



**Covetous of Truth : The Life and Work of Thomas  
White, 1593-1676 (International Archives of the  
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des idées)**

*B.C. Southgate*

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Thomas White, in the quatercentenary of his birth, is due for historical rehabilitation. English Catholic priest, philosopher, theologian, and scientist, he was a renowned and notorious figure in his own day; and, though long forgot ten, his work exemplifies aspects of major current concern to historians of ideas: in particular, the significance of the newly-revived sceptical philosophy; the complexity of the transition from scholasticism to the new philosophy; and the whole role of "minor", non-canonical figures in the history of thought. White's writings embrace theology, politics, and natural philosophy, or science; and in all these three areas, his work, after centuries of comparative neglect, has slowly been resurfacing. His theological significance received intermittent recognition through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries; but more recently his great importance as leader of a whole "Blackloist" faction of English Catholics has become increasingly clear. Condemned by co-religionists in his own time as a dangerous heretic, he has been assessed by modern scholars as an anticipator of twentieth-century trends in Catholic theology, and even as "probably, after John Henry Newman, the most original thinker as yet produced by modern English Catholicism."<sup>2</sup> Blackloism implied not only a theological, but also a political position; and that position was clarified and publicised by White in his single political treatise, *The Grounds of Obedience and Government*, published in the mid 1650s. His provocative stance was widely misunderstood and misinterpreted, and was soon anyway rendered untenable by the restoration of the monarchy.

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