

Herd-boy, Court Physician, MP, Spy: the life of Dr John Hutton of Dumfries

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ABSTRACT Dr John Hutton, a graduate of the Universities of Edinburgh and Padua, became the first Treasurer of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (1681–82), and Court Physician to King William III and Queen Mary (1688–1702). Later he was involved as a secret agent at the Court of Hanover, and was also MP for Dumfries Burghs (1710–12). He died in London, in November 1712, bequeathing to the Presbytery of Dumfries a library of 1,500 volumes, including many medical books, much of which survives in New College Library, Edinburgh. An educational trust, established by Hutton for his native parish of Caerlaverock, continued till 1935.

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John Hutton was the first Treasurer of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in 1681–82, when he was only in his mid-twenties. He must have already been valued by his colleagues for ability and probity. His chief claim to fame in his lifetime was his decade as Principal Physician to King William III and Queen Mary. His claims to posthumous remembrance are the charitable fund he endowed in his native Caerlaverock and the library he bequeathed to the ministers of Dumfries.

The first surviving mention of Hutton is in an Edinburgh University Library manuscript.¹ It records his matriculation in 1672 and graduation in 1674, when he would probably have been about 15. For his earlier life there is only anecdotal evidence. PH McKerlie, in 1877, is the first to relate that he was an orphan, befriended by the Minister of Caerlaverock and employed as a herdsman.² If true, this would have been in 1671, the year John Birnie was appointed to the parish. Birnie was himself a well-connected young man of 28, married to a bishop's daughter, and apparently of some substance, because in March 1688 he bought himself two estates, one of which he prudently retreated to on being ejected from his parish, like other Episcopalian clergy, for refusing the oath of allegiance to the new King in December of that year. He is described as 'of good learning and well skilled in divinity, law, physic and history' – in fact, a likely patron for a penniless lad of parts.³ Hutton must have had such a patron at Edinburgh University, and also at the University of Padua, where he is recorded as graduating MD on 24 May 1677.⁴

His whereabouts from then until November 1681, when he became one of the founding Fellows of the College, are unknown. He was one of the twelve present at the sederunt of 18 January 1682, when he was made

Treasurer. He attended nine of the ten meetings held between January and May 1682, but resigned in May on 'going furth the Kingdom'.⁵

This phrase suggests a voluntary political exile. Perhaps he felt unable to take the oath attached to the Scottish Test Act of 1681, required of all clergy and public office-holders. Perhaps he was connected with the English Parliamentary opposition led by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, whose Exclusion Bill was aimed at the Catholic James, Duke of York. Shaftesbury had already been arrested and spent time in the Tower in July 1681. Out on bail, he fell to plotting with the Protestant Duke of Monmouth against King Charles II, was betrayed, and fled to Amsterdam in December 1682. He died there a month later of gout of the stomach.

In July 1683 Hutton wrote from Paris to the Lord Treasurer Depute (John Drummond of Lundin, later Earl of Melfort) in Edinburgh. He had been commissioned to buy woodcuts of Versailles and other notable houses in France and Rome, costing 100 livres, and also books, for clients in Scotland.⁶ He may have been using his knowledge of fine art and books to support himself financially. He knew his way about, and knew how to make himself understood: his library contains dictionaries and grammars of Italian, Spanish, French, and German, and guide books such as *Description nouvelle de la ville de Paris* by Germain Brice, (Paris, 1684).

After further travels he had the good fortune to be the nearest available physician in Holland when the Princess Mary (married to the Prince of Orange in 1677) had a fall from her horse.⁷ 'This brought him to the attention of Prince William, who after careful inquiry into his character

and qualifications, appointed him as his wife's physician. Hutton, leaving nothing to chance, had taken considerable pains to secure this post by obtaining favourable references from Sir William Trumbull (the English Ambassador to Paris in 1685–86) and travelling into Germany to meet William's confidant, the Hon. Henry Sidney. An arrangement was devised whereby Hutton served for a trial period with Sidney, followed by a formal introduction to William.⁸

At The Hague in 1687–88, Hutton was one of a group of Scots exiles who formed Prince William's network of informants. This included his chaplain, William Carstares (later Principal of Edinburgh University and a leading figure in the Church of Scotland), James Stewart (son of a Lord Provost of Edinburgh), Gilbert Burnet (later Bishop of Salisbury and historian) and Burnet's cousin James Johnston (son of Archibald Johnston of Wariston). (Gilbert Burnet's brother Sir Thomas Burnet was, like Hutton, one of the original Fellows of the College.) Between November 1687 and August 1688 Johnston, as 'Mr Rivers', wrote at least twice a week to Hans Bentinck, Prince William's chief lieutenant. These letters were apparently business letters between genuine traders in London and Holland; however, on receipt the letters were 'soaked in a solution prepared by Dr Hutton [which] produced a cipher message written in invisible ink'.⁹

Hutton was then appointed Physician General to Prince William's expeditionary force which landed in Torbay on 5 November 1688 and by the end of the year was installed in a special apartment on the back stairs of Whitehall Palace in preparation for Mary's arrival.¹⁰

In 1689, as well as his position of First Royal Physician (at an annual salary of £400) he was appointed acting Physician General to the British Land Forces,¹¹ (confirmed in October 1691¹²) and head of the Commission for Sick and Wounded Soldiers and Physician General to Hospitals.¹³

Gilbert Burnet relates in his *History of his own times*¹⁴ that Dr Hutton attended the King as personal adviser as well as physician, and was with him during the three weeks' siege of Limerick, and at the battle of the Boyne on 1 July 1690, in his campaigns against the Irish Catholics who were trying to reinstate King James. Hutton described William's 'very extraordinary command over his temper', being neither depressed at the failure of the siege nor elated after the victory.

The Royal College of Physicians of London admitted Hutton as a Fellow on 30 September 1690.¹⁵ He was almost immediately in controversy with the College, writing to the President from The Hague on 15 May 1691, 'The King desires me to tell you to take all possible care to send away the medicines that are designed for the use of the army in Ireland; it being absolutely necessary that

the same should forthwith be done, otherwise they are like to prove of no use at all'.¹⁶

The physicians had the right to inspect the medicines being prepared for the army by the apothecaries, but it was revealed that delays had often resulted from failure to provide the timely notice required for inspection, so the government overrode the physicians' inspections. Action was taken to prevent these hold-ups and the College did resume its inspections in March 1692. 'In short, Hutton meant no harm to the College, but the government had to get on with the war without being bothered by corporate niceties. It would contract with whomever it pleased'.¹⁷

Some part of Hutton's generous salary was devoted to the purchase of books. In 1710 he declared his intention of establishing a library for the Presbytery of Dumfries, and had collected about 1,500 volumes in biblical studies, church history and theology for that purpose. Two years later, in his will, he added all the rest of his books to the gift. These included all his medical books, together with titles in history, politics, literature, travel, fine art, language dictionaries and grammars, as well as physics, chemistry, botany and zoology – perhaps a further 800 volumes. The collection was sent by sea to Leith and overland to Dumfries in August 1713.¹⁸ Its uniquely surviving *Register of Issues* illustrates its use till 1826, and a printed catalogue of 1784 shows its extent at that time.¹⁹ Neglected and damaged by exposure to the elements, it was transferred to the General Assembly Library in Edinburgh in 1884 and about 1,500 volumes survive in the special collections of New College Library and the main Edinburgh University Library.²⁰

A high proportion of Dr Hutton's medical books date from 1680–1700, and were probably bought on publication, such as William Cockburn's *Oeconomia corporis animalis* (London, 1695), and William Briggs' *Ophthalmographia* (Leyden, 1686). His name appears in the subscription list to the *Myographia nova: or a graphical description of all the muscles* (London, 1697) of his colleague John Browne, the King's surgeon. Other contemporary authors in the collection are Martin Lister, David Abercromby, Richard Morton, Thomas Willis, Nehemiah Grew, Charles Goodal, William Cole and Gideon Harvey. The presence of Cornelius Beughem's *Bibliographia medica* (Amsterdam, 1681) and *A Catalogue of the library of Dr Francis Bernard* (London, 1698) (an auction catalogue) suggest that his book-buying was quite systematic. There are volumes published in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Paris, Lyon, Rome, Venice and Naples. Hutton has annotated some volumes, such as Coronelli's *Viaggi* (Venice, 1697) where he explains that the author was chaplain to two Venetian ambassadors in London in 1696: other books have printed or manuscript dedications to him. There is surviving correspondence

with the Dutch physician Govard Bidloo, whose *Exercitationum anatomico-chirurgicarum* (Leyden, 1708) is in the collection, as well as his folio size *Oratio gratulatoria* (The Hague, 1691), an extravagant encomium of the new King of England.²¹

The University of Oxford awarded Hutton their MD degree in 1695, and he became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1697. But he could have had little opportunity for medical research or the writing of books. Quite apart from his administrative duties as Physician General to the armies and hospitals, he was in continuous attendance on the King. This meant a lot of travelling, as Hutton later claimed back pay for nine summer campaigns in Ireland, Holland and Flanders between 1689 and 1697.²²

Perhaps he shared the same equable temperament and capacity for endurance as William. Certainly their close relationship gave him influence. His lack of parents was no impediment to other relatives needing a friend at court. A letter of 31 May 1691 from Loo (Holland) directs the Commissioners of the Great Seal to add Charles Hutton, Esquire, 'who is related to Dr Hutton, Physician to the King, and now attending him here' to the Justices of the Peace for the County of Lincoln.²³ Two other unknown relatives, John Hutton junior, of Caerlaverock (the Doctor's native place) and Thomas Hutton, a cousin, Keeper of Somerset House (the Doctor's final residence) were the principal beneficiaries of the generous will which was proved in December 1712.²⁴

Dr Hutton's last service to King William was to preside at his autopsy in March 1702. A letter from Secretary of State James Vernon at Whitehall runs '24 February 1701/2, I am sorry I must acquaint you with the ill accident that befell His Majesty on Saturday last [21 February] at Hampton Court, when he fell from his horse that stumbled at a mole-hill, and the fall caused a fracture at the end of the collar-bone, towards the end of the right shoulder. There was a surgeon at hand, and His Majesty being dressed, was brought into town that night. His Majesty has continued since without any fever, or other ill symptoms, so that I hope he will be quit for a few days confinement.'²⁵ Hence the origin of the ironic Jacobite toast 'To the little gentleman in black velvet.'

In fact, the King, who had driven himself and others hard during his fifty-one years, was not in good health. After an apparent recovery he became feverish on 4 March, and died on 8 March about 8 am. The most significant part of the autopsy report, signed by Dr Hutton at the head of eight other physicians, runs 'The Upper-Lobe on the Left-side of the Lungs, and the part of the Plura [pleura] next to it, were inflam'd to a degree of Mortification; and this they looked upon as the immediate cause of the King's Death'.²⁶

One unexplained feature is the presence of 'Professor Bidloo' among the signatories. This friend of Hutton's had

only recently arrived from Holland and had insisted on having the King's shoulder wound reopened and the bone reset. Presumably William knew his countryman Govard Bidloo and placed a confidence in him which was not shared by other official physicians like Sir Thomas Millington and Dr Thomas Lawrence.

Within six months of William's death, Dr Hutton was replaced as Principal Physician to Queen Anne by Dr Lawrence, who had been Second Physician to King William but had previously served as Principal Physician to King James II. Vainly dunning the new administration for back pay of over £3,000 (10/- per day as Physician General to the Army, plus 20/- per day as Physician General to the Hospitals), Hutton was aggrieved and unemployed.²⁷ Letters preserved in various archives reveal him to have spent much of the next five years in Hanover as a (curiously unreliable) confidential agent supplying information about the intentions of the Electress Sophia and her son Prince George Louis. In February 1703 he was corresponding with the Earl of Rochester (Lawrence Hyde), who had also been dismissed from office, and with Dr Thomas Tenison (Archbishop of Canterbury) and Dr John Sharp (Archbishop of York).²⁸

In November 1705 the disgruntled Tory ministers wanted to persuade Parliament to invite Sophia or George to come and reside in England as being Protestant heirs to the throne, following the Act of Settlement of 1701 which was designed to exclude the Catholic Stuarts. Hutton misleadingly told his correspondents that Sophia was willing to do this 'whenever the Queen and Parliament call her'. Queen Anne had no intention of doing this and accurate news from London did not reach Hutton in the way it had in the days when he served King William. He was still at it in 1710, writing to Prince George at Hanover that he would 'lead the Allied troops as Generalissimo'.²⁹

He appears to have been in Scotland in 1705 before a further sojourn at Hanover from September 1705 till December 1706.³⁰ He favoured the Treaty of Union of 1707 for it gave him the possibility of a new position as a member of the Union Parliament. He proposed standing for election for the Dumfries Burghs in 1708 but withdrew in the face of stronger nominees.³¹ In that year however he established a mortification of £900 sterling for the parish of Caerlaverock to provide schools, schoolmasters, free education and maintenance for four boys, as well as poor relief and the repair of the kirk and the manse.³² This trust was an independent body till 1935 and still provides income for Hutton Hall School under the Dumfriesshire Educational Trust.

Letters of 1709 from Hutton to John Crosbie, Provost of Dumfries, report progress, or rather delays, in his attempt as an intermediary in promoting a Parliamentary bill for a public postal service between Dumfries and

Carlisle.³³ In 1710 came his offer to establish a library for the ministers of Dumfries:

'The Presbytery Understanding that Dr John Hutton Physician has a design to bestow upon them some Books to be kept in a Library here, thought fit to write a Letter to him thanking him for it & encouraging him in that Design; and appointed Mrs Hill, Robison & the Moderator [John Somervel] to draw the Letter & report after noon'.³⁴

This was certainly a philanthropic and, as it transpired, long-lasting benefit for the town but the Presbytery was also a body of men who would have had considerable contemporary influence with the electors.

In 1710 Hutton was indeed elected to represent the Dumfries Burghs (Dumfries, Annan, Lochmaben, Sanquhar and Kirkcudbright) in the third UK Parliament.³⁵ The unsuccessful candidate this time was William Paterson, another Dumfriesshire man known in England as the founder of the Bank of England but reviled in Scotland for his part in promoting the disastrous Darien Scheme. Hutton's library still has a copy of Paterson's pseudonymous tract *An inquiry into the reasonableness and consequences of union with Scotland*, by Lewis Medway (London, 1707).

Another volume in the library is John Mackqueen's *An essay on honour* (1711) inscribed 'My honoured friend Dr Hutton, First Physician to his late Majesty and one of the House of Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain, presented'.

In his brief time in Parliament the only significant act recorded is on 29 January 1712 when he presented a petition from William Carstares that the proceedings on the Scottish Toleration Bill be deferred.³⁶ This was not accepted, and the resulting Toleration Act of 1712 became the watershed for Episcopalians in Scotland, who were allowed their own forms of worship and the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* provided that their clergy took the oaths of allegiance and abjuration. Intended to end the

'rabbling' of the curates, it actually resulted in 80 years' proscription of the Jacobite clergy till its repeal in 1792.

The Doctor presumably became unwell in the summer of 1712, for he had his will drawn up on 13 August with a codicil dated 2 September. He died in November and the will was proved on 4 December.³⁷ There is a long list of bequests to his family and servants and a reiteration of the gift of his library to the Presbytery of Dumfries and of the Caerlaverock mortification, which was eventually set up in 1717 after the Lord Chamberlain paid £954 of the Doctor's back pay (owing for 20 years) to his executors.³⁸ There is no mention ever of a wife and the will does not include furniture nor land. There is a special note in the codicil in favour of one woman, however, Anne Pullott – perhaps his cook? She was to get £6 per annum plus £20 cash 'to be paid to her sole and separate use without or contrary to the direction of her present or any other husband and that her Discharge alone shall be sufficient for the same'.

The will was signed at the old Somerset House where his cousin Thomas Hutton was the keeper, and where the doctor presumably lived in some sort of grace and favour apartment, and he wished 'to be buried reverently with little Company and Noise, not in the cities of London or Westminster except in or at the Chappell of Somerset House, or at the Abby'.

The last word came appropriately from the later ministers of the Presbytery of Dumfries, who could not have known about the quiet burial or the double life of Doctor Hutton. They continued to make good use of the Library for about a hundred years after his death, borrowing mainly his books on history and travel, but with some attention to theology and medicine. In October 1731 they recorded that 'The Majority of Ministers with the Assistance of the Toun of Drumfries at a Considerable charge built a Library House and fitted up presses for their books' and 'In Grateful remembrance of Dr John Hutton, whose gift is the chief foundation of the present Library' ordered his name to be inscribed 'On a Board newly polished and coloured in Golden Letters'.³⁹

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