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Notes

Robert Yaxley, Tudor Physician

Phyllis Johnson Walton

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On the 22nd day of the month of October, 1540, Robert Yaxley, doctor of Physic of the city of London, dwelling in the parish of St. Michael in Cornhill, made his last will and testament.¹ (Although a recent statute allowed for transfer of real property by will,² any land owned by Dr. Yaxley would almost certainly have been held in trust and not subject to the terms of his will.) After bequeathing his soul to Almighty God, his blessed mother, Saint Mary, and all the company of heaven, and his body to be buried in the churchyard of St. Michael's, he made provision for the church. Moneys were allotted for torches, an alter cloth and vestment, and masses with "no other wyne but redd wyne of the best that may be hadde," and a "continuall taper to be borne at the tyme of celebracon upon saynt Kateryns aulter, and to paye yerely for the said taper."³ Seven years before Parliament legislated the restoration of the cup to the laity, he also provided that the best red wine be used to give communion, a healing sacrament, to the sick and to women with child.⁴ "I will that all women with child and syke people reseevyng

1 Prerogative Court of Canterbury. F, 18, Alenger.

2 32 Henry VIII ch. 1.

3 I have used Michael T. Walton's transcription of the wills and expanded common scribal abbreviations.

4 See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 34-36, for the curative and prophylactic powers of the Host.

the blessed Sacrament to be houstled⁵ with the same wyne as farr as it will extend in case they will them selffs.” He concluded his gifts to the parish by bestowing on St. Kathryn’s alter his own large silver and gilt with beryl reliquary, a pax,⁶ and a communion-cloth case.⁷

Dr. Yaxley then bequeathed to each of his servants, both male and female, ten shillings. He made two specific gifts of silver cups, each worth 4 marks sterling, one to his wife’s niece, Ann Hamond, and the other to Margaret Brigges [Bruges], the daughter of a fellow physician, Peter Fernandez.

After instructing his executors to expend 40 shillings sterling on the poor, he gave “all the rest of my goodes moveable and unmoveable, debts, annuities, and specialties with all other lyke, . . . to my wife to bestowe or caus to be bestowed . . . at her discrecion for the whelth⁸ of my soul and all Christian soules.”⁹

Two days later, on the 24 day of October, his wife Margaret made her own will.¹⁰ Where Robert’s will followed a neat order, it could have been drafted from the then equivalent of the fill-in-the-blank wills we now find in office supply stores or drafted by Legalzoom.com, Margaret’s will is of a very different nature. Robert has expired, for she refers to herself as the “late wyf to Robert Yaxlee.” She begins much as her husband did, bequeathing her soul to Almighty God and to his blessed mother and her body to be buried near her husband. She gives an alter cloth worth 5 shillings to the high alter of St. Michael’s. Then, almost as if she were distracted while looking around the room, she bequeaths to Margaret Brograve

5 Administered the Eucharist.

6 A flat tablet adorned with a sacred image that worshipers kissed.

7 Corporass.

8 Weal, welfare.

9 P.C.C., F., 18, Alenger.

10 P.C.C., F., 18, Alenger.

a satin gown—or maybe her damask gown instead—four pairs of coarse sheets, one pair of fine, blankets, tablecloths, and one of her best towels.

Reminded of her duty, she directs her executors to distribute 20 pounds sterling to the poor; then she returns to the delightful chore of parceling out some of her household goods between her husband's nephew, Richard, her own niece Anne Hamond, and Margaret Brigges, each of whom had benefited by Robert's will, and Elyn Champion.

Is she prompted by the scribe to insert the obligatory gift of 10 shillings to each of her women servants and 20 shillings to her male servant Peter? That taken care of, she remembers her sister Verney with a black velvet kirtel and sleeves, and a gold ring.

Now we start to see Margaret as a woman who loved jewelry. I can almost see her, having pulled her jewelry casket to her lap, going through the casket piece by piece. A ring here, a broach there, coral beads, hoops of gold, a gold enameled pomander, crosses, a diamond, a ruby.

Then there is another set of sheets and a silver pot to give to Mary Atkynson, and gifts of a French hood, gowns, another kirtel, a scarlet petticoat, and nightgowns. Having, in her thoughts, come to the bed, she bequeaths bed hangings, pillows, and more sheets. Next, a stone pot with a silver gilded lid—perhaps the chamber pot?

By what train of consciousness does she now give Richard Yaxley, her husband's nephew, the clothing that had belonged to her husband, especially since Robert himself had directed her to use his property for the welfare of his soul? Perhaps, recalling this, she then bequeaths an alter cloth made of cloth of gold and velvet to the town of Melles [Mellis], the Yaxley family parish in Suffolk.

Margaret has not exhausted her own resources. She bestows clothing of satin, damask, and velvet, silver cups, pots, basins, and ewers, and jewelry, including “a payr of [sandlewood] bedes gawdyd with gold which was king Henry the viiiths.”

In addition to her gifts to church, charity, and servants, Margaret remembers over twenty people in her will, most of them women friends and relatives. Although it is impossible to identify many of the beneficiaries, their surnames, including Verney, Campion, Bruges, Brograve, and Lodge, suggest connections to persons prominent in the City of London. The wills also are evidence of the Yaxleys' friendship with the Sidneys and the Pagenhams. Sir William Sydney, knight, is named Robert's overseer, and Margaret's executor. Molle Sidney is referred to as Margaret's goddaughter.

Margaret did not long survive her husband, for the wills of both were probated December 4, 1540, six weeks after the drafting of Margaret's.

The wills present the Yaxleys at the end of their lives—pprosperous, respected, and religious. Much of their prosperity and respect came from Robert's medical practice and his work in London, but Robert's was not a Dick Whittington story. The Yaxley family, originally surnamed Herbert (Herberd), had their ancestral home in Suffolk, in the parishes of Yaxley and Mellis near the town of Eye and about 90 miles from London. Robert's father Richard was born about 1440, and appears in the surviving records first as Richard Herbert, then as Richard Blogate (his mother was the heiress of John de Blogate of Yaxley), and finally as Richard Yaxley.

Robert was Richard's second son; the older brother, John Yaxley, as heir, maintained his ties to the ancestral home and was buried at the parish church in Mellis, one of the two adjoining family villages, the other being Yaxley. John had been a member of Grey's Inn in London and one of ten serjeants-at-law under Henry VII. "It has been remarked that Yorkist and early Tudor England saw the emergence of a new professional managerial class; the nucleus of this class was formed by the common lawyers."¹¹ Unlike the greater number of lawyers who gained social status due to their success in royal service, John Yaxley came from the established gentry;

11 E.W. Ives, "The Common Lawyers in Pre-Reformation England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, 18 (1968):145-173 at 153.

his father Richard was a justice of the peace.¹² His descendants remained in Suffolk and their names appear in the Nicholas Bacon manorial rolls.

While his brother John was pursuing an extremely successful legal career, Robert entered into the study of physic. He became a questionist at Cambridge in November, 1477. He would have been about 16 years old at the time, so we can infer that he was born between 1459 and 1461. He became a bachelor of medicine in 1486, at about age 26, but it was not until eleven years later that he took his M.D.¹³ Prior to that date, he was probably in practice, for in May 1497, John Alcock, Bishop of Ely, granted him a ten-mark annuity.¹⁴

Although Robert would make his life in London, as his and his wife's wills show, he remained attached to his family and Suffolk. In 1503, Robert joined his brothers John and Richard in a real estate transaction.¹⁵ In 1513 he again participated in a Yaxley family legal matter involving the jointure of his nephew Anthony's wife, Elizabeth.¹⁶ Both contracts dealt with Suffolk property.

It may be that Robert's London life also involved legal matters. Court records for 1500 describe an action by Robert Yexlee, gentleman, against Richard Hanchit, citizen and skinner, on a bond given April 5, 1498. Hanchit claimed the bond was invalid because he gave it under duress, Yexlee "threatening his life and the

12 Ives, 157.

13 Cambridge University Grace Book A, 120, spelled Jaxle. C. H. Talbot and E. A. Hammond, *The Medical Practitioners in Medieval England* (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1965), 306, cite the majority of documents that refer to Robert Yaxley.

14 Alfred W. Gibbons, *Ely Episcopal Records; A Calendar and Concise View of the Episcopal Records preserved in the Muniment Room of the Palace at Ely* (Lincoln: James Williamson, 1891), 415; *Reg. Alcock, Ely Diocesan Remembrancer*, 109, p. 76 cited in C.H. Talbot and E.A. Hammond, *The Medical Practitioners in Medieval England; A Biographical Register*, 306.

15 MS 2368, "Sir Nicholas Bacon Collection of English Court and Manorial Documents," <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/findaid/bacon/15.html>.

16 MS 4380, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/findaid/bacon/15.html>.

“mutilation of his limbs.” It seems unlikely that this Robert Yexlee is identical with Robert Yaxley, M.D., who is usually identified by his occupation, but the sum involved, 100 shillings, argues that the plaintiff was a person of substance.¹⁷

As one might expect, we also know little about Robert’s actual medical practice, but what we do know shows him to have been one of the most important physicians in the country. He was one of the first six fellows of the Royal College of Physicians of London established by Henry VIII in 1518, each of whom was referred to by name in the Letters Patent.¹⁸ Although Robert was not a court physician, he was paid from the Privy Purse at least twice. He received the sum of 13 pounds, 6 shillings 8 pence in December 1513 for treating Mary Tudor, the king’s seventeen-year-old sister, for a period of ten weeks.¹⁹ On 1 February 1532, he along with another physician received 4 pounds, perhaps for the treatment of Lord Richmond, the king’s illegitimate son who had been ill in January. It is also possible that he was paid for service to Thomas Boleyn, Earl of Wiltshire, the father of Anne Boleyn, who was given money for a physician on February 1.²⁰

17 Jonathan Mackman and Matthew Stevens, “CP40/952: Easter term 1500,” Court of common pleas: The National Archives, CP40: 1399-1500, British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=118167>.

18 Pat. 10 Henry VIII, p. 2 m. 15. William Munk, *The Roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, 2d rev. ed. (London: By the College, 1878) I:1-2.

19 J. S. Brewer (editor), “The King’s Book of Payments, 1513,” Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 2:1515-1518, British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=90979>. “Rob. Yaxley, Dr. in Physic, 10 weeks’ attendance on the Princess of Castile, 13l. 6s. 8d.” Mary was referred to as the Princess of Castile after she was betrothed by her father to the future Charles V, prince of Castile. Henry VIII did not renounce the betrothal until 1514, the year Mary was married to Louis XII of France.

20 James Gairdner (editor), “Henry VIII: Privy Purse Expences,” Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 5:1531-1532, British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=77503>. Entry for January 23rd states: “To a physician that went to my lord of Richmond, 40s.”

When Robert was in his late seventies, he was still practicing medicine. In January 1539, he and Edward Wotton, M.D. were paid annuities for their care of Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, then resident in the Tower.²¹ She survived him and was not executed until May 1541.

(Later in the sixteenth and in the seventeenth century, the Yaxleys were known as one of the prominent recusant families. At least three of Robert's nephews were priests²² and the Spanish ambassador referred to Robert's great-nephew Francis as a "good catholic" during the early part of Elizabeth's reign.²³)

The meager data we have, which consist of his concern for new mothers shown by his will and his care of King Henry VIII's sister Mary and Henry's female cousin Margaret Pole, suggest that Robert had a special interest in the medical treatment of women. He certainly seems to have cared for and valued them. His female servants received the same bequest as his male servants; his wife was executor of his estate, and he singles out two women for special gifts in a will otherwise devoid of personal bequests.

The wills of many fifteenth and sixteenth century medical practitioners bequeath books on physic and surgery, but Robert's makes no such reference.²⁴ Perhaps that is due to the nearness of his death, which did not allow him to make many specific gifts, or it may be that given his age, he was close to eighty years old, he had already given away his books. The Great Fire of 1666 destroyed

21 "Letters and Papers: January 1539, 26-31", Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 14 Part 1: January-July 1539 (1894), pp. 51-77. Item 181. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=75842>.

22 Walter C. Metcalfe, ed. *The Visitations of Suffolk, made . . . 1561, . . . 1577, and . . . 1612, with Notes and an Appendix of Additional Suffolk Pedigrees* (Exeter: Wm. Pollard, 1882), 81-2.

23 Alfred Frederick Pollard, "Yaxley, Francis," *Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900) 63:305-6.

24 Michael T. Walton and Phyllis J. Walton, *Medical Practitioners and Law in Fifteenth Century London* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu, 2007), 192-5.

the library of the Royal College of Physicians and any books Robert may have given to it. Thus, we have no evidence from his books about Robert's medical interests.

Robert apparently spent most of his later adult life in London, most of it in the parish of St. Michael Cornhill, where, by 1504, when he was about 45 years old, he was a leading figure. The affairs of the parish were in disarray and the Drapers' Guild took over its management, including the right of patronage. Robert, as parishioner of the church, was one of the members of the commission enacting new ordinances for its governance. This group of parishioners also had the responsibility to review and audit the accounts of the churchwardens.²⁵ In 1522, Dr. Yaxley is listed in a royal valuation of lands and goods of the parish.²⁶ In 1540, he was buried in its churchyard. Even now, the website for the parish lists two famous burials: Robert Fabyan, sheriff of London and author of the *The New Chronicles of England and France*, and Robert Yaxley, physician.²⁷

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25 *The Accounts of the Church Wardens of the Parish of St. Michael Cornhill*, ed. William Henry Overall (London: Alfred J. Waterlow, [1868], 200.

26 J. S. Brewer (editor), "Henry VIII: September 1522, 1-5," Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 3: 1519-1523, British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=91103>.

27 <http://www.st-michaels.org.uk/history.htm>.

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St. Michael's Cornhill, c. 1830 by Thomas Hosner Shepherd
Rebuilt by Christopher Wren after the London Great Fire of 1666

<http://www.st-michaels.org.uk/history.htm>