

# *Texts and Documents*

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## DAVID EDWARDES: HIS ACTIVITIES AT CAMBRIDGE

by

ARTHUR ROOK\* and MAURICE NEWBOLD

THE IMPORTANCE of David Edwardes in the history of medicine in Britain has been effectively established by O'Malley and Russell,<sup>1</sup> in the scholarly introduction to their translation of his *In anatomicen introductio luculenta et brevis*. Edwardes was responsible in about 1531 for the first recorded dissection of the human body in England and in 1532/33 (1 January) he published the first book on anatomy to be written in England. Little information has been available concerning Edwardes and his career; the *Dictionary of National Biography* includes him under the name of Edguard an abbreviation of Edguardus, the latinized form he employed in his two publications, and states, inaccurately, that there is no record of his having the M.D. degree and that his treatise on anatomy was published on 12 January 1532. These errors were corrected by O'Malley and Russell.<sup>2</sup> The systematic study of College and University Archives at Cambridge has recently brought to light some additional facts which supplement, and, in one instance, amend, the biography summarized by these authors.

David Edwardes was born in Northamptonshire in about the year 1502. On 9 August 1517, at the age of fifteen, he was admitted as a scholar at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He graduated B.A. on 16 December 1522 and M.A. on 4 July 1525. He was elected a Fellow of his college in 1522, and he appears to have acted as Reader in Greek during the absence abroad of the regular Reader.<sup>3</sup>

In or before 1528 he moved to Cambridge. It is probable that he was a member of a college, but evidence as to the identity of the college has not been discovered. The following entry in the University Grace Book<sup>4</sup> in the year 1528–1529 records the granting to him by the university of the M.D. degree on the basis of his having devoted seven years to the study of medicine and subject to his giving a public lecture on Galen's *De differentiis februm*;

*Item conceditur David Edwardes in artibus magistro Oxonie ut septem anni in studio medicine sufficient ei ad incipiendum in eadem facultate ita quod legat publice Galieni librum differentiis februm antequam admittatur ad incipiendum.*

In 1537–1538 the Grace Book<sup>5</sup> records the granting of the M.B. degree to John Edwardes. The examiners were Drs. Wendy, Edwardes and Bill, who found him fit to practise medicine and surgery. The probate of the will of a John Edwards, described as a surgeon of Clare Hall, and dated 1552 is recorded in the Register of the

\*Arthur Rook, M.A., M.D., F.R.C.P., Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge.

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Vice Chancellor.<sup>6</sup> In 1540–1541 the Grace Book<sup>7</sup> records that, subject to the approval of Drs. Edwardes and Walker, Alexander Blythe was licensed to practise surgery, he having for seven years studied and practised surgery, partly in this country and partly at Louvain.

In his book *De indiciis et praecognitionibus*<sup>8</sup> Edwardes refers to his first practice of medicine being at Bristol, “I having left my teachers only shortly before and begun to swim without any support”. It is not clear whether this was before or after obtaining the M.D. degree. He also mentions his practice in and around Cambridge. Perhaps the demands of his practice led to his being excused in 1530–1531<sup>9</sup> from a statutory university obligation to attend “all congregations, masses and exequies”.

Edwardes appears to have lived and practised in Cambridge, until his death around the middle of the year 1542. At some unknown date he had married a lady named Alice. O'Malley and Russell<sup>10</sup> state that his will is no longer in existence. In fact it never existed, for he died intestate. What was referred to as the probate was the issue of letters of administration by the Court of the Vice Chancellor.<sup>11</sup> The entry reads as follows:

Doctor Edwards

*Sexto die mensis Augusti A° DNI 1542 Comissa est administratio omni et Singulis Bonora & debitos David Edwards defuncti dū vixit in medicina professoris Alicie Edwards uxori sui et exhibuit inventarium.*

[The word “professor” was regularly used at this period and later to mean practitioner.]

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On the still scanty facts so far available it is not apparent why Edwardes chose to move from Oxford to Cambridge. His association with the University of Cambridge seems not to have been close, since he is named as examiner only twice over a period of some thirteen years, though in many cases the Grace Book does not give the examiners' names. It may not be fortuitous that both candidates were examined in surgery. The traditional teaching that the educated and highly academic physicians disdained the practice of surgery, which they left to the menial practical surgeon, can easily be shown to be false, at least in so far as small towns such as Cambridge are concerned. The population of the town was under 7,000,<sup>12</sup> and economic necessity forced the majority of physicians into what would now be called general practice.

During the fourteen years that Edwardes resided and practised at Cambridge, the names of twelve other medical men who practised there for at least a part of this period have been traced from university, college or parish records.<sup>13</sup> The most eminent was William Butts, M.D. from Gonville Hall in 1518, active in university affairs, and physician to the King. He was knighted in 1545 and died later the same year. Henry Walker (1503–1564), also of Gonville Hall, was incorporated M.D. from Angers in 1531–1532, and thereafter practised in Cambridge. William Bill (d.1560) of St. John's College, fellow examiner with Edwardes in 1537–1538, was a theologian who appears not to have graduated in medicine, yet was appointed Linacre Lecturer in Physic. Andrew Manfield, M.D. 1508–1509, practised in Cambridge for many years. He served occasionally as an examiner, but was of no special distinction. Robert Pickering of

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King's College, M.D. 1548, after eight years' study as a Fellow of his college, was a student of medicine during Edwardes' most active years. He practised in Cambridge until his death in 1551. John Thomas (1490–1545), B.A. in 1512, received the Licence in Surgery in 1514. He practised in Cambridge until his death. His will suggests that he was a man of some standing and his library that he was a considerable classical scholar whose interests (and probably also his practice) were not confined to the surgical aspects of his profession. Robert Ventriss was licensed to practise surgery in 1518–1519; he died in 1541. John Parman of Benet College, was licensed to practise surgery in 1537–1538; he practised in Cambridge until his death in 1545. John Freeman, who died in 1544, had also practised surgery. John Edwards (d. 1552) appears to have practised as a surgeon in Cambridge. John Seward, said to have been of Clare Hall, and described in his probate inventory as "scholar and surgeon", also died in 1552; his library suggests that he was an educated man. Of William Holland little is known, apart from the fact that he was a surgeon in Cambridge who died in 1562; his probate inventory suggests that his attainments were more modest than those of most of his colleagues. Richard Smith (or Smythe) received in 1520–1521 the university licence to practise medicine and surgery and practised as an apothecary in Cambridge for many years. There were doubtless also numerous totally unqualified practitioners whose names have been lost.

The medical practitioners at Cambridge between 1527 and 1542 were numerous in relation to the population served. The Cambridge medical school attracted few students; there were only sixteen graduations in medicine between 1527 and 1542. Many of the Cambridge practitioners were successful and were highly regarded, but none, except Edwardes himself, contributed to the advance of medical science. It must be assumed that personal reasons (was John Edwardes a relation?) brought him to Cambridge. The suggestion<sup>14</sup> that the dissection that he carried out in about 1531 took place in Oxford, has no evidence to support it.<sup>15</sup> It seems probable that at Cambridge Edwardes, stimulated by his Oxford associations to a questioning approach to anatomy, dissected in vain in an unreceptive university. Despite the efforts of John Caius, and the enthusiasm of a few exceptional individuals, many years were to pass before regular teaching in anatomy was introduced.

### *REFERENCES*

1. C. D. O'Malley and K. F. Russell, *David Edwardes. Introduction to anatomy 1532*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961.
2. *Ibid.*
3. J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses 1500–1714*, p. 447.
4. W. G. Searle, University of Cambridge, Grace Book Γ, p. 242.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 326.
6. H. Roberts (ed.), *Calendar of Wills found in the Vice Chancellor's Court at Cambridge*, Cambridge University Press, 1907, vol. 1, p. 95.
7. Searle, *op. cit.*, note 4 above, p. 353.
8. O'Malley and Russell, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 9.
9. Searle, *op. cit.*, note 4 above, p. 254.
10. O'Malley and Russell, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 26.
11. Roberts, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, p. 65.

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12. Population in 1586: University 1550, town 4990. Lansdowne M. S. Fol. 144, cited in C. H. Cooper's *Annals of Cambridge*, Cambridge, vol. 11, p. 435.
13. The MS. biographies compiled by M. Newbold of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries who practised at Cambridge before 1815 have been deposited in the libraries of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons. All sources are recorded in the MS.
14. A. H. T. Robb-Smith, 'Medical education in Cambridge before 1600', in A. Rook (ed.), *Cambridge and its contribution to medicine*, London, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1971, p. 14.
15. O'Malley and Russell, *op. cit.*, note 1 above.