

Book Reviews

Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Europe's physician: the various life of Sir Theodore Turquet de Mayerne*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2006, pp. xii, 438, illus., £25.00, US\$35.00 (hardback 0-300-11263-7).

By the 1970s, Hugh Trevor-Roper was rumoured to be working on the first full-length biography of Sir Theodore Turquet de Mayerne. A royal physician to the early Stuarts from 1611, Mayerne was a Huguenot exile, chemical physician, and the first clinician in England to keep elaborate case notes on his patients. He died in 1655, very wealthy and very fat. By the twentieth century, the great reputation he had enjoyed had dwindled, and he appeared in the historiography episodically rather than as a whole person. But what engaging episodes: his diplomacy and spying for King James; his treatment of John Donne, which earned him a place in the *Meditations*; his recipes for the skin medicine calomel and for the British coronation oil; his plan for building continental-style plague houses, in which he complained in an aside about the great numbers of rats and vermin that attended outbreaks; Rubens' dark and formidable portrait of him; his production of the first London Pharmacopoeia; and his advocacy of chemical medicine in Paris and London. Through the 1990s, the public fruits of Trevor-Roper's labour were few. Mayerne figured prominently in an article on early Stuart medical patronage, and another study examined his treatise on the chemistry of paints and pigments. These two articles hinted at the richness of the subject's cosmopolitan life, but also at something else: Mayerne, as Trevor-Roper notes, did not make things easy for a biographer. His story lay buried in manuscripts strewn about Europe, often in obscure archives, and written in half a dozen languages. Moreover, there is a large lacuna in the evidence. Sir Hans Sloane purchased Mayerne's medical manuscripts, but most of his private papers disappeared amidst

lawsuits amongst his heirs. There are tantalizing clues as to their whereabouts, which Trevor-Roper vividly described to me in 1993 as we discussed my research on the casebooks. After his death a decade later, I assumed that neither the archive nor the biography would see the light of day. Fortunately, I was wrong about one of these. Written mostly before 1979, *Europe's Physician* was edited by Trevor-Roper's literary executor, Blair Worden. One danger of this book is that the story of Mayerne's life unfolds in prose so graceful and limpid that one is apt to overlook the originality of the underlying research.

The chief contribution of the book is its brilliant reconstruction of Mayerne's cosmopolitan world. This mental world consisted primarily of the international Calvinist movement and the continental struggle for chemical medicine, and, closer to home, the French Wars of Religion and the battle between Paracelsians and Galenists within the Paris Medical Faculty. Trevor-Roper has generously peopled this world with Mayerne's associates, friends, mentors, and enemies. We follow his Genevan birth, his education at Montpellier, his travels throughout Europe, and his long stints as a royal physician in Paris and London. We find the great Huguenot general, Henri, Duc de Rohan taking the young physician on a tour through Europe, where Mayerne contacted chemical physicians, investigated spas, mineral waters, salt mines, and medicinal simples. We find his medical mentors, first Joseph du Chesne, who probably introduced Mayerne to chemical medicine, and then Jean Ribit, Sieur de la Rivière, who oversaw his early practice and was instrumental in securing a position for him at court. We find the Galenist Jean Riolan attacking the trio of chemists in the Antimony Wars. We find the great Huguenot scholar, Isaac Casaubon, a lifelong friend, also to be lured to London by King James. Mayerne's tact, wit, and confident bedside manner allowed him to boast some of

the greatest Catholic figures at court among his patients, including Cardinal Richelieu, whom he treated for syphilis. Still, for all his grace and charm, his position began to erode after the assassination of Henri IV. As the French court increasingly returned to Rome, Mayerne left for London, becoming a royal physician to King James in 1611, where his Calvinism and his chemical medicine would be less of a problem.

For Trevor-Roper, Mayerne's public persona was that of the Hippocratic chemist. Mayerne dissociated himself from the passionate polemics of Paracelsus, while consistently arguing that chemical medicine could be squared with the best traditions of Greek medicine. The Hippocratic commitment to clinical observation, found in the *Epidemics*, was clearly an important influence on Mayerne's own casebooks. He argued that the discovery of new remedies was precisely in keeping with the empiricism that Hippocrates had counselled, and that it was the very nature of medicine to progress. Though Trevor-Roper does not mention it, Mayerne argued that various Hippocratic texts, particularly *On ancient medicine*, clearly taught that the body contained chemical qualities in addition to the four qualities of hot, cold, wet, and dry. These chemical qualities caused diseases and required chemical cures. Mayerne clearly argued these points in the only medical treatise published during his lifetime, the *Apologia* of 1603. Other Paracelsians of Mayerne's generation shared this view, as Jole Shackelford's recent study of Severinus' *Idea medicinae philosophicae* has shown. Mayerne was cautious in his public practice as a royal physician, using chemical remedies alongside many traditional ones and striving for co-operation and consensus among royal healers.

The very success of the book in portraying Mayerne's network of associates, however, raises anew the most difficult question for the interpretation of his life: how do we square his public persona with his private life? Mayerne always retained the sense of himself as an outsider. He thrived in Paris and London, without being at home in either place. When not in attendance at court, he returned to a domestic and personal world peopled by Huguenot exiles,

continental Calvinists, chemical apothecaries, and skilled craftsmen. He nurtured a lifelong interest in Hermetic, alchemical, and Rosicrucian principles. In Paris, he secretly met with a society of Hermetic thinkers known by code names. His letter book contains an outline of Rosicrucian principles, and his notebooks record his own alchemical experiments. This evidence is difficult to reconcile with Mayerne's public portrayal of himself as a moderate establishment chemist. There are inevitably some conflicts with the post-1979 historiography. Imagine writing this book without the recent work of Allen Debus, Bruce Moran, Lawrence Brockliss and Colin Jones, Jole Shackelford, I M Lonie, Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham, and many others. Mayerne's Calvinism, for instance, is portrayed as a generalized Erasmian inclination to reform, almost devoid of theological content (pp. 11–13). Mayerne was indeed tolerant by the standards of his day, but recent research has demonstrated that many of his generation found Paracelsian metaphysics appealing precisely because they seemed to complement Protestant theology. Still, the extraordinary detective work underlying this book will establish it as the foundation for any further appraisals of Mayerne's life and as one of the richest and most enduring biographies of our day.

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Susan K Morrissey, *Suicide and the body politic in imperial Russia*, Cambridge Social and Cultural Histories, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. xv, 384, illus., £55.00, \$99.00 (hardback 978-0-521-86545-6).

“You be Don Quixote but I've had enough.” The absurdity of the “worldly circus” led one Lieutenant Kvitsynskii, in 1852, to write this striking line in his suicide note and precipitate his own death with a pistol. A bemused civil servant in Tsar Nicholas I's security apparatus (the infamous and inquisitive Third Section) dryly recorded the death and quoted this note