SOME ASPECTS OF THE EARLY HISTORY OF SYPHILIS IN SCOTLAND*

A POSTSCRIPT TO THE MEETING OF THE M.S.S.V.D. IN
EDINBURGH JUNE 1 AND 2, 1962

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When our typically dour but articulate Scottish guide pointed out the Island of Inchkeith from the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle, he mentioned that "incurables" had been ordered there at the end of the 15th century. Like at least two others in the party I was reminded of "Ane Grandgore† Act" of 1497. The act sought to protect the King's "liegis fra this contagiis seikness" by ordering all those infected to assemble by 10 a.m. on a Friday morning on the sands of Leith, whence they would be taken by boat to Inchkeith. Any who claimed to be able to cure them were also to be deported—a side-effect of treatment which happily has not been reported since. The whole operation was ordered to be completed "be Monoundy at the sone ganging to (sunset)". Failure to comply was to be met by branding on the cheek so that sufferers "may be kennit in time to come" (Scottish Burgh Records Society, 1869–).

Whatever we may think of the possible historical consequences of the political and economic machinations of the present decade, there can be no doubt the years between 1490 and 1500 marked a great turning point in the affairs of Europe. The conquest of Granada rendered Spain wholly Christian; the festering sore of France—Brittany—was finally conquered; Germany was at peace; the invasion of Naples revealed the weakness of artistic Italy; the discoveries

of Vasco da Gama and Columbus promised untold wealth to the Old World; Maximilian of Austria annexed Flanders, the cultural centre of Europe, by his marriage to Mary of Burgundy. Scotland's place in affairs was secure in the "auld alliance" with a strong France under Charles VIII—a relationship which dominated her foreign policy in dealing with England. Scotland and England nevertheless lived on good terms throughout the decade except for the episode of Perkin Warbeck (Gairdner, 1898).

Warbeck pretended to be the Duke of York, the younger of the two princes murdered in the Tower. His claim to the English throne led him to suffer death by hanging at Tyburn on November 23, 1499, but not before he had created a great stir all over Europe. The pretence started while Warbeck was on a visit to southern Ireland in 1491–92. He rallied support in Europe, receiving recognition and lavish financial support especially in Flanders through Maximilian. Warbeck was in Flanders at the time of Columbus's return from his voyage of discovery in March, 1493. After visiting Vienna in November of that year Warbeck returned to the Low Countries, where Maximilian paraded him with suitable finery as the true claimant to the English throne. An abortive attempt to land at Deal on the Kentish coast in July, 1495, was followed by a visit to his original sponsors at Waterford in Ireland, and he and his followers were soon welcomed by James IV of Scotland, who held a great display of arms—"a wapping schawing"—at Stirling in honour of Warbeck. Perhaps it was the Irish influence, but we find evidence

* Received for publication July 2, 1962.

† Syphilis was recognized in Scotland by several names in medieval times, viz. gor, gore, grandgore, grangore, grantgore, glengor, glengore, glengoir, glengour, the French seikness, the Spanje seiknes, the seiknes of Napillis, pockis, rognole. The earlier names are probably from the French meaning "large sore".

in the Burgh records of Aberdeen that some of Warbeck's followers preceded him. Aberdeen burgesses paid a "stent" of £100 at 5s. 4d. per day for one month on behalf of eight supporters (Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1844).

Warbeck's men came from all nations and it seems likely that this immigration brought syphilis to Scotland. At the time of the raid from Scotland into England in September, 1496, there was an army of 1,400. Gairdner quotes Hall as describing them as "a great army of valiant captaines of all nations, some bankrupt, some false English sanctuary men, some thieves, robbers, and vagabonds, which leaving their bodily labours, desiring only to live of robbery and raping, came to be his servants and soldiers". A motley crew more likely to have acquired and be able to disseminate the new disease can hardly be imagined.

Perkin Warbeck, who was undoubtedly a pawn of James IV, sailed from Ayr in July, 1497, oddly enough in a ship called "The Cuckoo". This was 2 months before "Ane Grandgore Act" reached the Statute Book but, perhaps not surprisingly in view of the record quoted above, 3 months after a similar regulation by the Burgh of Aberdeen, then a thriving merchant seaport. This Act recognised the venereal element in the spread of syphilis and did not merely imitate the measures currently in use against plague. It called for "all light (loose) women" to "dicist from thair vices and syne of venerie" and to work for their support on pain of being branded.

The episode of Warbeck apart, Scotland was enjoying a period of quiet and prosperity. Under the coldness of the skin-tight iron chain belt which he wore in penance for his part in his father's death, there burned a fire in the belly of James IV. He was a man well worthy of kingship. He had a fine intellect and was of sound education. Perhaps from his sense of guilt, he added to these attributes a restless energy. He was continually on the move ensuring law and order throughout the country. He promoted thought, theatre, poetry, and experiment. Trade with the Continent flourished as never before. He gave great encouragement to education and travel, a bent which culminated, under the scholarly hand of Lord Elphinstone, in the establishment of Aberdeen University. James IV's interests and activities were, to say the least, catholic. We learn from his carefully kept treasury accounts that he may well have treated cases of syphilis and so lay claim to being the first of a long and continuous line of Scottish venereologists. We find, for example, the following statements entered in 1497-98:

1 Sept. 1497

"Item, to ane woman with ye grantgore thair (at St. John's

Kirk of Dalrye when the King was on a pilgrimage)
iij s. vjd."

2 Oct. 1497

"Item, to thaim that had the grantgor at Linlithquo
viijd."

22 Feb. 1498

"Item, the xxij day of February griffen to the seke folk in
grandgore at the tounn end of Glasgo ijs."

April 1498

" . . . seke folk in gradngor in Lithgow as the King cam in
the tounne ij s. viijd."

These extracts from the "Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer, 1403-1598" give some idea of how rapid and how wide was the spread of the disease in Scotland at the end of the 15th century. No trace has been found of early descriptions of the disease in the Scots of the time. This is perhaps not surprising for there was then little need for hospitals. Town crowding did not take place till early in the 18th century. Such hospitals as we read of comprise a few beds only and those for "the seke, aged, and impotent". One of the earliest reports (1491) concerns a hospital for lepers at Stable Green Port (gate), then a stone's throw to the north of Glasgow Cathedral. Monies for hospitals were often misappropriated. Three efforts, made between 1466 and 1549, all failed to gain any substantial measure of progress. Thus hospitals remained for the infirm only, with occasional places for "lepers" a loose diagnostic term. Indeed it is not till 1592 that the Glasgow Kirk Session book mentions "that the house beyond the stable-green-port for women affected with the Glengore be looked after".

We might do well to pause at this point and consider the clinical manifestations and course of syphilis at this time. For this we must thank Astruc (1737), who collected and organized the descriptions of early writers. There is no doubt that the illness was new and virulent. In the secondary stage it killed thousands. Its severity waned, however, over more than a century and Astruc is able to describe five periods.

In the first, small genital ulcers were soon followed by a widespread pleomorphic rash. Many of the large papules became "phagaedenic". When the disease "attacked the head chiefly it produced acrid rheums which eroded sometimes the palate, sometimes the uvula, sometimes the jaws and tonsils. In some it destroyed the nose. Gummy tumours which frequently grew to the 'size of an egg' deformed the legs. On being laid open they discharged 'white mucilagenous matter'. Patients were tortured with pain in the 'muscles and nerves'. Late fever and general deterioration led to death."

By 1516, all this, together with periostitis and osteitis giving rise to bone pains especially at night, were added to form the second and perhaps the peak period of virulence.

The third period, 1526 to 1540, showed abatement of severity—"few pustules began to show themselves and more gummy tumours than there were during the first years". "Phyma or tumour of the inguinal glands and alopecia" however were noted at this period. Osteocopic pains were less severe. The teeth were noted to be dropping out but this may have followed the introduction of mercury treatment.

The fourth period, from 1540 to 1550, was characterized by a general diminution of all signs and symptoms, and gonorrhoea seems to have been more generally associated with the infection.

The fifth period ended in 1610, by which time only one new symptom had been added to the waning severity of the condition, *i.e.* "noises in the ears".

Little mention of treatment is found in early Scottish records. We know from Halyburton's "Ledger" for the years 1492-1503 that mercury and its derivatives, as well as guaiacum and sarsaparilla, all in use on the Continent, were imported. By 1612 "quacksiluer" was not only being imported from Germany but re-exported to France. In "Ane gude buik of Medycines callit the treasure of Puir Man" published in 1552 we find two prescriptions which may have been widely used by syphilitics.

"Camamell" (mercurous chloride) is recommended for "the yche in the heid".

"For stynking breath or stynking nose. Take the joyce (juice) of blake myntis, ye joyce of rew of the lyke much and do it in the nose". This must have been a blessing to all suffering syphilitic damage as described above and suffering too from the complications of mercury treatment.

Legal documents also give us some idea of the social situation in regard to syphilis. A second regulation published in Aberdeen on October 8, 1507, exhorted "That diligent inquisition be takin of ale infect personis with this strange seiknes of Napillis for the sautie (safety) of the toun". There was further warning that "nayne infecht folkis be halden at the common fleschous or with fleschouirs (butchers), baxteris (bakers), brousteris (brewers), and ladinaris (launderers)". The infected were advised to "keip quayat in ther houssis".

Pitcairn (1833) tells of the case of Thomas Lyn of Edinburgh who was condemned to prison for 19 years being "indyted and accusit of negligent care and medecine of ye infirmitie of ye grantgore yat

Schir Lancelot Patorsoun was infekkit with". The disease was much detested and, even as late as 1591, a year of great activity against witches, one such was charged with spreading syphilis. Condemned witches were usually strangled before burning but so wrathful apparently was the populace on this occasion that the woman concerned was not afforded this privilege. Another case of "certane witchcraft" concerned a woman who tried to break a marriage by alleging that the groom had the glengore.

Scottish literature and poetry of the time is not extensive. Diaries are few and uninformative on the topic of syphilis. Andrew Halyburton's "Ledger", already referred to, is subtitled in the preface as "Promiscuous Account Books" but denies a seemingly helpful promise.

As elsewhere in Europe, the sexual mores in Scotland were similar among courtier, commoner, and ecclesiastic. It was still an age when gonorrhoea was known by Rabelais's term "rhume ecclesiastique". Some reference to the new disease of syphilis could therefore be expected in works of the time. Masque and anti-masque was the prevalent form of theatrical entertainment in the court of James IV and we find a similar form in the poetry of such rhymers as William Dunbar, Sir David Lyndsay, and Montgomerie. All wrote poems entitled "The Flying" which literally means "the scolding", and consisted of a wordy trial of strength between two poets, each participant contributing alternately half a dozen stanzas or more. They are full of abuse, one poet for the other, with no holds barred. As in other poetry of the time there is much sarcasm but, underneath lies a tendency to deplore the social behaviour of people in general, *e.g.* the mode and speed of spread of syphilis in the community at large.

The best-known and most prolific of these writers was William Dunbar, who was in a way the poet laureate to the court, receiving a salary from the Queen. In his "General Satyre of Scotland" (1507), he refers to syphilis as the "Spanje pockis", saying that "Sic losing sarkis, so mony glengour markis, within the land are nevir herd or sene".

He regrets, too, the misbehaviour of youth, noting that some young men will not keep away from the houses of prostitutes until they become infected. He suggests they would be better lodged in the stocks.

"I saw cow-clinkis (prostitutes) me besyd,
The young men to thair houssis gyd,
Had better luggit in the stockis,
Sum fra the bordell (brothel) wald nockit byd,
Quhill that thae gatt the spanje pockis,"

In one poem devoted entirely to syphilis Dunbar talks of "libbing of the pockis". "Libbing" is a difficult word to interpret and I am indebted to Mr. J. A. Aitken, the present compiler of the "Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue", for an understanding. "Libbing" means curing by local applications, by local application together with magic words, or by the magic words themselves. It may also mean cutting and, in some circumstances, gelding. A perusal of the poem suggests that Dunbar played on all these meanings to gain the greatest effect. As well as a warning against the "perilous play" that leads to infection he also reminds his readers and listeners (the monopoly of printing is just about to be given) of the after-effects:

"Sum, that war ryatouss as rammis,
Are now maid tame lyk ony lammis,
And settin down lyk sarye (sorry) crockis,
And has forsaikin all sic gammis,
That men cal libbing of the pockis."

The debilitating effect of relapse and reinfection even in those as strong as giants is recognized in another stanza of the same poem:

"Sum thoct thame selffis stark lyk gyandis,
Are now maid weak lyk willow wandis,
With schinnis (shins) scharp and small lyk rockis,
And gotten thair back in bayth thair handis,
For ower oft muckle of the pockis."

Sir David Lyndsay (1592), in one of his poems telling of the various causes of death prevalent at the time, refers to the discomforts of infection—

"Quhilk humane nature dois abhor,
As in the Gut, Gravel and the Gor."

In another poem he recounts the story of John MacKreary who held the post of "King's fule" and was infected at a Christmas party after a glorious performance:

"In his maist triumphand gloir
For his reward got the Grandgoir."

Dunbar's tilts at public morality are equalled by those of George Bannatyne (1770) who quoted a special word for the clergy.

"Sic pryd with prelates so few (s)till preach and pray,
Sic haut of harlottis with thame bay the nicht and day."

Scandalous profligacy of churchmen was rife.

Allusion has already been made to misappropriation of funds set aside for hospitals. Similar thieving took place in regard to attempts to establish parish schools. In 1549, the provincial council of Edinburgh pointing out the growing number of scandals, passed a resolution exhorting prelates and clergy to keep their own illegitimate children "in thair companie". Little improvement seems to have been produced, for by 1558–59 we find legal limits laid down simply and shamelessly, of how much church property may be purloined for the marriage dowries of bastard daughters.

John Hamilton of St. Andrews, Archbishop and head of the church in Scotland, was visited by Gerolamo Cardano, the Italian physician, regarding asthma. The following advice was also given:

"De venere. Certi non est bona neque utilis; ubi tamen contingat necessitas debet uti ea inter duos somnos scilicet post mediam noctem et melius est exercere eam ter in sex diebus, pro exemplo ita ut singulis duobus diebus semel, quam bis in una die etiam quodstaret per decem dies."

(Regarding sexual intercourse; it is certainly not good or beneficial, but when there happens to be a necessity it ought to take place between two sleeps, to wit, after midnight, and it is better to exercise this function three times in six days, *e.g.* once in every two days rather than twice in one day, and then to wait for ten days.)

Thus through the 16th century syphilis remained widespread and quite uncontrolled, *at least at the social level*. Doubtless some individuals benefited from the improving use of mercury. In England, George Baker had published "The Nature and Properties of Quicksilver" in 1575, and in 1579 William Clowes brought out his "Cure of the French Pocks by Uncions", which was the first book in English on the subject, and was to run to several editions and many reprints.

To Maister Peter Lowe of Glasgow, however, must go the credit of publishing the first full description in English of syphilis; in 1596 his "An easie, certaine and perfect method to cure and prevent the Spanish Sicknes" was published, in London, by James Roberts. Two copies of his treatise are extant, one in the British Museum and one in the library of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, of which he was the founder. Lowe felt strongly the need for teaching and proper qualifications among those who treated syphilis. His enthusiasm may well have been based on the loss of a great friend "Captaine Boyle who was one of the chieftest

captaines amongst the Spaniards in Paris"; the unfortunate captain had his aneurysm lanced by an "ignorant barber".

Lowe had served with the French armies in Europe and much of his writing is soundly based on personal observation. He was not neglectful of epidemiology, carefully reporting how he traced and dealt with an outbreak of the disease among men, women, and children.

How much is owed to Peter Lowe for the following entry in the Glasgow Kirk session records of April 17, 1600, cannot now be determined, but it seems to have something of his bold and academic touch:

"Some sent to the Council to deplore the infection thats in this city by the glengore and some to convene again at the Blackfriars Kirk anent it and the whole chirurgeons and professors of medecine to be present."

Although he was master of local medical events in his time and strove to raise and maintain standards of diagnosis, treatment ("the help of God and my confection"), and teaching by administrative means he apparently never lost the personal touch with his patients. We may read on his tombstone, refurbished and cared for by the Glasgow Faculty in the church yard of the city's Cathedral:

"Yea when his Physicks Force oft failed,
His pleasant purpose then prevailed,
For of his God he got the grace,
To live in mirth and die in peace."

This brief history of syphilis in Scotland would be incomplete without some mention of Mary, Queen of Scots, and her court. Her medical history and that of her husbands has been well documented by Davison (1956) and MacNalty (1960) as well as others, but one or two points are of special interest here. There seems little doubt that Mary's second husband, Darnley, and probably her third, Bothwell, had syphilis. According to the Lords of the Congregation, Darnley, who was 21 years of age and known to be addicted to both alcohol and women, was "poysned". Mary's secretary, Nau, said he had smallpox. Mary herself, however, spoke of him as this "pockish man". When she visited him in Glasgow at the time of his illness she noted, "I thought I should have been killed by his breath: and yet I sat no nearer to him than in a chair by his bed and he lieth on the further side of it". By the time she visited him his rash was fading and he had alopecia. When Darnley finally moved to Kirk O'Fields near Edinburgh to convalesce he had a special bath on Saturday, February 8, 1567. All this rather suggests that

he had a salivation of mercury and gives support to a diagnosis of syphilis.

Before Mary's visit to Glasgow the royal couple had last met in October, 1566, at Jedburgh. Mary received a letter from him on November 5 at Kelso. The contents of this letter are unknown, but she was heard to cry out that she wished she could die and she was under the care of her physician for some weeks thereafter. Various suggestions regarding the contents of the letter have been found unsatisfactory for one reason or another, but I would suggest that Darnley told Mary he had syphilis and perhaps even accused her of being its source—perhaps this letter is the first recorded use of the contact slip.

Darnley's skull, which is preserved in the Royal College of Surgeons, London, was judged by Sir Daniel Wilson, the archeologist, to be syphilitic.

Mary herself was well versed in the disease. Darnley's uncle, Archbishop Hamilton, "the most abandoned of all Episcopal scoundrels" (Froude, quoted by Fleming, 1897), was known by her to have "stinking breath". When he was detailed to officiate at the christening of James VI at Stirling in December, 1566, she declared "that she would not have a pockie priest to spit on the child's mouth"—apparently a regular part of the ceremonial of the time.

Two months after Darnley's murder at Kirk O'Fields, Mary married Lord Bothwell. About the end of July she said she was "seven weeks gone with child". At the end of August she miscarried twins and had a fever. This obstetrical accident would be too early in pregnancy to be precipitated by syphilis. After the skirmish at Carberry the following summer, Bothwell, as Great Admiral of Scotland, contrived his escape to Norway where he was imprisoned. He died at the age of 43 in Denmark in April, 1578, after a mental illness which lasted at least 5 years and suggests general paralysis of the insane.

Bothwell was a scholarly man and wrote several books. While imprisoned in Copenhagen he wrote "Les affaires du Comte de Boduell", which includes an interesting entry regarding his rival: "Sometime after, the King [*i.e.* Darnley] fell sick of the smallpox." Bothwell wrote with ease and grace in French and the words used for smallpox were *petite vérole* but *vérole* is deleted and the word *roniole* substituted in his own hand. *Roniole* means "itch" and Davison (1956) suggests that Bothwell omitted to delete *petite* as well as *vérole*, and thinks the substitution should have been *rognole*, a term which he believes was common slang for syphilis. Davison gives no further backing to this suggestion. My own searches have resulted in only one support. Astruc mentions

(Book I, p. 115) "l'hospital de Rougnonses de la rougno de Naples" (the hospital for such as had the Neapolitan itch).

So much then for the beginnings and early progress of syphilis in Scotland. It may have revived for a moment the pleasures of our meeting. In welcoming us to Edinburgh the chairwoman of the Scottish branch felt confident that everybody present could dig up a Scottish ancestor for such an occasion. In a way I would like to take her advice and have a look at Bothwell next year in Copenhagen.

I am indebted to Mr. J. A. Aitken, present compiler of the "Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue", and Dr. James Craigie of Edinburgh, for advice on bibliography. Mr. James Forrest translated Cardano's prescription.

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