

A counterblaste to tobacco: King James's anti-smoking tract of 1616

This year sees the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. We have a fine early copy of this work in the College Library collection which was originally owned by Baron Orde, the first occupant of No 8 Queen Street – now part of the College. However, it is another work connected to King James I and VI that is the subject of this piece. One of the newest antiquarian additions to the Sibbald Library is a copy of the 1616 works of King James. The library bought the volume because it contains a classic we have been seeking for a considerable time – *A counterblaste to tobacco*, the king's early foray into anti-smoking activity.



Written in early modern English, James's 12-page tract covers many of tobacco's dangers and even mentions the problem of passive smoking. It is famous for the concluding paragraph in which King James writes that smoking is 'a custome loathsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull to the braine, dangerous to the lungs, and in the blacke stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomelesse'.

What is perhaps more surprising is that the work's primary purpose was to argue against tobacco used as a medicine. Tobacco smoking in Europe began around 1560 and many thought that the practice treated or cured illnesses such as

headaches, stomach problems, cough, epilepsy and cancer. This is illustrated by another work in the Sibbald Library, published before King James's pamphlet: Giles Everard's *Panacea; or the universal medicine, being a discovery of the wonderfull vertues of tobacco taken in a pipe, with its operation and use both in physick and chirurgery*.

In the *Counterblaste* King James addresses the difficulties involved in testing treatments when he states that it was foolish of people to believe 'if a man smoke[s] himself to death with it (as many have done) then some other disease must bear the blame for that fault'. It was the same as if 'old harlots thanked their harlotry for their many years that custom being healthful (say they) to

the purging of the loins, but never had mind how many died of the pox in the flower of their youth, and so did old drunkards thought they prolonged their days by their swine diet but never remembered how many died drowned in drink before they be half old'.

King James initially levied a very high tax of six shillings and eight pence per pound of tobacco imported, but his attitude changed when tobacco started to become a cash crop for his new Virginia colony. If you would like to read the whole of the pamphlet please visit the Library website at <http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/library/read/index.php>.

– Iain Milne, Sibbald Librarian

150 YEARS OF MEMBERSHIP

At the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, we are delighted to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the introduction of Membership in 1861 and have gathered both historical memorabilia and current statistics about the membership examination as it was, and as it is now, to commemorate this milestone with a dedicated website. Could you have passed the Membership exam in the 1890s? Find out at:

<http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/150-years-of-membership/index.php>