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THOMAS GARVINE—AYRSHIRE SURGEON ACTIVE IN RUSSIA AND CHINA

by

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THE NAME OF Thomas Garvine of Ayrshire was entered in the records of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow as a surgeon-freeman in 1738.¹ He had been apprenticed to John Marshall (d. 1719), surgeon of Kilsyth, who was in charge of Glasgow University Physick Gardens in 1704. Probably Garvine served his apprenticeship in the early years of the eighteenth century, prior to his activities in the East.

Before 1713 Garvine worked in a hospital at St. Petersburg. This is one of the few biographical facts about his stay in Russia provided by a letter from Hugh, third Earl of Loudoun dated 31 October and addressed to Sir John Erskine or his brother Charles of Alva in Scotland; in it the Earl of Loudoun asks to recommend Thomas Garvine “who is now a surgeon in the hospital at Petersbourg”, to their relative Areskine (Erskine), physician to the Czar Peter the Great at St. Petersburg.²

Robert Erskine (d. 1718) was the sixth surviving son of Sir Charles Erskine of Alva, Bart., and brother of the recipient of Loudoun’s letter. He had received his medical education at Edinburgh and was one of eleven physicians and over eighty surgeons called to Russia during the reign of Peter the Great.³ To become a protégé of this influential doctor must have meant a great deal to the young Garvine, of whose surgical activities we know very little, nor can any written work by him be traced in the authors’ indexes of learned societies of his day. In the introduction to John Bell’s travel account he is mentioned as the “first Scottish doctor to be sent to Peking by the Russians”.⁴

It is interesting to read of the need in China for Western physicians in a travel document by Too-Le-Shin,⁵ Chinese Ambassador to the Tartars, from 1712 to 1715. He met the Governor of Tobolsk in Siberia, General Koko-lin (Prince Gagarin in John Bell’s account⁶) in 1713 and voiced the Emperor K’ang Hsi’s request for “good surgeons or physicians” to be sent to Peking. At that time Too-Le-Shin received a negative reply “. . . with regard to medical men, we have none of great ability at this place. We have already sent to Moskow to enquire for persons of this description, but none has arrived yet from thence; they may, however, still arrive previous to the period of your excellency’s return to China.” The emperor had to wait until 1716, one year after Too-Le-Shin had completed his mission.

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More information concerning Emperor K'ang Hsi's medical requirements is given in the Reverend Isaac Kimber's account of Peter the Great.⁷ Under the heading "Two very odd embassies", the Chinese request is mentioned ". . . send an able physician, and some Medicines that would provoke the Venery. . . . Mr. Garwin, an English [*sic*] surgeon, went to China on this occasion, carrying with him the Drugs desired."

Chimin Wong and Wu Lien-Teh⁸ confirm this story: ". . . The Emperor K'ang Hsi wrote to the Tobolsk Governor, Prince Gagarin, to recommend him a good physician and some serviceable physic for pleasure apparently vitaliser or aphrodisiac. A British surgeon of St. Petersburg Hospital, called Thomas Garwin in the Russian records . . . was selected." It is mentioned here that "his real name was probably Harwin", an unfounded statement, the version "Harwin" was due to a mistake in transcription from the Russian.⁹

Thomas Garvine was attached to the mission to China headed by Lorenz Lange (fl. 1715–38). He was a Swedish architect in charge of the Czar's building of Peterhof. Larousse¹⁰ relates that he had to accompany, as diplomatic agent, the "physician" Thomas Garvine. They left Russia in August 1715 and arrived in Peking in November 1716. (Lange returned to Russia in 1718; his report does not mention the actual date of his departure from Peking with Garvine, but this date can be assumed from Garvine's own account accompanying his portrait (see below).)

The journey is described in detailed reports which are of interest because of their observations of people and topography.¹¹ On 11 November they arrived at the emperor's country seat at Tchantienne and were taken to his castle, where two Jesuits had to save them from molestation by the inquisitive crowds. They were brought before K'ang Hsi's throne, ". . . the doctor was asked about his medicine". On the next day Lange and Garvine had to appear again before the emperor; after much kneeling and bowing they were given two damask coats with fox fur and had to put on gloves. It was then that the surgeon was directed to feel the emperor's pulse. His pronouncement was that "His Majesty was very well". This information pleased the emperor, and they were allowed to retire and rest. After receiving more presents and completing the diplomatic mission, they attended the Chinese New Year celebrations on 2 February 1717 and returned with messages from K'ang Hsi to the Russian Czar in 1718.

In addition to these Western travel accounts, Needham and Mrs. Lu Gwei-Djen provide further information.¹² After the Treaty of Nerchinsk between China and Russia in 1689, medical men became interested in Chinese methods of inoculation. A special Russian medical mission, in which "Harwin" participated, was sent to China in order to study the method of variolation or "engrafting".

The shadowy figure of Thomas Garvine in literature is thrown into relief in an oil portrait of him at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine. This represents him more than life-size, standing in a shining blue coat with white fur lining and cuffs; perhaps this was the coat given to him by the Chinese emperor in Lange's account. Under it he wears a typical oriental dress, with thick felt boots and a high fur-edged cap. To his right stands a flower pot with a plant of the *Musa* species,¹³ and through a window is seen a distant mountain landscape with a castle. He is

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pointing to a table on his left, on which stands a box with surgical instruments. On the table and floor there are three documents, a Manchu text, a long scroll covered with Chinese cursive writing and a Latin text. The Chinese and Manchu texts are illegible, due to transcription by a European artist and some overpainting.¹⁴ At best one can say that the Chinese text is a conventional address of praise dedicated to scholars in gratitude for their services. The two-page document in Latin is easier to decipher. It is headed by a letter from the Chinese court addressed to Dr. Areskine (Erskine, Garvine's protector at St. Petersburg), and mentions Garvine's name. In other words, the emperor sent a special message, dated 1715, shortly before the Russian mission set out for China—and this time he addressed the Russian medical service personally. In addition to the request for medical aid, K'ang Hsi expresses the wish to have a man sent who should be "loyal to the Realms of the most exalted Czar . . . and able to undertake the dangerous journey over the great distance".

Then follows a personal account by Garvine, in which he gives the date of his departure from St. Petersburg as the beginning of September (not August). He arrived "safe and sound" at Peking in November of 1716. His date of departure from Peking is given as the beginning of June 1717; he reached Moscow early in February 1718, ". . . and after a stay of two months I returned home via St. Petersburg." There is no word about his medical work at Peking, only the remark ". . . I was invested with my office and greatly honoured and made much of by the doctor and the nobility". This sentence is in accordance with the aristocratic posture in the painting which testifies to the enormous sensation such a return from the Far East must have created.

The following is a complete English translation of the Latin inscription accompanying the portrait:¹⁵

To Robert Aretinus Thomas Garvine, Surgeon and Physician at St. Petersburg Hospital

Kang-hi, the Emperor of China, has asked you to procure from the Czar of all the Russians, Peter the Great Alexeievich, an experienced and acute doctor who, being loyal to the Realm of the most Exalted Czar, can be sent without reservations, a man who is suitable to perform such an office and able to undertake the dangerous journey over great distances. God speed you! Fare-well. 1715 A.D.

After the letter of this most kind and learned man had been read by the Czar and his Secret State Council, I left St. Petersburg at the beginning of September without knowledge of what I was going to encounter; and first I travelled through the length of the Russian Empire to Moscow, from there to Tobolsk, the capital of Siberia, then to the famous city of Yeniseysk on the river Yenisey, from there to Troitski near the river Troit, the wealthy market town of Greater Tartary, from there along the banks of the river Angara I reached lake Baykal at the furthest frontier of the Empire. Crossing this, I met up with the Chinese mandarin Fuldus, who guided me through Mongolia which is subject to the Emperor of China, to the Chinese Wall which is built on such a scale that you would think it was the work of gods rather than men, and from there through famous cities to Peking, the Northern capital of China and seat of the Emperor Kang-hi, where I arrived safe and sound at the beginning of November. There, at the Court of the Emperor himself, I was invested with my office and greatly honoured and made much of by the doctor and the nobility. Some months later, at the beginning of June, I was sent with well-disposed letters of recommendation, from Peking to the Hun. I reached Moscow at the beginning of February 1718 and after a stay of two months I returned home via St. Petersburg.

The style and colouring of the painting are typical for a North European artist.

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There is no signature, but the Scottish National Portrait Gallery suggests the name of William Mosman (fl. 1730–71), a Scottish artist who had some schooling under Imperiali in Italy.¹⁶ On comparison with Mosman's portrait of Robert Gordon at Gordon College, Aberdeen, of 1758, a distinct similarity with the portrait in the Wellcome Institute is obvious. There is the same slightly awkward attempt at solemn posture, the same lack of stability in the placing of the legs, a similar steeply rising floor towards the background; the imaginative curvature of the table legs and orientalizing shapes to the right can be found in other portraits by Mosman.

The dates of Mosman's activity after his return from Italy, between 1730 and 1771, leave ample time for the execution of Garvine's portrait, some time after the latter's return from the East; perhaps it was painted at the occasion of Garvine's registration as a surgeon-freeman at Glasgow, 1738, in commemoration of his mission to the Emperor K'ang Hsi.

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12. Joseph Needham and Lu Gwei-Djen, 'Hygiene and preventive medicine in ancient China', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1962, 17: 429–478, see p. 466. My attention was drawn to this article by Mr. J. H. Appleby.
13. Information from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, July 1973.
14. Letters from Professor W. Simon, London School for Oriental Studies, 18 December 1972, and from Mr. Cheng-Wu-Fei, painter and calligrapher, 24 February 1973.
15. Translated by Miss M. Winder, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.
16. Letter from Mr. R. E. Hutchinson, Keeper at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, 25 June 1973.



Figure 1

Portrait of Thomas Garvine in the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.
Attributed to William Mosman (fl. 1730–1771).

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