

News, Notes and Queries

VENEREAL DISEASES IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND*

THERE SEEMS to have been a certain amount of despondency on the early history of syphilis in England. Several authorities have remarked what little record there is of venereal disease in the sixteenth century in England compared with continental Europe. Astruc¹ names only four British medical authors on venereal disease before 1600 compared with two hundred other European sources, and even then one is anonymous (1570), and another a Scotsman, Peter Lowe (1596), albeit his work was published in London. This leaves William Clowes and George Baker² whose work will be discussed later. However, later in his work Astruc quotes the eighteenth-century London surgeon William Beckett, who included several other sixteenth-century English sources in his review (1718–1720)³ of the early history of venereal disease in England, trying to prove the antiquity of syphilis. Of course at that time the separate pathologies of syphilis and gonorrhoea had not been formulated, these being considered part of the same disease. Even as late as 1891 Creighton⁴ in his *History of Epidemics in Britain* states that syphilis makes hardly 'any appearance in the English records of the time and no appearance at all in the writings of the English profession.'

However not only have medical writers given us some record of the early history of syphilis, but a cornucopia of writings on venereal disease can be found in the daily records, court books (Emmison),⁵ and belletristic works of those times.

Before I begin my survey I should make it clear that I regard the evidence for the American origin of syphilis and the first appearance in Europe with the return of Columbus and his sailors in 1493 as overwhelming. Whether syphilis came to the British Isles directly from Spain, or followed the disbandment of mercenaries after the siege of Naples in 1495, spreading along with the followers of Perkin Warbeck from France to Scotland, is a matter for conjecture; nevertheless by the end of the fifteenth century it had made its appearance in Britain.

The oldest witness of the new disease is the Spanish physician Ruy Diaz de Isla⁶ who, as a young man was practising in Barcelona in 1493 when he saw the first epidemic manifestation of lues. 'In Castille they called it "Bubas" but I call it the serpentine malady of the Isle of Hispaniola; and the reason I call it serpentine, "Morbo Serpentino", is because one cannot find a more horrible comparison, for as this animal is hideous, dangerous and terrible so the malady is hideous, dangerous and terrible.'

The early history of syphilis in Scotland has been covered by Comrie⁷ (1932), and Morton⁸ (1962). This survey covers its early history in England. The late Professor Shrewsbury⁹ has recently (1970) mentioned two of the earliest notes of its existence in the British Isles. In 1493–1494 the town of Shrewsbury was affected: 'and about thys tyme began the fowle scabbe and horryble sychness called the freanche pocks.'¹⁰ In 1494, a Chronicle of Lynn (Ireland) records,¹¹ 'In this yer begane the ffranche pockes.' Lynn was a seaport, but Shrewsbury had no doubt been infected via Chester

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or Bristol, where it was imported via the wine trade from Bordeaux in 1497, being called morbus Burdigalensis¹² (Peste de Bordeaux).

In 1503 in the book of the *Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York*,¹³ wife of Henry VII, there is an entry of a sum of forty shillings paid on behalf of John Pertriche 'oon of the sonnes of mad Beale'; which sum appears to have been the amount the youth cost her majesty for food, clothing and incidental expenses during the preceding year. Twenty shillings were paid to 'a surgeon which heled him of the French pox.' This bill was as much as all the other expenses for the year together.

Both alderman Robert Fabyan, a London chronicler in the early sixteenth century and Stow¹⁴ in the next century mention the measures taken in the year 1506 to close the Winchester stews. These brothels of ancient origin were situated in Southwark under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester. In 1506 there were eighteen of them in a row along the Surrey side of the river, a little above London Bridge; they were wooden erections each with a stair down to the water, and each with its river front painted with a sign like a tavern, such as the Boar's Head, the Cross Keys, the Gun, the Castle, the Crane, the Cardinal's Hat, the Bell, the Swan, etc. Stow mentions that their suppression was not for long. Soon twelve reopened. Their closing was probably connected with early ravages of the French pox. It has been mooted that the young Henry VIII, as Prince of Wales, may have been infected by a Winchester goose, the name at times being used for a prostitute¹⁵ the disease itself,¹⁶ 'a groyne bumpe, or a goose from Winchester,' or a victim who suffered the usual consequences of a visit to the locality. Later in 1527, Thomas Vicary, as Johnston Abraham¹⁷ (1944) has told us, treated Henry VIII for his 'bad legge' which may have been a gumma or syphilitic periostitis of the tibia, or chronic osteomyelitis, or even a varicose ulcer.

These notorious trysting places again came into the forefront in 1546, not from a health angle but from politico-religious overtones. Latimer criticized them in a sermon and William Beckett (1718) mentions their suppression. Thomas Cromwell had been given the task of closing monastical properties and seemed to have used as an excuse for the closure of St. Thomas's Hospital, its unsavoury reputation being a result of its proximity to the stews in Southwark.

To return from the South Bank diversion, in 1508 an oblique reference is made by Bernard André¹⁸ in his *Annals of Henry VIII*; writing about the sweating sickness, he says, 'It occurred in England four and twenty years before, and it was followed by a far more detestable malady, to be abhorred as much as leprosy, a wasting pox which still vexes many eminent men' (multos adhuc vexat egregios alioquin viros tabifica lues). Then, in 1511, a fellow of Merton College, Oxford, was ordered to leave because he had the French pox.¹⁹ Seven years later, the will of Dr. Collet,²⁰ Dean of St. Paul's mentions that following the recent decline in leprosy in England, there was an increase of the pox not only in Italy and France but also in England.

The next allusion to syphilis seems to have been Simon Fyshe's²¹ *Supplication of Beggars*, which was compiled in 1524 and read to Henry VIII, being an attack on the idle and luxurious living of monks and churchmen, among whom, it was said, the ravages of the disease were widespread. 'These be they that have made an hundred thousande ydel hores in your realme, which wold have gotten theyr lyvinge honestly in the swete of their faces had not there superfluous riches illected them to uncleane

lust and ydelnesse. These be they that corrupte the hole generation of mankynd in your realme, that catch the pockes of one woman and beare it to another, ye some one of them will boste amange his felowes that he hath medled with an hundreth wymen.' Men's pretensions do not seem to have changed much in the intervening four hundred years.

In the next year, 1525, Erasmus²³ in a letter to Schiedlowitz, Chancellor of Poland, discoursing on causes of sickness, states that until 'thirty years ago England was unacquainted with the sweat, nor did that malady go beyond the bounds of the island. In their own experience they had seen mutations.' Continuing, he puts forward his thoughts on the causes of these maladies. 'It seems to my judgement that it is due to that evil, of uncertain origin, which has now been for so many years raging with impunity in all countries of the world, that has not yet found a definite name. Most persons call it the French pox (Poscas Galleas), some the Spanish.'

English politics were shaken in 1529 by the Arraignment of Wolsey, the scandalous sixth charge being that, by blowing in the ear of the King, 'the same Lord Cardinall, knowing himself to have the foul and contagious disease of the great pox broken out upon him in divers places of his body, came daily to your Grace [the King], rowning in your ear, and blowing upon your most noble Grace with his perilous and infective breath' had tried to infect the King.

Compared with medical writings on syphilis in Europe, English medical writers lagged behind in its first fifty years. There had been such noted authorities as Joseph Grünpeck²³ (1496, 1503), John of Vigo²⁴ (1514), the first two chapters of whose *Practica* discuss Morbus Gallicus, Jacques de Bethencourt²⁵ of Rouen (1527), the first to use the term 'venereal disease', and Ruy Diaz de Isla⁶ (1539) already mentioned, not forgetting Fracastoro's²⁶ poem 'Syphilis Sive Morbus Gallicus' (1530), and Ulrich Von Hutten's²⁷ personal experience of the guaiacum cure published in 1519. In this he mentions what tortures he had suffered under mercury and the blessed relief he obtained with decoctions of guaiacum. Nevertheless Von Hutten himself was to die miserably of tertiary syphilis at the age of thirty-five in spite of his reputed cure. Like many events in this country the translation of his book into English occurred almost by accident. Paynel, a canon of Merton Abbey, a translator amongst other things of *Regimen Salernitanum* the popular guide to health of those times, going one day to his printer about a new edition was asked if he would like to translate Von Hutten's work, for said the printer 'Almost into every part of this realme this most foul and peynful disease is crept and many soore infected therewith.' Thus a first edition appeared in 1533,²⁸ which proved to be a sound commercial venture, for several more editions were later printed. In 1539 Paynel added a short section. 'A Remedy for the Frenche pockes' to his book entitled, *A Moche Profitable Treatise against the Pestilence*, (1534).

During all this time the medical establishment remained silent. Andrew Boord (1490–1549) wrote not only for his peers but for popular appeal. In his *Breviary of Helthe* (1547), the first printed medical book to be written by a physician in English, he wrote not only of syphilis, but also of gonorrhoea and scabies. Of syphilis he quotes:

Morbus Gallicus or Variole Miores be the latyn wordes. And some do name it Mentagra. . . .

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In englyshe Morbus Gallicus is named the french pockes, whan that I was yonge they were named the spansyshe pockes the which be of many kyndes of the pockes, some be moyst, some be waterashe, some be drye, and some be skorvie, some be lyke skabbes, some be lyke ring wormes, some be fistuled, some be festered, some be cankarus, some be lyke wennes, some be lyke biles, some be lyke knobbes or burres, and some be ulcerous havyinge a lytle drye skabbe in the middle of the ulcerous skabbe, some hath ache in the ioyntes and no signe of the pockes and yet it may be the pockes. . . . The cause of these impediments or infyrmytes doth come many wayes it maye come by lyenge in the shetes or bedde there where a pocky person hath the night before lyenin, it may come with lyenge with a pocky person, it maye come by syttenge on a draught or sege [i.e. privy] where as a pocky person did lately syt, it may come by drynkyng oft with a pocky person, but specially it is taken when one pocky person doth synne in lechery the one with another. All the kyndes of the pockes be infectiouse.

Of gonorrhoea: He alludes to the 'burning of an harlotte' adding, 'if a man be burnt with an harlot, and do meddle with another woman within a day, he shall burn the woman that he shall meddle withal.' Of scabies: 'In latin it is named Scabies. In English it is named scabbes which is an infectious sickenes, for one man may infect another by lying together in a bedde, and there be two kindes, the drye scabbes and the wet scabbes, or moyst scabbes.'

In 1561 venereal diseases were treated at St. Thomas's Hospital in the four sweat wards: Job, Lazarus, Judith and Susanna, at the back of the hospital. Berengario Da Carpi (*d.* 1530), better known as the leading anatomist before Vesalius, was treating the disease by mercurial inunction in 1500 and by fumigation in 1506. That this remained the standard treatment in Britain is proved by the very large number of allusions to it in the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One example is Shakespeare's:

Be a whore still; they love thee not that use thee. Give them diseases, leaving them with their lust. Make use of thy salt hours. Season the slaves For tubs and baths; bring down rose-cheek'd youth To the tub-fast and the diet (*Timon of Athens*, IV, iii, 83–87).

Another allusion is to 'Cornelius's tub'. How the name came about is unknown. One of the earliest references to it is in Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, 1594. 'Mother Cornelius's tub why it was like hell, he that came into it never came out of it.'

Facilities for the treatment of venereal diseases came into being in the old lazar houses or locks. As leprosy declined, so the locks in London came to be used for syphilis and also for housing of the chronic sick and elderly whom nobody else wanted. Beckett (1720)⁸ mentions how their number had risen from three in London in 1452 to six by the time of Henry VIII. They were at Knightsbridge, Hammersmith, Highgate, Kingsland (Hackney), the Lock (Southwark) and Mile-end. The Journals of St. Bartholomew's Hospital are records of the meetings of the governors and started in 1549. They are quoted in the comprehensive *History of St. Bartholomew's Hospital* by Sir Norman Moore (1918). The earliest mention of the locks in the journals is for 1555, where payments are made to the 'keeper of the spital called the Lok for keeping 2 men for 1 month 13/4'. Later, in 1558, Alderman Wylford and two others are to 'ride to the Lok and to Myle end' to report on the lazar houses. The entry for 20 September 1561 gives the names of the keepers of the locks. By 1621 the lock hospitals were reduced to two at Southwark and Hackney solely for the treatment of syphilis. Beckett also mentions that a similar system prevailed in France.

It is most likely that gonorrhoea is referred to in three small works published about the middle of the sixteenth century. The first of these is a letter probably printed at Geneva in 1553 by Michael Wood,²⁹ for Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, being an apologia for Protestantism. In 1555 John Bale wrote a manuscript about Dr. Weston; (Dean of Windsor in 1556, deprived of his post in 1557 by Cardinal Pole because of his gross immorality) stating 'at this day is lecherous Weston, who is more practis'd in the art of brech-burning, than all the Whores of the Stews'.³⁰ And again, of the same person, he says, 'He not long ago brent a beggar in St. Botolph's Parish.' In 1562 William Bullein 'discourses on the burning of Harlots'.³¹ Later in 1564, the same author wrote *A Dialogue of the Fever Pestilence*, in which the pox is mentioned. Roger, the groom, soliloquizes thus: 'Her first husband was prentice with James Elles, and of him learned to play at the short-knife and the horn thimble. But these dog tricks will bring one to the poxe, the gallows, or to the devil.' The author refers in his first work to certain drugs 'which have vertue to cleanse scabbes, iche, pox. I saie the pox, as by experience we se there is no better remedy than sweatyng and the drinkyng of guaiacum.'

Better-known medical men did not start to write about venereal disease until well into the second half of the sixteenth century. Thomas Gale, a friend and colleague of Clowes, in his *Certain Workes of Chirurgerie* (1563), has an imaginary pupil talking about 'morbus or great scabbe'. Gale cynically replies 'any disease is morbus: what you mean is the morbus Gallicus!' In the same year John Jones, in his *Dyall of Agues*, makes a casual reference to the pox, when quoting what conditions originate in various countries, 'The Neapolitans, or rather the besiegers of Naples, with the pockes, spread hence to far abroad through all the parts of Europe, no kingdom that I have been in free—the more pity.'

William Clowes can justly be called the first English venereologist. Born in Warwickshire in 1543, he came to London as bound apprentice to the Surgeon George Keble about 1556, attending anatomy lectures in Barber-Surgeons' Hall where John Caius lectured in anatomy. After practice both as an army and naval surgeon he became Surgeon to the Queen and St. Bartholomew's Hospital. As Master and Examiner of his Company and as author of the best surgical books of Elizabethan England he represents the most expert surgical practice of his day. There is no doubt that he had considerable experience of treating syphilis. His work, *A short and profitable Treatise touching the cure of the disease called Morbus Gallicus by unctions*, first published in 1579, ran into several editions. This book was influenced by a translation of John of Vigo's²⁴ work, of which an English translation was made in 1543, and the Frenchman Jean Fernel²² of Amiens, whose works appeared in 1548 and 1554. It is interesting to observe his style of writing.

'The Morbus Gallicus or Morbus Neopolitanus, but more properly Lues Venera, that is the pestilent infection of filthy lust and termed for the most part in England the French Pockes, a sicknes very lothsome, odious, troublesome and daungerous, which spreadeth itself throughout all England and overfloweth as I thinke the whole world.' He then characterizes the vice 'that is the original cause of this infection, that breedeth it, that nurseth it, that disperseth it.' In the cure of the malady he has had some reasonable experience and no small practice for many years. According to

the following passage St. Bartholomew's Hospital was three-quarters occupied by syphilitics.

It is wonderfull to consider how huge multitudes there be of such as be infected with it, and that dayly increase, to the great daunger of the common wealth, and the stayne of the whole nation: the cause whereof I see none so great as the licentious and beastly disorder of a great number of rogues and vagabondes: The filthy type of many lewd and idell persons, both men and women about the citey of London, and the great number of lewd alehouses, which are the very nests and harbourers of such filthy creatures: By means of which disordered persons some other of better disposition are many tymes infected, and many more lyke to be, except there be some speedy remedy provided for the same. I may speake boldly, because I speake truely: and yet I speake it with very grieffe of hart. In the hospitall of Saint Bartholomew in London there hath been cured of this disease by me and three others, within this fyve yeares, to the number of one thousand and more. I speake nothing of Saint Thomas Hospital and other houses about this Citye, wherein an infinite multitude are dayly in cure. . . . For it hapneth in the house of St. Bartholomew very seldome but that among every twentye diseased persons are taken in, fiftene of them have the pocks.

On communication, he speaks of 'good poor people that be infected by unwary eating or drinking or keeping company with these lewd beasts and which either for shame will not bewray it, or for lack of good chirurgions know not how to remedy it, or for lack of ability are not able otherwise to provide for the cure of it.'

Clowes died in 1604, probably of the plague, leaving a son of the same name who became Surgeon to James I.

By this time, the severity of epidemic syphilis had probably abated, and it had become much more like the disease we know today. A contemporary and possibly a pupil of Clowes, John Read of Gloucester (1588)³³ wrote yet another treatise on the pox, stating that its severity had lessened. He warned that it was often improperly treated and that the poor being unable to afford good surgeons resorted to quacks, wise women and other indigents. One such was Woolfgange Frolicke, a Fleming who came to Gloucester in 1587 but 'was not able to answer to any one point in chirurgerie' when examined by the author, who quotes, 'and yet for money got him a licence to practise at Bristow.' The neighbouring city of Bath was much frequented in Tudor times by people suffering from 'pokkes, scabs and great aches', believing in a cure for their ills by drinking spa waters.

The sixteenth century passed with two other serious medical writers on syphilis. John Banister's³⁴ book on the 'general and particular curation of ulcers' (1575) mentions *lues venerea*. Malignant ulcer is treated with guaiacum; mouth ulcers are treated by diet, purgation, decoctions of guaiacum and touching the ulcer with sublimated rosewater. He mentions corroding ulcers 'of the privie parts' which could well be syphilis, chancroid or herpes genitalis. Finally once again he states, 'When ulcers proceed through the French pockes, diet, decoctions of guaiacum and mercurial inunctions should be used.'

In 1596, Peter Lowe³⁵ of Ayr, who had served in the French armies, brought out a monograph 'An easie, certaine and perfect method to cure and prevent the Spanish sickness.' It is interesting that Lowe having served in France, syphilis for him became the 'Spanish sickness'. The essay is a summary of his experience abroad and is mainly theoretical.

Sixteenth-century drama and literature have a wealth of references to syphilis.

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These have been very fully covered by Rolleston³⁶ (1934) and Simpson³⁷ (1959). Shakespeare provides the source for most of the quotations, but other notable sources are Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, George Chapman's play of *All Fools* and Ben Jonson.

Brewster³⁸ (1958) writes interestingly of some of the less well-known Elizabethan and later literary allusions to the 'Winchester goose, the Winchester pigeon, the sweating tub, and marbles'.

SUMMARY

The author gives an account of references to venereal disease in the first hundred years after the outbreak of syphilis. Mention is made of the paucity of English writing compared with Continental sources and not until the end of the sixteenth century are competent medical authorities on the disease found in England.

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M. A. WAUGH

GERIATRICS ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

JUST OVER A century ago, Daniel Maclachlan, Physician to the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, published his book *The Diseases and Infirmities of Advanced Life*. This was based on his extensive experience among the Chelsea pensioners as well as patients seen in private practice. He begins by stating 'the diseases of advanced and declining life have been comparatively neglected . . . they have nowhere received the attention they deserve'. The volume of 718 pages is full both of original observations and also copious quotations from the literature of the period. It is superior in many ways to the two books written by his successors at Chelsea. The clinical descriptions are more vivid than those of Lipscombe (1932), while the references are more extensive than those of my own little work composed under wartime conditions (1940–44).

Maclachlan had been born at Glasgow in 1807, being educated at the local grammar school. He qualified with the Diploma of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh during 1827. Joining the army shortly afterwards, he volunteered for service as Hospital Assistant on the West Coast of Africa. A year later he was transferred to be Assistant Surgeon to the 79th Highland Regiment. In 1840, he was appointed Physician and Surgeon of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, where he served for twenty-three years, until repeated attacks of respiratory infection caused him to retire at the age of fifty-six. He was known professionally as able, well-informed, but not brilliant. The officers at the Royal Hospital noted that 'he persisted in the performance of his duties in spite of great suffering and consequent exhaustion'. Apart from his celebrated book, he wrote relatively little—the chief contribution being the report of a case with