

The Library copy of van Helmont's *Ortus Medicinæ*

In 1648 Johan (or Johannis or Jan) Baptista van Helmont's *Ortus medicinæ* (The dawn of medicine) was published in Amsterdam.¹ This collection of writings, published posthumously by his son Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont, is the most considerable of van Helmont's works and one that greatly influenced medicine for the rest of the seventeenth and well into the eighteenth century. It proposed nothing less than the overthrow of the Galenic medicine of the Schools and its replacement by a 'chemical' system influenced strongly by, but by no means identical with, that of Paracelsus. Van Helmont became the most famous of the iatrochemists, whose theories presented a formidable challenge to the traditionalists and whose adherents were harried by the medical establishment – particularly in Paris by the Faculté de Médecine and in London by the Royal College of Physicians.²



Van Helmont's *Ortus* contains the earliest known proposal that 'casting lots' should be used in the selection of groups of patients for a trial of treatment – in this case of the value of bloodletting in the treatment of fever.⁴ Hepburn seems to have been struck by this proposed 'trial' since he annotated the page *provocat ad luctam humoristas* ('he challenges the Humorists⁵ to a contest') at the foot of the account of the proposed contest (page 526 of the RCPE copy).

Who, then, was this George Hepburn who paid 10 pounds for the book in 1652? A George Hepburn, MD of Leyden in 1693, was admitted to the Fellowship in December 1694, the 15th Fellow to be admitted after the 21 Fellows named in the original patent of 1681.⁶ He was a pupil of Archibald Pitcairne during the latter's brief professorship at Leyden, and

took his master's part in the Edinburgh controversy about the treatment of fever between Pitcairne and the more traditional practitioners who gathered round Sir Robert Sibbald.⁷ In 1695 Hepburn published an offensive pamphlet⁸ in riposte to a satire⁹ on Pitcairne's method, in which he went so far as to say about the undeclared author of the lampoon, whom he calls 'Tarrugo':

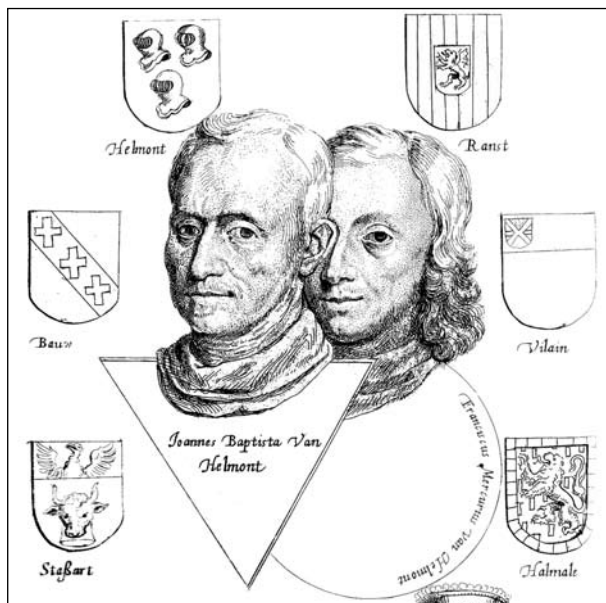
'that the papers which I call Tarrugo's were revised, corrected and approven by one who twice in one year changed his Religion upon how honest and religious principles I doe not determine.'

This is a reference to Sibbald – indeed, in the Faculty of Advocates' copy (now in the National Library of Scotland) the phrase is underlined and 'Sir Robt Sibbald' is written in the margin. Not surprisingly, Hepburn was suspended from the Fellowship in 1695 and thereafter found no more in the College's records.^{6,10} It seems that he left Edinburgh around 1700 and spent the rest of his life in King's Lynn, where he died in 1759 at a great age.⁶ Clearly this Fellow is not the Hepburn who wrote the date of the book's purchase in Edinburgh since he was born around 1670.

However, from the studies of Innes-Smith on English-speaking medical students in Leyden¹¹ it appears that there was another George Hepburn, a physician, who was probably the father of the George who was briefly a Fellow; let us call this earlier Dr Hepburn George père. George père was awarded the MA, Med in Leyden in 1648, aged 22, and the MD the next year. He may also have

The copy of *Ortus medicinæ* in the RCPE Library is particularly interesting. On the blank leaf preceding the title page, manuscript annotations show that it was bought in Edinburgh by George Hepburn on 10 September 1652, apparently at a price of 10 pounds. Since the purchase was made in Edinburgh we are probably safe in assuming that this was pounds Scots rather than pounds sterling. The relative values of these currencies varied as the Scots pound steadily lost value compared with sterling from the fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century. After the Union of the Crowns in 1603 the exchange rate was fixed, with the Scots pound worth 20 pence against the sterling pound's 20 shillings. Thus, after 1603 a Scots pound was worth one twelfth of a sterling pound, which means that Hepburn paid the equivalent of 16 shillings and eight pence sterling for his book in 1652. According to a calculator developed by economic historians,³ this sum had the purchasing power of about £98 in 2008; the book was therefore expensive but perhaps not prohibitively so for a physician.

Hepburn made an index of the treatments for certain conditions contained in van Helmont's work and wrote this out in double columns using both sides of the originally blank leaf. At the end we find the date 26 November 1653, presumably indicating when he finished the index. The work is also heavily annotated in the same hand on many of the text pages; it would be reasonable to suppose that Hepburn made these annotations during the compilation of the index, that is, between September 1652 and November 1653.



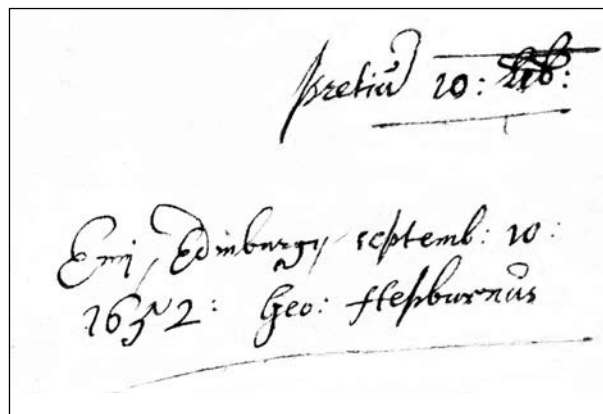
Portraits of Johann Baptist van Helmont, the author, and his son Franciscus Mercurius, the editor, from the RCPE Library's copy of the 1648 edition of van Helmont's *Ortus*.

studied in Edinburgh – Innes-Smith records two George Hepburns who graduated MA in Edinburgh in 1645 and 1647 respectively. George père was one of those whose names were on the patent in the unsuccessful attempt to found a College of Physicians in Edinburgh in 1657. Monteith¹² includes in his collection of funeral monuments the memorial inscription of a George Hepburn of Monkkrig, a physician, in the churchyard at Haddington, which is probably that of George père. The waters are muddied by claims, based on Monteith's English translation of the Latin, that this physician died young. However, examination of the Latin text bears out Innes-Smith's claim that this is a misinterpretation: the Latin talks of a swift departure from life, not a youthful death. Hepburn's will is apparently dated 1681, when he would have been about 55, a respectable age in the seventeenth century.

A possible, though by no means proven, sequence of events suggests itself. George père bought his copy of

REFERENCES

- 1 Van Helmont JB. *Ortus medicinæ: id est initia physicæ inaudita*. Amsterdam: Apud Ludovicum Elzevirium; 1648.
- 2 For a brief account of the complex and confusing views of van Helmont see Debus AG. *The French Paracelsians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1991.
- 3 <http://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk>. Estimating the modern equivalent of the cost of a book in the seventeenth century is a very uncertain business. The figure given is based on estimates of the Retail Price Index. Based on average earnings in the two periods the figure would be much higher – more than £1,000.
- 4 See the James Lind Library (<http://www.jameslindlibrary.org>) for transcriptions of the relevant Latin text, English translations of these and other material.
- 5 Humorists were those who supported the humoral theory of the origins of disease, that is, the Galenists whose views van Helmont violently opposed and against whom he wrote vituperatively.
- 6 *Historical sketch and laws of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh from its institution to 1925*. Edinburgh: Royal College of Physicians; 1925.
- 7 Cunningham A. Sydenham versus Newton: the Edinburgh fever dispute of the 1690s between Andrew Brown and Archibald Pitcairne. *Med Hist Suppl*. 1981; 1:71–98.
- 8 Hepburn G. *Tarrugo unmasked, or an answer to a late pamphlet intituled, Apollo mathematicus*. Edinburgh; 1695.
- 9 Eizat E. *Apollo Mathematicus or the art of curing diseases by the mathematicks, according to the principles of Dr. Pitcairn*. London; 1695.
- 10 Ritchie RP. *The early days of the Royall Colledge of Phisitions, Edinburgh*. Edinburgh: George P Johnston; 1899.
- 11 Innes-Smith RVV. *English-speaking students of medicine at the University of Leyden*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd; 1932.
- 12 Monteith R. *An theater of mortality; or, a further collection of funeral-inscriptions over Scotland[...]* Edinburgh: Heirs and Successors of Andrew Anderson; 1713.



An enlargement of part of the blank leaf preceding the title page, with Hepburn's note about his purchase. The text in the top right, 'Pretium 10: Lib', translates as 'Price: 10 pounds'.

the *Ortus* in Edinburgh in 1652 and annotated it over the following year. At some later time, perhaps after his death, this book passed into the hands of his physician son who, in due time, became a Fellow of the College; from him it passed into the College Library. Although there are records of the presentation of books by Fellows in the 1690s and, indeed, an ordinance that each new Fellow must give a book or books to the Library was made at this period, these records are irregular and the absence of a note of any donation by Hepburn during his brief association with the College by no means excludes such a donation. It seems unlikely that we shall ever know for certain if this version of events, credible as it is, is true.

Interestingly, the Edinburgh University Library copy of the 1648 *Ortus* was donated by the medical graduands of 1649. Van Helmont's writings were both influential and highly controversial in British medicine of the later seventeenth century; perhaps the *Ortus* was a popular book to donate to a learned society on receiving its accolade of approval?

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