

Mateo Aleman and John Locke : two Frustrated Physicians

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Summary

Two seventeenth century intellectuals who shared a lifelong interest in medicine were both the beneficiaries of the affection and patronage of an important public figure in their respective society and both their patrons died, coincidentally, from the same disease.

Résumé

Deux intellectuels du 17e siècle qui partageaient un intérêt pour la médecine bénéficièrent tous deux du patronage et de l'affection d'un important personnage de leur société. Ces deux personnages succombèrent de la même maladie.

Two seventeenth-century giants of intellect, one a Spanish novelist, the other an English philosopher, might have become eminent physicians had religious prejudice not stood in their way. As it was, the Spaniard, Mateo Aleman (1547-? 1616), prospered as a writer and found a new life in the New World; and the Englishman, John Locke (1632-1704), after years of «inquiries concerning human understanding», devised the intellectual scaffolding for many later Anglo-Saxon political institutions, and furnished many of the central concepts of the American Declaration of Independence.

On Thursday, June 12th, 1608, a fleet of 62 ships sailed from Cadiz in southern Spain, heading for Mexico, and arrived in San Juan de Ulua on Tuesday, the 19th of August. Aboard was Frai Garcia Guerra, recently appointed Archbishop of Mexico and later to become its 12th viceroy. Besides his attendants, the same ship carried a very popular novelist, Mateo Aleman, accompanied by his «oldest daughter»

(in fact, his mistress Francisca de Calderon), a niece, two sons, and two servants. Another famous writer, Jean Ruiz de Alarcon, was a fellow passenger.

Aleman and the archbishop developed a warm friendship during the journey. The prelate was most helpful after their arrival in Mexico and Aleman may have become a member of his household. As we shall see below he reciprocated fully by giving the funeral oration at the archbishop's burial and by subsequently publishing an account of his last years and death, giving to posterity the principal record of this kindly priest-statesman.

Mateo Aleman was born in Seville in 1547, within two weeks of the birth of Cervantes. He came from a family of Jewish origins. At least one of his ancestors had been burned at the stake (ref.1). His father Hernando, born in nearby Jerez, became a physician to the jails of Seville. An uncle, Juan, was also a physician. His mother, Juana de Herrero (or Del Nero) was descended from an Italian family, also Jewish. The Aleman surname (i.e., German) was allegedly derived from a 15th century ancestor who arrived from Germany.

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• Portrait of Mateo Aleman

charge, Catalina de Espinoza, within a year, and both he and she agreed to pay part of the loan after the wedding. It did not take place for another year after the creditor had taken him to court. Returning to his law studies, he requested permission to emigrate to Peru. This was granted but he never went.

In 1599 he published in Madrid his immediately successful picaresque novel *Guzman de Alfarache* or *The Rogue* (3) First Part. Fifty thousand copies were issued in twenty six editions but the author derived little profit from this. It was considered one of the earliest picaresque novels and it remains a favourite. The frontispiece includes a portrait of Aleman and an emblem with a spider dropping on a snake, with the legend «*ab insidiis non est prudentia*» (4) and a fraudulent coat of arms with a double-headed eagle. The theme of the novel, as Aleman himself wrote, was an elaboration of the myth of Sisyphus: the striver who again and again almost succeeds but never quite makes it; an apt description indeed of the writer's own career.

In 1602 an apocryphal *Second Part of Guzman de Alfarache* appeared by «Mateo Lujan de Saavedra», a pseudonym for the lawyer Juan Marti. Aleman responded by his own *Second Part* in 1604 to further acclaim. He also published several scholarly works.

In 1607 he requested permission to emigrate to Mexico. In order to obtain the required «certificate of clean blood», he had to bribe the duke of Ledesma, the King's secretary, by signing over to him all of his remaining real estate. During the crossing he became a friend of the recently appointed archbishop, Frai Garcia Guerra, and it is obvious that Aleman participated intimately in the life and medical problems of the archbishop although often more as a sophisticated and well-informed medical critic rather than as a surgeon or the active coordinator of the prelate's medical care.

Mateo Aleman received a bachelor in arts degree in 1564 and began medical studies in Seville. It is known that he also studied at Alcala de Henares and at Salamanca in 1562 (ref. 2). He returned to Seville in 1568 without having completed the required program for a medical degree and it is assumed that this interruption was due to increasing restrictions on families of Jewish origin, in contrast to the more permissive regulations applied to his father's generation. Aleman never returned to medical studies or practice, but his writings contain medical allusions and demonstrate a continuing interest and a sophisticated understanding of anatomy and pathology.

Aleman's life was stormy and financially disastrous in spite of the spectacular success of his writings and he was jailed several times for failure to pay his debts. He practised law and accounting in a desultory fashion and was commissioned to investigate the work conditions at the mercury mines of Almaden (1), exploited by the Fuggers of Augsburg. His report is scathing, but it was effectively suppressed by the powerful bankers.

In 1568 he contracted a debt with a Captain Fernandez de Ayala (2) and a clause in the agreement stipulated that he would marry Ayala's

- *Portrait of Frai Garcia Guerra*

Frai Garcia Guerra (1560-1612) was born in Fromista, a region through which there were yearly migrations of large herds of sheep, a recurrent event down to the present, established by medieval law (5). This migration plays an important role in later developments.

The details of the cleric's career are skimpy but he seemed to have been eloquent, socially attractive to the members of the court, and the recipient of special preferments and promotions. He had been a friar of the Convent of Santo Domingo in Valladolid and probably its prior, but apparently had no major administrative position before his appointment to Mexico. From all accounts he was a kindly and liberal man, as shown not only by his support of Aleman but of at least one other prominent writer, Juan Ruiz de Alarcon, whom Professor Francisco Marquez has identified as a member of an important Sevillian family of converts (6). Mateo Aleman devoted his last work to events following the arrival of the archbishop in Veracruz in Mexico. Intriguingly, the writer on landing is said to have had as the only book in his possession the first edition of *Don Quixote*, which was impounded by the Inquisition. It was restored by the prelate's intervention.

Los Sucesos de Frai Garcia Gera (sic) (The Events of Frai Garcia Guerra) was published in Mexico in 1613 by C. Adriano Cesar (imprenta de la Viuda de Belli). An extremely rare work, it was fortunately reissued in two modern versions (7). It is an account of the life of the archbishop after his landing in Mexico, his many misadventures, his long and painful illness, death, and autopsy. Events were ominous and tragic from the beginning. Almost immediately the coach in which he was traveling tipped over, though with no reported injuries. Shortly thereafter the platform from which he was reviewing a parade in his honor gave way, crushing an Indian under it. Another one was killed when he fell off a «flying tree», the Aztec equivalent of a maypole. More seriously, the mules pulling the prelate's coach galloped out of control and he jumped out of the coach, suffering major bruises when he fell. His



physicians later attributed his ill health to this accident, a wrong diagnosis, as I hope to prove.

In 1611 the Viceroy Luis de Velasco was appointed to a higher post in Spain. The archbishop was named his temporary successor, not an unusual event under the circumstances. During the transition, an eclipse occurred and a volcanic eruption showered the city with ashes. Astrologers claimed that these events presaged «the death of the prince of the church» (ref. 4).

Two major earthquakes followed in quick succession and the viceroy-bishop had to retire to his palace feeling ill and feverish. Aleman describes in detail subsequent events: bloodletting, purges, punctures, and deterioration of the patient. A hepatic lesion was diagnosed, though without mention of jaundice. On January 28, 1612, as a desperate measure, a chest drainage was attempted, «too high», according to Aleman. Nothing was accomplished and the patient died on February 22.

The description of the autopsy is meticulous and vivid : «an abscess of the liver, the size of half an egg», a chest abscess with the lower ribs «so rotten that they crumbled between the fingers», and the brain so swollen that the examiners were unable to push it back into the cranium. (It was buried immediately, several days before the main funeral) (ref. 5).

Portrait of John Locke

The illness occurred too long after to be attributed to the carriage accident and although it could conceivably have been caused by tuberculosis or some other purulent infection, the overall clinical and pathological picture is most consistent with cystic hydatid disease caused by ingestion of *Echinococcus* eggs of the dog tapeworm, often acquired in childhood and later from playing with sheepdogs.

Mateo Aleman concludes his book with the funeral oration which he delivered, a conventional literary-theological exercise, in the style of the day. We know of no later writing by him and know nothing else of his last years and death. There is casual mention of his residence in the village of Chalcos, near Mexico City, in 1615, and the time and place of his death remain obscure.

Across the ocean in a Somerset village near Bristol, John Locke (1632-1704) was born, one month before Spinoza and six years after Bacon's death. His parents came from Puritan families, clothiers and tanners. The father earned a modest living as an attorney and clerk and had some minor landholdings that allowed the son to title himself «gentleman» in the front of one of his books (ref. 6).

In contrast to the erratic Mateo Aleman, John Locke kept meticulous records and details of his observations and different versions of his works have been largely preserved, either in printed form or in manuscript.

Locke's father, through the influence of a fellow officer during the Civil War, was able to get his son accepted at the prestigious Westminster School and later at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1652. He retained a connection with Christ Church until 1684 when he was expelled by royal command. He was almost continuously in college only from 1652 to 1667. He was allowed to continue his fellowship in spite of not having taken orders, all by special royal dispensation. Between 1661 and 1664 he taught



Amshel, 1704 Westlyne, 1704

John Locke.

*«Absolute Liberty, just & true Liberty,
equal & impartial Liberty.»*

Greek, rhetoric, and moral philosophy. Amongst other works he produced *Respirationis Usus* so far inadequately transcribed.

During his early years at Oxford, Locke continued a major interest in medicine. «All that was expected... for a bachelorship in physic was... three years' attendance at the lectures of the Arabic professor (8) and the professors of anatomy and medicine, together with certain disputations in the medical school... and four years' delay necessary to qualify for the doctorship». Locke obtained his MB in 1664 but never his MD.

We have records of books read by Locke between 1658 and 1667. One hundred fifty-seven of these were medical, 59 of natural science, and 55 on theology and religion. His final library as reported by Harrison and Laslett leaned more heavily on theology; but after religion, medicine was next. This (ref 8) documents his lifelong interest in spite of his many other preoccupations. His approach, like that of Sydenham and the other members of the Royal Society, was strictly empirical and much influenced by Rene Descartes.

In 1666, while still at Oxford and assisting a medical colleague, David Thomas, a crucial event took place, his encounter with Lord Ashley Cooper, later Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the outstanding statesmen of the age. An immediate sympathy between the two men became evident and Lord Ashley invited Locke to move into his household to become the family physician and medical advisor.

Locke was involved in the negotiations for the marriage of Ashley's son and later delivered his grandson, but the relationship between the two men became increasingly close and resulted in a major collaboration in political writings and in practical affairs such as Locke's designing a constitution for the Carolinas, for which Lord Shaftesbury was Lord Proprietor, and Locke himself invested in several of these colonial ventures including the slave trade.

He was a late starter in his political and philosophical writings and they were mostly produced between 1671 and 1689, but throughout his life he continued to write on medical subjects, mostly in his commonplace books, largely to be found in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. He collaborated with the great empirical physician, Thomas Sydenham (9), and in writings with Robert Boyle and other members of the Royal Society on human blood and other topics (10). In these works it is often impossible to determine when Locke was the transcriber and when the principal author and investigator.

The work that he prized above all others, written and revised over many years, are his *Essays Concerning Human Understanding* *De Intellectu* which deal with psychology, education, political science, and many related topics. It was the first book published under his own name, the two previous ones having been anonymous, and while the first edition appeared in 1689, the author continued to make major revisions in several later editions, the last one posthumous.

It is clear that in his early Oxford period, starting in 1652, Locke was anxious to obtain a medical degree. Although he did get his MB, the Oxford authorities denied him the MD degree. The reasons were clearly religious. Locke was Low Church; Oxford was the centre of High Church sentiments. For similar reasons he was expelled from Oxford in 1684 by royal command.

The most vivid reports by Locke and his medical colleagues deal with the illness and death of Lord Shaftesbury, his patron and most important patient.

Ashley Cooper, later Lord Shaftesbury, was orphaned young and lived in various households of relatives, all in the south of England. It is fair to assume that as a child he was in frequent contact with sheep and sheepdogs, an important factor in his later medical history. He had a brilliant political career, with many ups and downs, reaching the pinnacle as Lord Chancellor and having to flee for his life in 1683 after a long incarceration in the Tower. Until close to the end, Locke's career was intimately bound to that of his patron, although for several years before the latter's death, he was travelling in France and Holland, largely to avoid political reprisals.

As early as the age of 16, Shaftesbury began to suffer from severe bouts of colic, mostly in the left upper quadrant, often with fever and sometimes with jaundice. These episodes baffled his physicians who attempted to blame them on various accidents, including the overturning of his carriage in Breda, Holland. Note the similarity with the history of Frai Garcia Guerra.

In 1668 he developed a large painful mass in the right upper quadrant and Locke, after consulting Sydenham and several other medical authorities in England and France, recommended that the mass be drained, a very risky procedure at the time. While Locke definitely supervised the surgery, it seems likely that the operation itself was carried out by a barber-



surgeon, who a couple of years later repeated the procedure. A silver cannula was inserted and it drained successfully for 15 years, extruding fluid and «skins», which Dr Osier first explained as being typical of hydatid disease, caused by *Echinococcus* (ref. 9).

Shaftesbury had many political enemies who attacked him viciously, mocking his life-saving device. Dryden, in particular, savaged him in «Absalom and Achitophel». After years of confinement in the Tower he was tried for treason, was acquitted, and fled to Holland. He acquired Dutch citizenship to avoid extradition, had an attack of «abdominal gout», and died after a brief, acute illness, presumably when his drain became occluded. Locke was not there at the time and had not been with Shaftesbury for several years.

This philosopher had a few other important patients including Lady Northumberland (ref.10) with tic douloureux, but increasingly his efforts centered on political philosophy where he continued to revise his magnum opus, *The Essay*. In his later years he was the house guest of Lady Damaris Masham and her family, and he died there in 1704.

Aleman and Locke were very different men : both geniuses, one an erratic man, the other a highly moral, serious, extremely organized thinker. But they shared a lifelong interest in medicine, frustrated by the religious prejudices of their day. They each shared the affection and patronage of an important public figure, who happened to have suffered from the same disease. We are fortunate in having the vivid and lucid account of the two writers, which allows us to reconstruct with considerable certainty the case histories of the illness which the two eminent patients shared.

References

1. M. Aleman, Guzman de Alfarache, p.13
2. M. Aleman, Ortografia, Folio54, VI E. Cros, Mateo Aleman p.13
3. M.A. «Sucesos»
4. V. Andrade, «Ensayo», p.59
5. V. Andrade, «Ensayo» p.68
6. J. Locke, «Essay»
7. Osier, «Alabama Student" p.70, quoting H.R. Fox-Rourne
8. J.R. Milton, in «Locke's Philosophy", Ed. G.A.J. Roberts, p.35
9. Osier, «Alabama Student»
10. K. Dewhurst, «John Locke», p.93-111

Notes

1. Almaden : A mine, in Arabic, the emperor Charles V (King Charles I of Spain), in serious financial straits because of numerous military expeditions, gave the Fuggers this mining concession in exchange for their banking support. Condemned felons were provided for the deadly labor. Bleiberg, *Nuevos Datos Biograficos*.
2. In one of his petitions, M.A. assumed the surname of Ayala, presumably to suggest aristocratic origins.
3. «Alfarache» possibly derived from the Arabic «Faraq» : happiness, freedom from care, or from «Alfarax»; a small horse from the light cavalry.
4. Loosely, «From illusion - ordeception - no practical wisdom can be gleaned"
5. P. Garcia, «Transhumancia»
6. Marquez «Canto» and personal communication
7. Consulted in the John Carter Brown Lib. Providence, R.I. Reissued in two modern editions.

8. G.A. Russell *The Arabick' Interest*, p.224-263, describes Locke's relationship with Dr Edward Pockocke, «Professor of the Hebrew and Arabick Tongues» and his son, translator of «Philosophus Autodidacticus», an Arabic allegorical tale that would have inspired some of Locke's psychosocial theories, especially regarding the infant's mind as a «Tabula rasa».
9. The group included Richard Lower, originator of blood transfusions, and Christopher Wren, illustrator and publisher of medical books before he turned to architecture (St. Paul's Cathedral)
10. Dewhurst, *John Locke*

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Biography

DrGuillermo C. Sanchez, a member of the International Association for the History of Medicine, was an internist and medical historian associated with the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. He was fluent in several languages and the author of a number of medical historical articles. He graduated from Harvard College in 1946 and from Harvard Medical School in 1949. He was a longtime chairman of the Archives Committee at MGD, a past president of the Roxbury Clinical Records Club and a member of the Club of Odd Volumes. Dr. Sanchez passed away on August 17, 2000 at his home in West Newton, Mass. He was 75.