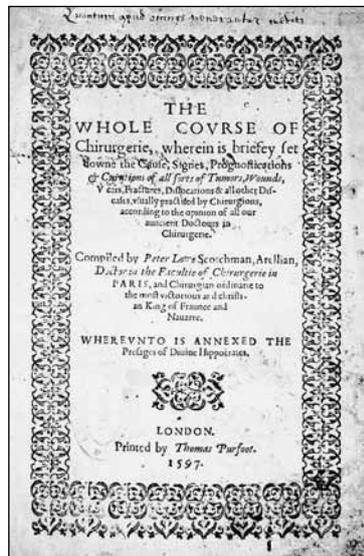


Peter Lowe's *Whole Course of Chirurgerie...* 1597

Towards the end of 1599 King James VI of Scotland granted a charter to 'Maister Peter Lowe our Chirurgiane...' and 'Mr Robert Hamiltone, professoure of medicine...' and their successors to oversee and supervise the practice of medicine in the West of Scotland. This Charter founded what became the Faculty – now the Royal College – of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. Obtaining the charter was undoubtedly Lowe's most important contribution to medicine but he was also the author of at least two books; he himself mentions other works but these have not survived if, indeed, they were ever written. In 1596 Lowe published a book on the cure and prevention of the Spanish sickness¹ (syphilis), and in 1597 his more important work *The Whole Course of Chirurgerie...*² both dated from and printed in London. Further editions of the *Chirurgerie* by the same printer appeared in 1612, 1634 and 1654; these were posthumous though, confusingly, their address to the reader is dated from Glasgow on 20 December 1612; Lowe's tomb also carries the date 1612 though it is now known from his will that he died in 1610. This is only the first of a number of puzzling questions about Peter Lowe's life which were discussed in the excellent and well-documented book on him by James Finlayson, Honorary Librarian of the Glasgow Faculty (as it then was) in 1889.³ Unfortunately the quality of scholarship in subsequent articles on Lowe has declined and a good deal of misinformation and some wild speculation have accumulated.

LOWE THE MAN

No doubt the paucity of information about Lowe's life, training in surgery and activities before he returned to his native Scotland, apparently about 1595, would have encouraged speculation; but it is the following description of himself as author of his books that has stimulated much of it. *Compiled by Peter Lowe Scotchman, Arellian, Doctor in the Facultie of Chirurgerie in PARIS, and chirurgian ordinarie to the most victorious and christian King of France and Nauarre.* There is space here only to comment briefly on the questions and some of the proposed answers to them. A fuller account may be published in a later issue of the *Journal*. The meaning of 'Arellian' has presented a problem to all authors; it has been variously



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*The whole course of
chirurgerie...*
London, 1597.

interpreted as signifying Lowe's birthplace – Errol in Perthshire and Ayr have been proposed; as meaning that he had a medical qualification from Orléans, and/or that he was a Master of Arts from that city; or – and this was a serious suggestion – that it meant that he was a fervent admirer of the philosophy of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. It now seems most likely that Arellian signified that Lowe was born in Errol. The label probably seemed as eccentric to his contemporaries as it does to us. Lowe was a Maistre (Maître) – their highest qualification – of the surgical Collège de St Côme in Paris; these Maistres sometimes styled themselves Doctors of a 'Faculty of Surgery' though the legality of such titles was extremely doubtful. He may also have been a Master of Arts but it is very unlikely that he had any association with Orléans. Lowe is not in the long list of members of Henri IV's medical establishment in 1593 but a postscript in a diplomatic letter of 1595 speaks of 'a new admittit chirurgien to the King of France, called Mr Lowe' who was probably Peter Lowe. It is likely that Lowe was a military surgeon to the French armies for about six years. It is clear from his Latin greeting to the Maistres of St Côme that Lowe received at least his higher surgical training there and, as we shall see, his book is full of evidence of French influences. It is possible – though by no means certain – that he also had some medical (as opposed to surgical) training.

Since the 1980s it has also been claimed that Lowe was a pirate preying on English ships and that he was a spy. The accusation of piracy is almost certainly not true since it is based on a single sentence in a letter in which 'Love' was probably misread as Lowe. However it does seem quite likely that Lowe was involved in espionage of some kind – it has been assumed that this was against England – though for whom he may have been acting is far from clear. In the same letter in which his appointment to the French king was mentioned he was said to have been involved in a transaction involving a 'casket' holding letters containing military information that might have been useful to English enemies. But just what his involvement was and whether he was involved at the time of the letter or about a decade earlier we do not know. Lowe was in London before the end of the

sixteenth century, when Elizabeth was still queen and William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who would have been aware of Lowe's alleged espionage, was still alive and influential and Lowe dedicated his first book from there in 1596 to Elizabeth's favourite, the Earl of Essex. This makes it improbable that he had been acting against English interests unless he was very foolhardy indeed. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that it will be possible now to discover much about Lowe's possible career as a spy, possibly even as a double agent.

THE BOOK

The first edition of the *Chirurgie* is now very rare and the Library is fortunate to have a copy, donated in 1894 by Dr GA Gibson, in excellent condition and in a calf binding which was restored in the nineteenth century but retains its original front and back covers which are probably contemporary with the content though gilding has been added to what were originally blind stamps of thistles and capital letters (Figure 1). These stamps constitute yet another puzzle. Front and back boards are identical except that the front carries, below the letters LO, a design resembling three capitals III, each with a short horizontal crossbar in the centre. Bird in his catalogue⁴ tentatively interprets the stamps as indicating *Low Parisiis Medicus* and suggests the copy might have been bound for Lowe. This interpretation is perfectly reasonable given what we know of Lowe though it leaves the ungilded stamp unexplained.

The later editions have woodcut illustrations which are not particularly well-executed copies of woodcuts from Ambroise Paré's surgical works and of engraved plates of Guillemeau's *Chirurgie Françoise*. These may have been added on the printer's initiative since they are not closely related to the text. The first edition is well printed in a roman face – as was the book on syphilis in 1596 – but in the later editions the main text is in a blackletter face relieved with roman titles; the effect is heavy and the book is much less pleasant to read than the first edition. Finlayson³ remarks on the reversion to an 'older type style' in the later editions suggesting that perhaps the printer had insufficient of the 'new style of type' to print the longer text of these editions. But this is to misunderstand printing practice of the time. There was no shortage of roman type and even if this had been scarce it would not have caused a problem since only a

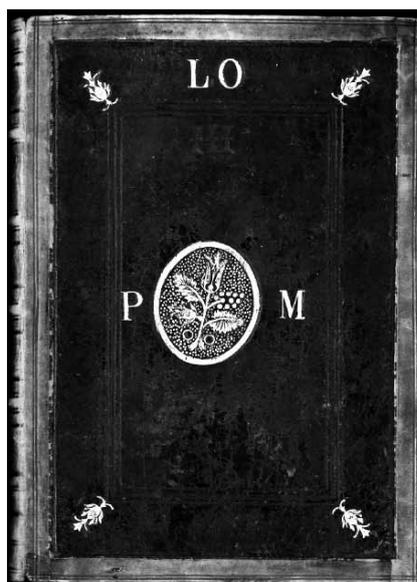


FIGURE 1 Front board of the binding of Lowe's *Chirurgie* of 1597. Contemporary calf with rules, stamped thistles and letters. Repaired and gilding added in nineteenth century. Ungilded design of three vertical bars with cross-strokes is just visible below LO.

couple of formes were set up at a time, the requisite number of sheets for the edition printed, then the type was dismantled and reused. Though this is speculation, there is perhaps a more interesting reason why the first edition used roman type. In sixteenth-century English printing, roman type was usually used for scholarly books, most commonly in Latin, and blackletter for other works. This was a peculiarly English practice. So a surgical book in English in roman type was eccentric (Clowe's English surgical text published in 1596 is mainly in blackletter). It is possible that Lowe specifically asked for roman type for the only edition printed during his life; his surgical education was in France and he was closely associated with Paris, whose printers by the late sixteenth century had long abandoned blackletter type faces. Lowe declared his wish to modernise medical education and regulation using Paris as a model and would perhaps have insisted that his

work should not appear in what to him would have been an antiquated style of print. After his death his printer probably had no such qualms.

Much has been made of the importance of Lowe's book as an early surgical text in English – though it was not the first; that it was important is supported by its running to four editions over more than half a century. Buchanan and Gately⁵ opine that the *Chirurgie* is unique in having 'not only a foreword by a well-respected surgeon... But also seven poems (two in Latin) in praise of the author and his book'. One must suppose that these authors were quite unfamiliar with sixteenth-century medical books. Lowe is following a style common in France in which forewords by professional colleagues plus several poetic encomia – in the vernacular, Latin and occasionally Greek – are very common in sixteenth-century medical books. They also remark on Lowe's book having a Latin preface and a list of names of authorities to which it refers; this also was common practice. They castigate Lowe for omitting his great Parisian older contemporary Paré from the authorities; they either failed to notice *Pareus* in the list or did not understand that it refers to Ambroise Paré. Rather than making Lowe's book extraordinary all these features show the major influence of contemporary, particularly Parisian, medical style. Indeed, as we shall see, the whole structure of the book and layout of the chapters closely mimic that of Paré's collected surgical works, the *Oeuvres* of 1575 – as does much of the detail of the

content. Buchanan and Gately are right that Lowe does not acknowledge his debt to Paré but seem not to appreciate that, though debts to contemporaries are sometimes acknowledged, this practice was rather the exception than the rule – in contrast to reference to ancient authorities which was expected in the sixteenth century. Again Lowe is not eccentric in this, he is of his time. Lowe's surgical text is not remarkable because it is in a vernacular; it is unusual because that vernacular is English. Britain was very markedly behind continental Europe in having very few vernacular texts by medical professionals by the end of the sixteenth century. But Lowe's book is unusual because he appended to the surgical text an English translation of the *Presages of Hippocrates*. This, a completely separate work with its own title page and dedication, is announced on the title page of the *Chirurgie* so it was clearly intended as part of the edition. Unlike the surgical treatise, the main text of the *Presages* is set in blackletter type. Probably its principal interest now is that it contains what seems to be the first English text of the Hippocratic Oath. Lowe's English translation appears to have been made from a sixteenth-century French version; Finlayson³ (quoting Creighton) nominates Jean Canappe's version of 1552 but it could equally well be from Pierre Vernei's 1542 edition – the text is the same. In any case it is, effectively, a word-for-word translation from French. Why Lowe included it we do not know though it was certainly still considered a useful medical work at the time.

The laudatory poems that preface the text, the introduction containing a summary of Galenic medical theory, the layout of the surgical text, the order of its chapters and their headings follow so exactly those of Ambroise Paré's *Oeuvres* of 1575⁶ and the content is so similar that it could be regarded as a much shorter synopsis of the purely surgical parts of Paré's great work. Lowe, unlike Paré, sets out much of the work as a dialogue between his master, Jean Cointeret, and himself (in the first edition; in the second he becomes the teacher and his son, then just a child, is the pupil). Certainly Lowe adds material, examples and anecdotes from his own experience and this is particularly the case in the longer second and later editions but there seems little if anything of diagnosis or technique that is not in Paré. Indeed, some sentences appear to be just English translations of Paré's French. Rather than castigating Lowe for his gross plagiarism – in which he was in good company in his time – we should probably praise him for making available in English an abridgement of much of the best surgical practice of his time. In his Latin address to the 'Doctors of the Royal College of Surgeons of Paris' Lowe gracefully and elegantly acknowledges his admiration of, and debt to, his former teachers and colleagues and says that he has not found their equals 'in these parts'. He has followed their methods very carefully as far as he is able, except that he has not

included 'anatomy and a few other topics' (of which he hopes to write a brief account). Then he sets out the order of the material and reaffirms his debt to them – 'of all under heaven my obligation is to you'. He may not have acknowledged adequately his debt to Paré but he is generous about his debt to French academic surgeons and their practice.

The text gives us no reason to believe that Lowe was an innovator or that he made any significant discovery or advance, in this he does not differ from most medical practitioners in all ages. That the book was useful seems certain from its life over four editions and more than half a century. There was probably no better English textbook of surgery until the Johnson translation of Paré's *Oeuvres* was published in 1634⁷ and Johnson's translation was made from the later, and imperfect, Latin translation of Paré's work since Johnson's French was inadequate to the task (Keynes).⁸

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