

M.L. BUSH. — *The Government Policy of Protector Somerset*, London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1975.

It has always been difficult for those who were never in close contact with Professor A.F. Pollard to appreciate to the full the high esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries among Tudor historians. Certainly, some of his views have remained unchallenged for so long only because of the reputation that he won during a long and fruitful lifetime. On various counts, his dicta are nowadays in question and the most recent challenge concern the reign of Edward VI.

Pollard believed, and was followed in this by W.K. Jordan, whose work on the reign, although more recent, does not advance understanding in this sphere, that the Protector pursued a policy socially so enlightened that it contributed materially to his downfall from office. "The only rational explanation of the experiment in liberty" initiated by Lord Protector Somerset was, for Pollard, "the obvious one that the Protector was a believer in constitutional freedom..."<sup>1</sup> Therefore his story of the Protectorate and of the reign of Edward VI was coloured — or distorted — by this important preconception. Its implications extended to the whole question of the "commonwealth's men" and their influence and to the social climate of the England ruled over by the children of Henry VIII. But if a "novel programme of political or social reform" undertaken by the Protector was dashed by the refusal of colleagues to countenance it, then both the undertaking and the its defeat are noteworthy, each in this own way. If it never existed as a government programme that clearly implies a very different picture of the protectorate.

In 180 well-produced if expensive pages, Dr. Bush of Manchester University dissects the brief two years of Somerset's rule and, by close and detailed argument, destroys any belief in the Duke's 'novel programme' (which had already been seriously questioned in various places). The accumulation of detail, indeed, smacks occasionally of overkill, since there appears little room for doubt about Somerset's true motives in most cases and the window-dressing for his policy becomes transparent. The question is rather to see why a historian as eminent as Pollard should have based a theory of such considerable scope on such slender evidence.

The book's criticism goes further, explaining the Protector's ideals as *idées fixes*, sometimes conventional, as that of the 'virtuous ruler', sometimes innovative, as with his plan to subdue Scotland by means of English garrisons. The contradictions of his character (for he was notoriously acquisitive while seeking the reputation of virtue) were revealed over and over again in the course of the reign, as crisis succeeded crisis and Somerset's colleagues found that the leader who had established himself as a successful military commander could only maintain political command at the expense of consistency.

The study has a strange topicality. A war (with Scotland) was the government's prime concern and for Somerset everything had to be subordinated to its prosecution. Accordingly, other measures (such as a ban on depopulation for sheep-farming) had to be imposed, principally to divert public attention from these more certain and deeper causes of the inflation which affected the whole of the society. Just as today the U.S. economy is in large measure devoted to war

<sup>1</sup> A.F. POLLARD, *England under Protector Somerset An essay* (N.Y., 1966), p. 58.

production and yet the consequent inflation is blamed upon a host of other, less fundamental causes, so Somerset's Scottish war had to be shielded from the blame for an economic phenomenon which it undoubtedly gravely exacerbated. As Dr. Bush puts it "...government needed to act because of the spectacularly high rate of inflation, but its military ambitions produced a social policy which aimed to sustain rather than to interfere with the war effort."<sup>2</sup> That, *mutatis mutandis*, might have been written, with Vietnam in mind, for the epitaph of Lyndon B. Johnson.

Remarkably, when Somerset's successors ended a ruinous and futile war in Scotland, for Pollard this was "cringing abroad" and a "criminal abandonment of English interest."<sup>3</sup> If anything, Dr. Bush is too kind to Pollard, who saw the invasion of Scotland only as "an imperative measure of defence,"<sup>4</sup> even though its failure simply cemented the Franco-Scottish alliance. Unlike Pollard, for whom his hero can hardly err, Somerset's latest critic show the Protector's weaknesses as causes both of the failure of this Scottish policy and of his final downfall.

Pollard believed that even after rebellions had begun, Somerset openly declared that "the covetousness of the gentlemen had given the people occasion to rise, and that it was better they should die fighting than perish for lack of living"<sup>5</sup> but Dr. Bush show clearly that Somerset never countenanced rebellion, nor recommended leniency to rebels, except as a tactic and then only a temporary one. The earlier author, on the other hand, continues his defence of "the good duke" by offering Froude, who gave no authority, as reference for the statement that Somerset's Council colleagues overrode his (supposed) leniency to the rebels<sup>6</sup>.

For most students of the reign, the duke of Somerset has always gained considerably by the inevitable comparison with his rapacious and unscrupulous successor, Northumberland. And, apart from greed, Pollard — still an important authority for the period — found nothing very serious to charge the former with, merely complaining that he lacked patience, flexibility and the willingness to compromise. After a far more minute scrutiny of actions and protestations, Dr. Bush finds that Somerset is both less praiseworthy for his virtues and more blameworthy for his failings. These include "obsessive stubbornness"<sup>7</sup> and harshness, notably in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> In short, he had "a difficult personality" and was "very much a man of his time"<sup>9</sup>. His obsessions, above all with the war in Scotland, prepared the way for his downfall and his prickly nature ensured that he would not be forgiven, except by those who lacked the power to aid him and amongst whom his renown was highest.

It is not likely that the older view of the Protector Somerset will be tenable in the future. So careful and convincing a survey of this short but crucial mid-century period makes one hope that the remainder of Edward's reign and the whole of his sister Mary's will receive similar capable treatment.

John ROBERTS,  
*Département d'Histoire,*  
*Université Laval,*

<sup>2</sup> BUSH, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> POLLARD, *op. cit.*, 265,6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 240.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 241.

<sup>7</sup> BUSH, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 161.