of Maidstone, we find Thorpe being instructed by the House of Commons to write to the Committee of York, enclosing an Order.²⁶ He may, therefore, have sent the Thompson document to Hull, either at this time, or earlier. His officially appointed role as correspondent with York would give him access to official documents of the House in Lenthall's office, and as the Thompson letter was surplus, Thorpe may simply have taken a document that was about to be thrown out and found a useful purpose for it. Therefore, the chances are that if Pelham did not

²⁴ Wildridge, *op. cit.*, 134.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

²⁶ *Commons Journals*, v, 584b.

send the document to Hull, Thorpe did, and that one or other of them was responsible for its being there today.

What does the discovery of the manuscript account by Thompson mean in relation to the other known published accounts? And what are the implications for our understanding of the historical events of the battle? The fact that we now have the original manuscript of one of the leading accounts and know the identity of its author, who was both reliable and important, means that Thompson's version of events takes on a higher standing, and when points of disagreement between accounts are considered, we must give increased weight to Thompson's.

Sufficient scrutiny has never been applied to the rival accounts of the battle of Maidstone in any case. The situation has not been helped by an error of Samuel Gardiner's, in which he claimed that one of them was written by a 'T.T.'²⁷ whereas in fact the account in question was written by someone whose initials were really I.T. The account in question occurs, signed I.T., in the same pamphlet as the second printing of Thompson's account, *A Letter Sent from Lord Goring*, E. 445 (42), referred to above. The author, I.T., refers in it to his 'last letter' and describes some of its contents. No one seems previously to have noted that these accord with the author, I.T., being identical to the author of the earlier anonymous letter dated June 2, printed by Rushworth in his *Historical Collections*.²⁸ Anyone wishing to come to such a conclusion would, however, have to work in the British Library and consult the pamphlet E. 445 (42) there, since if he tried to find it anywhere else, he would not get very far. Gardiner not only got the initials of the author wrong, but he got the title of the entire pamphlet wrong as well. He calls it *A Letter written to Lord Goring*.²⁹ Its true title, as already stated, is *A Letter Sent from Lord Goring*.

But to return to the possibility that the author I.T. also wrote the letter in Rushworth's *Collections*. In both accounts the author is quite clearly an officer in the New Model Army, and from the intimate description of the fierce fighting in the streets of Maidstone, it would appear that the author was an officer in the regiment of foot of Colonel John Hewson, who made the charges down the streets towards the barricades. He speaks of the artillery with the case shot and says they 'did us some mischief before we

²⁷ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 390 n.

²⁸ John Rushworth, *Historical Collections*, (1721), vii, 1137.

²⁹ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 390 n.

could get under their shot'.³⁰ This and like remarks indicate very strongly that the man writing the account actually experienced the events in question. He does not say 'our soldiers' had to get down and creep under the range of the case shot, he says 'we' did it. He also speaks of the cavalry in a way which indicates that he is not one of them: 'I cannot but observe unto you the gallantry of a party of about sixty of our horse, which charged. . .'.³¹ This reads like the remark of an officer of foot, not of horse.

If the author, I.T., was an officer in Hewson's regiment, then who was he? He could hardly be lower in rank than a captain. There was apparently only one New Model officer present at Maidstone with the correct initials, Captain John Topping, who was indeed in Hewson's regiment. (The initial I. was, of course, used at that time for a name beginning with J.) We know that Topping was literate and quite capable of writing letters of import, because one of his letters to Lenthall, dated 1659/60, survives amongst the Portland MSS.³² Topping was not an original captain of Hewson's regiment like Thomas Price; Topping seems to have been promoted to a captaincy only upon the death of a Captain Tompkins at the battle of Naseby (and Tompkins himself was successor to Captain George Jenkins, who was killed at Farringdon).

In Topping's presumed first account there is a prominent mention of Major Husbands.³³ This would be natural for a captain who had once served beside him. For Husbands had been a captain in Hewson's regiment before being transferred to other service by 1647, and is mentioned in the List of Officers printed in 1647 by Sprigge, just before John Topping (mistakenly called Toppington by Sprigge).³⁴ Topping would thus have been giving a bit of a plug for his old friend. Topping was eventually transferred to Newcastle and Tynemouth, where he served as captain, then major, and finally Governor of Tynemouth, over the next ten years.³⁵

Assuming that the identification of I.T. with Captain John Topping is correct, he was obviously a highly qualified observer to

³⁰ I.T., 'Another Letter from Maidstone', in *A Letter Sent from the Lord Goring Directed to the Lord Maior, Aldermen, and Commonalty of the City of London, and what was agreed upon, at the receipt thereof* (1648), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *HMC Portland MSS*, i, 692.

³³ Rushworth, *op. cit.*, 1137.

³⁴ Joshua Sprigge, *Anglia Rediviva*, (1954), 330.

³⁵ Sir Charles Firth and Godfrey Davies, *The Regimental History of Cromwell's Army*, (1940), ii, 459-60; 524. See also *HMC Leyborne-Popham MSS.*, 139.

say the least. The correspondences between his account(s) and that of Thompson are remarkable, and they tend to confirm and strengthen each other, except as regards the number of enemy foot captured (for they agree with one another that 400 horse were captured). Thompson's original letter, written at 6 in the morning, said 300 foot had been captured. This figure was increased to 400 by Rushworth before sending the account to the printers, as we have already seen. But the account which we believe to be Topping's first account, and also the account by I.T., which we believe to have been Topping's second account, both agree in mentioning a larger figure of 1000 foot taken (1400 enemy taken, of which 400 were horse). The answer for this is simple: captured foot were continually being gathered in, being unable to escape on horseback, and the numbers were swelling. Thompson's figure was obviously the earliest; Rushworth's figure was somewhat later, and the figure of 1000 was a later tally still.

The discovery of Thompson's manuscript account deals the final blow to a statement by Everitt that large numbers of the royalist forces at Maidstone were not native countrymen but were seamen, apprentices from London, etc. Everitt says 'this is not generally confirmed by other sources'.³⁶ We see now that it is confirmed by an unimpeachable manuscript eye-witness account, Thompson's. But the account printed in Rushworth's *Collections*, which we believe to have been Topping's first account, is also explicit and says, in agreement with Thompson: 'we find few or none to be Countrymen, but many of them of the King's Party, and Men of Quality, some Seamen, and the rest Apprentices and Watermen that came from London, and thereabouts.'³⁷ Everitt ignores this account entirely; in doing so, he may have been influenced by Gardiner's savage condemnation of it as 'full of blunders, and evidently concocted by someone ignorant of the course of events'.³⁸ Gardiner's statement cannot stand scrutiny, but it must have led Everitt to steer away from that source, with unfortunate results.

The newspaper *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer* printed on June 6 and using later letters received in London on June 5, reports an additional 100 enemy prisoners and remarks that the London apprentices were particularly attached to Lord Goring and only reluctantly went along with Edward Hales being chosen General.³⁹

³⁶ Everitt, *op. cit.*, 262 n.

³⁷ Rushworth, *op. cit.*, 1137.

³⁸ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 390 n.

³⁹ *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer*, May 30–June 6, 1648, Number 263, 967–8.

This gives some additional confirmation that there must have been a fair number of London apprentices amongst the Royalist forces.

We can see that Thompson's manuscript brings the account printed in Rushworth's *Collections* back into repute, by their agreement on so many details. The two reports were obviously written by two men who had seen the same things and witnessed the same events. Entering the realms of speculation, with our mind's eye, perhaps we may imagine that after the battle was over, the limping George Thompson caught up with the exhausted John Topping, and they may even have exchanged some words in the desolated streets of Maidstone, whose one great martial moment they were each, in their own accounts, to immortalize for posterity.