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CONRAD GESNER AND THE ENGLISH NATURALISTS*

Edward Wotton (1492–1555), President of the London College of Physicians from 1541 to 1543, is remembered today for only two things; his part in the publication of the first edition of the complete works of Galen in their original Greek, which appeared at Venice in 1525,¹ and his book *De differentiis animalium*. This, the first renaissance work on natural history to be written by an Englishman, was published by Vascosanus in Paris in 1552 in an extremely elegant folio, prefaced by an ode in Greek by the French physician, Jacques Goupyl.² It is in ten books, and covers the whole of the animal world, from man to molluscs, in a clearly arranged attempt to encapsulate the most reliable information taken from the best authorities. For Wotton, these were his classical sources, Pliny and Aristotle chief among them, and, to a much lesser extent, their humanist successors such as Ermolao Barbaro and John Claymond. Wotton's book is thus, in the words of C. E. Raven, "a useful compendium of the traditional lore . . . but not a book with much originality or human feeling".³

The Wellcome Institute copy of Wotton's treatise (catalogue number 6777) bears on its title-page a less charitable judgement by an unnamed contemporary (fig. 1): transtulit plurima ex Athenaeo etiam, sed ut uideo nec tanta diligentia usus est qua ipse sum usus. (He took a great deal from Athenaeus even, but, as far as I can see, not everything; nor was he as careful as I have been.) There then follows, written in the book's margins, a whole series of corrections, criticisms, and additions to substantiate this harsh verdict. Wotton is shown to have misunderstood his Greek sources (e.g., fols. 14, 81v, 93); mistranslated (e.g. fol. 114); oversimplified (fols.

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¹N. Mani, 'Die griechische Editio princeps des Galenos (1525), ihre Entstehung und ihre Wirkung', *Gesnerus*, 1956, 13: 29–52. The identification of the mysterious Odoardus with Wotton has been called into question by A. B. Emden, *A biographical register of the University of Oxford, A.D. 1501 to 1540*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 185; and C. Webster, 'Thomas Linacre and the foundation of the College of Physicians', in Francis Maddison, Margaret Pelling, and Charles Webster (editors), *Essays on the life and work of Thomas Linacre, c. 1460–1524*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 219, who favour David Edwards, who is not otherwise known to have studied at Padua. Their contention is weakened by the fact that in many of the formal documents of the University of Padua, Edward Wotton is called simply by his Christian name, Edward the Englishman, which was far easier for an Italian to pronounce than his surname, see Elda Martellozzo Forin (editor), *Acta graduum academicorum ab anno 1501 ad annum 1525*, Padua, Editrice Antenore, 1969, nos. 1053, 1056, 1059 (cf. also for renderings of his surname no. 1027 "Ottonis" and p. 413, n.3 "Nutoni").

²The beauty of the book's production and Goupyl's presence are perhaps explained by the part played in securing a printer by Sir John Mason, the English ambassador to Paris, see E. Wotton, *De differentiis animalium libri decem*, Paris, M. Vascosanus, 1552, sig. a ii-iii.

³C. E. Raven, *English naturalists from Neckam to Ray*, Cambridge University Press, 1947, pp. 40–42.

15v–16, 120); and blindly put his faith in a corrupt text (e.g., fols. 2, 103v, 155, 163) or a frivolous author (if that is what the “ex Athenaeo etiam” is meant to convey). The erudite annotator knows the ancient languages, including Hebrew, extremely well; he can also quote a German proverb (fol. 157v: “gsünder dann ein rhynegle”): “healthier than a young perch from the Rhine”); and he lives towards the South of Europe, for the bird known to him and to the Italians as “fulica” is different from the one recorded by Wotton under that name (fol. 129). Finally, he displays an unusual knowledge of the natural history of England, even chiding Wotton for his description of the coot (the “cotte Anglorum”, fol. 134). Only one scholar contemporary with Wotton possessed these remarkable characteristics, Conrad Gesner of Zurich, one of the most prolific naturalists of his day, and a brief comparison of Gesner’s handwriting with that of the Wellcome annotations is sufficient to confirm this identification.⁴

In print, however, Gesner was far more generous to Wotton. Although he confessed that Wotton had brought nothing new of his own to his subject, he could appreciate the elegance of his Latin style, the general accuracy of his reporting, and the helpfulness of his annotations.⁵ Yet his praise was muted by comparison with what he gave to Rondelet, Belon, and Turner, and with good reason, for Wotton’s book reeks of the study.

Not that Gesner was averse to books; he was indeed the finest bibliographer of the day, but in compiling his massive *Historia animalium* he looked outside his library to the hills, fields, and forests of a wider Europe.⁶ The Wellcome annotations show another side of his work on natural history, for the comments that he made briefly and in passing on Wotton’s mistakes were later incorporated, almost verbatim, into the printed volumes. His Swiss proverb, for example, made its appearance in the discussion on the perch, and many smaller corrections also found their place.⁷ His comments also display his confident command of things English which, as we shall see, was to cause him a certain amount of embarrassment at the beginning of Queen Elizabeth’s reign.

He derived his information on England largely from the community of exiled Protestants living in and around Zurich. William Turner, later Dean of Wells, was by far the most active naturalist among them, and he was consulted frequently by Gesner.⁸ But Turner was by no means alone in having a reputation as a botanist and zoologist, or in playing an important role in the religious struggles in England.

⁴A good example, with the distinctive “A”, is given by Hans Fischer, *Conrad Gessner 1516–1565*, Zurich, Kommissionsverlag Leemann AG, 1966, p. 51, pl. 11.

⁵C. Gesner, *Historia animalium*, I–IV, Zurich, C. Froschover, 1551–58; Vol. V was printed posthumously, Zurich, C. Froschover, 1587. Unless stated, I cite the *Historia animalium* (=HA) from the Wellcome copy of the second edition, Frankfurt, J. Wechel, 1585–1604. For Gesner’s praise of Wotton, see HA III, sig.* 5r; IV, *Enumeratio auctorum*. The long list of acknowledgements to friends that opens HA I says nothing about Wotton, which implies that the two were not known personally to each other.

⁶H. Wellisch, ‘Conrad Gessner: a bio-bibliography’, *J. Soc. Bibliog. Nat. Hist.*, 1975, 7: 151–247, is the fullest recent account. In his earlier *Historia plantarum*, Paris, G. Richard, 1541, Gesner had avowedly listed in alphabetical order the plant descriptions from Dioscorides, along with their medicinal properties as given by Paul of Aegina, to make a little handbook for travelling doctors, even in the countryside, and he had added none of his own observations, see sig. A ii.

⁷E. Wotton, *De differentiis animalium*, fol. 157v; Gesner, HA IV, p. 701.

⁸On Turner, Raven, op. cit., note 3 above, pp. 48–137, is fundamental.

EDOARDI VVOTTO-
NI OXONIENSIS DE
DIFFERENTIIS ANI-
MALIVM LIBRI
DECEM.

Infinita plura ex Arbeno et, sed ut video nec omnino nec tanta diligentia uti e. et ipse se uti.

AD SERENISS. ANGLIAE REGEM
EDOARDVM VI.

Cum amplissimis indicibus, in quibus primùm authorum nomina, unde quæquæ desumpta sunt, singulis capitibus sunt notata & designata: deinde omnium animalium nomenclaturæ, itémque singulæ eorum partes recensentur, tam græcè, quàm latinè.

Schultze

LVTETIAE PARISIORVM
APVD VASCOSANVM.
M. D. LII.

Cum priuilegio Regis.

Figure 1. Edward Wotton, *De differentiis animalium libri decem*, Paris, M. Vascosanus, 1552, title-page, with manuscript note by Conrad Gesner, Wellcome Institute Library, London, cat. no. 6777.

Gesner acknowledged with thanks the help he had received from John Estwyck, some-time Principal of St Alban Hall, Oxford;⁹ Thomas Gibson, doctor, printer, and writer on herbs;¹⁰ and, with greater warmth, John Falconer, who had resided for some time in Italy, where he had put together an important collection of plant specimens.¹¹ He was on terms of affection with John Parkhurst, later Bishop of Norwich, and possibly also with John Bale, the fiery Bishop of Ossory, and it was through John Hooper, the Protestant martyr and Bishop of Gloucester, that Gesner received not only news of the English Reformation but also natural curiosities for his own collection and even books written in Welsh.¹²

Another English friend with similar medical and zoological interests, but with a very different theological standpoint, was John Caius. The two had met while Caius was on his way back from Italy in 1544, and they continued active correspondents until Gesner's death in 1565.¹³ For Caius, the slightly younger Gesner served as an inspiration and as a model for the true humanist physician, and his lament for his dead friend in his *De libris propriis* is among the most moving pages he ever wrote.¹⁴ It was Caius, too, who acted as intermediary when Gesner had to apologize to Queen Elizabeth for dedicating to her in 1560 his second edition of the *Icones animalium* without her permission and, at least in official eyes, as a sort of temporizing replacement for the deceased Duke of Suffolk and his brother.¹⁵

Like the Protestant naturalists, Caius provided Gesner with information on the many unusual animals, birds, and fishes he had come across on his travels in England. He often sent drawings for Gesner to include in his volumes of plates, but his generosity was not always well timed, for sometimes the material that Gesner had asked for arrived too late for inclusion in the *Icones*. Hence Caius had to wait almost seven years before he saw his description of British dogs, *De canibus Britannicis*, in print.¹⁶

Gesner reciprocated by sending complimentary copies of his *Historia animalium*, signing them himself with a dedication to "John Caius, an outstanding doctor and philosopher".¹⁷ But Caius, like Gesner, was no respecter of persons, even if they

⁹Gesner, *HA* I, sig. C 1v; Emden, op. cit., note 1 above, p. 194.

¹⁰Gesner, *HA* I, sig. C 1v; *Dictionary of national biography*, London, Smith Elder, 1908, vol. 7, p. 1163.

¹¹Gesner, *HA* I, sig. C 1v; IV, *Enumeratio auctorum; Icones animalium*, 2nd ed., Zurich, C. Froschover, 1560, p. 5; *Dictionary of national biography*, 1908, vol. 6, p. 1025, noting his services to Turner and Amatus Lusitanus, but not Gesner.

¹²For these divines, see C. Salzmann, 'Conrad Gessners Persönlichkeit', *Gesnerus*, 1965, 23: 126f.; Fischer, op. cit., note 4 above, pp. 66–71. Gesner's annotation reproduced by Fischer on p. 51 disproves the contention of Raven, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 138, that Parkhurst had no interest in nature. Cf. also C. Gesner, *Icones animalium*, 2nd ed., p. 5.

¹³Raven, op. cit., note 3 above, pp. 138–153, is still the best account of Caius' work in natural history. For some of his other interests, on which he also corresponded with Gesner, see V. Nutton, 'John Caius and the Linacre tradition', *Med. Hist.*, 1979, 23: 373–391; *idem*, 'John Caius und Johannes Lange: medizinischer Humanismus zur Zeit Vesals', *NTM*, 1984, 21: 81–87.

¹⁴J. Caius, *De libris propriis*, London, W. Seres, 1570, fols. 21v–24v, repr. in E. S. Roberts, *The works of John Caius*, Cambridge University Press, 1912.

¹⁵J. Stevenson (editor), *Calendar of State Papers, 1561–62*, London, Longman Green, 1866, p. 10, letter of Gesner to Cecil. The Queen was probably also displeased at the cavalier way in which, at the end of his preface, p. 5, Gesner had assumed that she would not mind taking the place of two deceased noblemen, "heroes", whose loyalty to the English crown had not been above suspicion. She was evidently also not mollified by Gesner's fulsome Greek ode to her.

¹⁶Raven, op. cit., note 3 above, pp. 141–147.

were his friends, and he too wrote his criticisms and corrections into the margins of his own books. He found less to complain about in Gesner's philological scholarship, not surprisingly, for Gesner was among the finest philologists of the day, but he took issue with him on several points of natural history. Many of these annotations he later published, along with some of his earlier notes to Gesner, in his *De rariorum animalium atque stirpium historia libellus*, which although originally written with a dedicatory preface to Gesner, did not appear until 1570, five years after his death, when it then incorporated the results of Caius' latest investigations.¹⁸

One of these criticisms concerned the humble puffin. Caius' first letter to Gesner about this bird, with its accompanying drawing, arrived too late to be included in the main text of the *Historia animalium*, but it was placed in a short appendix.¹⁹ Caius' description evidently amused Gesner, for he ended his own entry with a joke: "If you imagine that this bird was white, and had then put on a black cloak with a cowl, you could give this bird the name of 'Little Friar of the sea' (*fratercula marina*)."²⁰ This was too much for Caius, who struck this whimsy out of his own copy and replaced it with a more sober description of the bird's feeding habits, based upon his own experience of keeping a puffin in his house for eight months. It was a difficult pet, and Caius was moved to record that it used to bite the fingers of those who offered it food or tried to touch it. But, he added a short while later, it did this in a rather friendly way ("benignius") and, as he added even later in his book, with no malice aforethought ("innocentius").²⁰

In his marginalia, Caius was then doing to Gesner what he, in his turn, had previously done to Wotton, reproving error from the best of scholarly motives. Gesner's relationship with the English naturalists, which lasted for over a quarter of a century, is but one example of the co-operation that could exist between scholars in different parts of renaissance Europe, and linked men of different nationalities and religions in the pursuit of truth.²¹ It is in this context that the Wellcome annotations should be seen, for they throw a little light on the creation of a great book and show how Gesner set down in passing, and in reaction to the opinions of others, ideas that he was later to put into print. They also serve as a salutary reminder that our knowledge, even of the greatest of renaissance scientists, can still be enhanced by manuscript discoveries, and that, in this search, one should not neglect even the evidence of marginalia.

¹⁷The copies survive today in the library of Gonville and Caius College, nos. L. 19. 2–5. For the various dedications, see P. Grierson, 'John Caius' library', in: *Biographical history of Gonville and Caius College*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, vol. 7., p. 516.

¹⁸J. Caius, *De rariorum animalium atque stirpium historia libellus*, London, W. Seres, 1570; repr. in Roberts, op. cit., note 14 above.

¹⁹C. Gesner, *HA*, ed. 1, III, p. 768.

²⁰Ibid., in the Caius College copy, L.19.4, repeated with minor changes of wording in *De rariorum animalium . . . libellus*, fols. 21v–22. In Caius' marginalia the words "sed benignius" are clearly an afterthought, being written in a visibly different ink and with a different pen after a gap at the end of a line, and extending further over into the margin. Caius' letter of complaint had reached Gesner in time for him to include a few words of it in the second edition of the *Icones avium*, Zurich, C. Froschover, 1560, p. 80. In his revised edition of the *HA*, III, p. 725, Gesner printed Caius' comments and clarifications as a preface to his repetition of the original entry.

²¹See, for a further example, involving Gesner, C. B. Schmitt, 'The correspondence of Jacques Daléchamps (1513–1588)', *Viator*, 1977, 8: 399–434.