

The Prescribing Physicians and Sick Scholars of Oxford: Jeremiah Webbe's Apothecarial Notebook, 1653-54

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Summary

The prescription book of Jeremiah Webbe, apothecary, illuminates the medical practices of a number of Oxford physicians, including those of Thomas Willis, Francis Barksdale, and William Conyers. It provides an indication of the nature of the illness present in Oxford, especially among the students of the University, in the years 1653 and 1654.

Résumé

Le livre de prescriptions de Jeremiah Webbe, pharmacien, éclaire les pratiques médicales d'un nombre de médecins d'Oxford, y compris celles de Thomas Willis, Francis Barksdale, et William Conyers. Il fournit une indication sur la nature des maladies présentes à Oxford, surtout parmi les étudiants de l'Université, dans les années 1653 et 1654.

Many features of the medical milieu of Oxford in the 1650s remain to be examined. Medicine at Oxford under the Commonwealth is important, for here was formed the inspiration for the Royal Society of London, in the «Oxford Experimental Philosophical Club», with its emphasis upon iatrochemistry and other relevant subjects (1). The scientific experimentation involved numerous Oxford medical figures, many still relatively obscure, who were both college tutors and active practitioners (2). Efforts to establish the contours of medicine at Oxford have to date focussed upon the early career of Thomas Willis. He proceeded M.D. in 1660, was in the same year elected Sedleian Professor of Natural Philosophy, and had published the first of many works, *Diatribae duae medico-philosophicae*, in 1659. However, Willis's connections to Oxford went back to his matriculation at Christ Church in 1636 and, following service in the army of Charles I, his return to the college in 1646 to graduate bachelor

of medicine, with a licence to practice. Willis's only known surviving casebook, for the years 1650-52, is invaluable in establishing the conditions of medical practice in the disrupted town and university, so recently exposed to siege, epidemics, and political revolution (3). The present short study will build upon this foundation. It is an examination of the prescription book of one Jeremiah Webbe, an Oxford apothecary. As with Willis, only one volume of his records has come to light, for the years 1653 and 1654 (4). The volume, which includes reference to the practice of Willis and several of his noted professional colleagues and fellow members of the Oxford Experimental Club, provides a snapshot of some important features of medical practice in Oxford during this decade.

Jeremiah Webbe was only one of a number of Oxford apothecaries of his generation. Like Willis, he was associated with Christ Church, being listed as «apothecary» in the College registrar of Michaelmas term 1656 (5). Willis himself possessed close professional ties in this period to two Oxford apothecaries, **John** Haselwood and John Crosse (a member of the

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Experimental Club and subsequently Robert Boyle's landlord for his first Oxford laboratory) (6). None the less, Oxford in the 1650s was an intimate town, and (as will be seen) several of Willis's patients were prescribed for by Webbe, as were patients of Sir Thomas Clayton, M.D., the Regius Professor of Medicine, 1647-65, and long-time patron of Haselwood. Webbe's business was diverse. In the years 1653-54 his clients were drawn from the colleges, the city, and the nearby towns and villages of Abingdon, Headlinton, Littlemore, and Witney. A few clients, as far removed as Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire, and Scotland (7), were perhaps isolated reminders of Oxford's national role as the centre of the royalist war effort during the 1640s. Webbe's customers also covered the social hierarchy, from the child of a peer of the realm, to one Cross, «a diseased old man» (8). Many, such as Goodwife Constable of Witney, are effectively anonymous and untraceable.

Webbe's prescription record is a rough notebook of scrawled receipts and miscellaneous information. The arrangement is chronological, although many of the prescriptions are undated and unattributed, or attributed only by way of cryptic initials or abbreviations. In almost all cases the client is identified, if at all, by surname and sex only, so that identification is either questionable or impossible. What the document does provide is a strong indication of the range of illnesses prevalent at Oxford in 1653-54 which required medical prescription, information on the ill health of twenty-eight students at the University, who were identified by surname and College, and thus are generally traceable in the Oxford records, and related information on the prescribing physicians, whose names are sometimes noted in the margins of the notebook.

The range of ailments requiring medical prescriptions in 1653-54 was broad and more diverse than the fifty cases covered in Willis's casebook for the two preceding years, a document representative of his own practice in Oxford and

the nearby towns, and providing our best knowledge of the epidemiological fabric of the area (9). It is coincidental, but one patient seems to appear both in Willis's casebook and in Webbe's record. The final, undated entry in the casebook was for a «Mrs Heme of Abingdon», aged thirty and the mother of a child of fourteen months (10). She suffered from listlessness, lack of appetite, sleeplessness, headaches and other symptoms, diagnosed by the editor of the casebook as pulmonary tuberculosis (11). In 1653 Webbe prescribed for a Mrs. Hearne of Abingdon, afflicted by wind and a «bad stomach» (12). Webbe filled prescriptions for many afflictions, from love-sickness in a young woman, to toothache, sore eyes, and flatulence, to tuberculosis (consumption), dropsy, jaundice, malaria (ague) and smallpox. As in the medical practice of Willis, (13) psychiatric illnesses were common: Webbe filled prescriptions for a Mrs Freke of Kennington for «spleen and fits», for Thomas Handie (born 1630) of St. John's College, the son of a London cutler and a graduate of the Merchant Taylor's School, for "melancholy and spleen", and the "desperate melancholy" of Master Spicer of the University (14). All three, perhaps not by coincidence, were the patients of the physician Dr Francis Barksdale, the fellow and vice-president of Magdalen College newly imposed upon the College by the parliamentary commissioners (15).

Webbe's prescriptions include one by Barksdale for a Doctor Cross, severely choleric and afflicted by deafness. This is perhaps Joshua Cross of Magdalen, created Doctor of Canon Law in 1650, and Willis's immediate predecessor as Sedleian Professor, 1648-1660 (16). All the remaining clients with university affiliations, however, were students. A total of twenty-eight students, spread over eight colleges, were prescribed for, several more than once: Magdalen - 11; Christ Church - 4; St John's - 3; Jesus - 2; Wadham - 2; New - 2; All Souls - 1; Merton - 1; New Inn Hall - 1 (17). Most of the patients can be positively identified. Several went on to illustrious careers. John Rosewell (d. 1684), who suffered

from «a very hot stomach», had matriculated at Magdalen on 2 April 1652, graduated B.A. from Corpus Christi in 1655, M.A. in 1659, and B.D. in 1667, eventually became a canon of Windsor and the celebrated headmaster of Eton, credited with establishing its educational reputation (18). Samuel Woodforde (1636-1700), the poet, who experienced «a sudden heat in the face» treated by Francis Barksdale, matriculated at Wadham on 20 July 1654, received the degrees of B.A. in 1657, and D.D. in 1674, became rector of Shalden and Hartley Maudit, Hampshire, canon of Chichester and of Winchester, Fellow of the Royal Society, and father of William Woodforde, Regius Professor of Medicine, 1730-58 (19). Walker Marshall of New College, Humphrey Gunter of Merton, and the highly controversial Henry Hickman of Magdalen went on to become well known nonconformist ministers (20). Others of these patients of 1653-54 embarked upon careers in the Restoration Church of England, including Cyprian Banbery, John Earle, William Milnar, John Panton, and Robert Sandford (21). The John Master or Masters of Christ Church, treated for smallpox by Dr Francis Hungerford in 1653, is of considerable interest (22). He proceeded B.A. in 1657 and M.A. 1659, but was finally awarded the bachelor and doctorate degrees in medicine in 1674 and became an honorary fellow of Royal College of Physicians of London in 1680 (23). An intimate associate of Thomas Willis, he assisted with both *De Anima Brutorum* (1672) and the first part of *Pharmaceutice Rationalis* (1674) (24).

The most common medical complaints for the students were melancholy and consumption. The melancholy that afflicted Handie and Spicer has already been noted. In addition, John Sayer of Christ Church was twice treated for «spleen and melancholy» by Barksdale; he subsequently left the College to become chaplain to the famous Parliamentarian general, Sir William Waller (25). Consumption affected at least five students, a sixth was prescribed a medication to prevent it, and a seventh and eighth were treated for the spitting of blood, and a vein broken in the lungs

after a «desperate» cough (26). The last occurrence was clearly viewed as very serious, and treated by three practitioners. Barksdale treated most of the consumption cases; however, Willis had as one of his patients in 1653 Mr Jones of Jesus College, for «a consumption proceeding from the blood» (27). Only one Jones is known to have attended the College at this time : Samuel Jones, born near Chirk Castle, Denbigh, was a scholar in 1648, received the degrees of B.A. in April 1652 and M.A. in November 1654, became vicar of Llangynwydd, Glamorgan, in 1658, was ejected for nonconformity to the Anglican service in 1662, and died in 1697, aged 70 (28). Willis's other medical case in Webbe's records was for a student at Jesus in 1654, one Mr Bynner - who cannot be positively identified - for the retention of urine (29). These are noteworthy as the first known treatments by Willis of college students; in the years 1650-52 his practice had been very restricted and economically precarious (30).

Smallpox struck at least one student at Wadham College. John Rogers, of Dedham, Essex, who matriculated in July 1654, aged sixteen, was placed under the care of «Dr Stevens». Presumably this was the Philip Steephens (d. 1679), fellow of New College in 1649, licenced to practice medicine on 2 April 1653, M.D. in 1656, and principal of Hart Hall, 1653-60, who became a candidate of the College of Physicians of London in 1659. In 1658 Steephens and William Browne produced the augmented edition of the *Catalogus horti botanici Oxoniensis* (31). Smallpox was also identified at Christ Church in 1653, where John Master or Masters was treated by Francis Hungerford and another student was given Hungerford's prescription «to prevent the pox» (32). Hungerford, B.A. (1636) and M.A. (1640) from All Souls, did not acquire the degree of Bachelor of Medicine until 1656, but he was evidently in practice considerably earlier (33). Other ailments treated in this period were ague, for Robert Sandford, subsequently rector of Radwinter, Essex, a «noise in his ears» for Humphrey Gunter (d. 1691), the non-conformist

minister, an ulcer (fistula) in a Mr Whaley of St John's, and «much wind in the bowels» suffered by William Milnar, a chorister of Magdalen and later College chaplain (34).

The ailments, therefore, ranged from life threatening to inconvenient. It is noteworthy that none of the scholars are known to have died from their ailments. Although some disappear from the university records in this period, only in one case is death certain. It is for John Rogers, the smallpox sufferer, who passed away several years later, in June 1656, from unknown causes. For the rest, the health problems while students at Oxford were those of morbidity, of greater or less severity, not mortality.

Dr Francis Barksdale was the most frequent of the prescribing physicians for Webbe's clientele, both of the city and the university. In 1653 he was approximately thirty-five years of age, and resigned his fellowship at Magdalen in the same year. In 1656 he was admitted a candidate of the Royal College of Physicians of London (35). Thomas Willis, Sir Thomas Clayton, Philip Steephens, and Francis Hungerford have already been mentioned. There were others: John Maplett (16117-1670), who received the degrees of B.A. from Christ Church in 1634 and M.A. in 1647 and rose to serve as principal of Gloucester Hall, 1660-62; Dr Tobias Garbrand (d. 1689), the principal of Gloucester Hall, 1647-60, who practised at Abingdon; Dr William Conyers (1622-65) of St John's, M.D. 1653, who was admitted to the Royal College of Physicians of London in 1656; Peter Eliot (d. 1681) who was a graduate and chaplain of Corpus Christi and held the degrees of B.M. (1646) and M.D. (1652) (36). In 1662 Eliot, Willis, and William Day, surgeon, leased consulting rooms in partnership at the Angel on Oxford High Street (37). Conyers is one of the most interesting of this group. In 1652 he served on the Experimental Club's committee working to compile a scientific index of the volumes in the Bodleian Library, and has been described as «a devotee of the chemical

arts» (38). His early death while treating patients of the Great Plague of 1665 cut short a promising career. The identities of other physicians are less certain: was the «Dr. Clarke» who was associated with Barksdale in 1653 the Timothy Clarke (d. 1672) of Balliol, M.D. July 1652, who later served as physician in ordinary to Charles II and on the original council of the Royal Society of London, or Henry Clerke (d. 1687) of Magdalen, M.D. May 1652, fellow of the Royal Society, 1667, fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, 1669, and vice chancellor of Oxford, 1676-7? (39). Likewise, the Dr Jackson of 1653 could have been one of several Oxford practitioners of this period (40). Willis, Conyers, Steephens, Maplett, Clerke and Eliot, at least, were all associated with the intellectual ferment at Oxford in the 1650s, participants in «a pattern of medical activity and education scarcely congruent to the standard [now outdated] historical descriptions of moribund university science and medicine» (41).

A single record does not provide answers to all questions. The prescription book of Jeremiah Webbe is a noteworthy document. It illuminates features of the medical landscape of Oxford at an important time, showing a range of ailments, and the treatments provided by a variety of prescribing physicians. Several of these physicians possessed standing of national importance; their case records have never come to light so no studies of their practices could have been undertaken. Certainly the prescriptions of Francis Barksdale, of which several dozen are recorded by Webbe, are deserving of study, while individual prescriptions by Sir Thomas Clayton, the Younger, and William Conyers are of interest. Willis and Steephens were both in the initial years of their medical practices, both unpublished, and the prescriptions for the former, at least, can usefully be added to the meagre body of knowledge for the development of a young, influential physician and scientist (42).

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8. *Ibid.*, fols. 113v, 211.
9. Dewhurst, *Casebook*, pp. 41-3, 63, 156-7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
12. Sloane Ms. 564, fol. 178v.
13. Dewhurst, *Casebook*, table opposite p. 157.
14. Sloane Ms. 564, fols. 157, 175, 209; Foster, II, 644.
15. Foster, I, 72.
16. Sloane Ms. 564, fol. 234v; Webster, pp. 124, 154, 166.
17. The total is twenty-seven, because the college for one student, Williams, is unspecified; this possibly may have been Benjamin Williams of Magdalen, or Roger Williams of Merton. Foster, IV, 1636, 1644.
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36. Foster, I, 318, II, 457, 546, III, 968.
37. Dewhurst, *Casebook*, p. 2
38. Frank, «Ward Diaries», 150, 155.
39. Foster, I, 280, 284.
40. *Ibid.*, II, 794-6.
41. Frank, «Ward Diaries», 153-7 (quoted on p. 157).
42. *Ibid.*, 153.

Biographies

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