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Fred M. Taylor

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Thomas Linacre  
1460 — 1524

## THOMAS LINACRE

### Humanist, Physician, Priest

FRED M. TAYLOR, M. D.

*It is in life as it is in ways,  
the shortest way is commonly  
the foulest, and surely the fatter  
way is not much about.*

Bacon, *Advancement of  
Learning*,  
Book II, Chap. 23,  
pp. 45, 1605

#### PART II

##### PHYSICIAN AND TUTOR

In 1501, in his 40th year, Linacre's role as Royal physician was cast: he was appointed a court physician in charge of the health of King Henry VII, one of the highest honors a doctor of medicine could at that time achieve. But he also was entrusted with the health-care of Prince Arthur, the young Prince of Wales, brother of Henry, future King Henry VIII, and Princess Mary, the elder son and daughter of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. In addition, he was appointed their Royal tutor.<sup>44</sup>

It is of interest that Linacre had already translated for Arthur, Proclus' astronomical treatise, *De*

*Sphera*, and in 1499 had printed at Venice by Aldus Romanus.<sup>45</sup> Linacre described Princess Mary as having not only a "marvelous disposition to every virtue . . . but a noble and instinctive genius to learning. . . ." <sup>46</sup> At seventeen, however, in the interest of the King's diplomatic foreign policy, she would marry and become Queen Mary of France. Linacre, in an early grammatical effort, had prepared for Princess Mary a Latin grammar in English which was the forerunner of a famous publication, the *Rudimenta Grammatices (Rudiments of Grammar)* (1570). Together with *De Emendata Structura Latini Sermonis (On the Emended Structure of the Latin Language)* (1524), in six books, one of the profoundest texts

of its kind and published just before his death, these two books on Latin established Linacre as Europe's illustrious grammarian and leading philologist for more than a century.<sup>47</sup>

Young Prince Arthur, in contrast to his robust brother, was frail and sickly. In his fifteenth year, however, he was married to Catherine of Aragon, daughter of a powerful new monarchy, the joint sovereigns of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella. Although this famous marriage was also negotiated by the scheming King Henry VII for diplomatic good-will, as well as a huge cash dowery, there was hope that it would "be fortunate and of good omen to England."<sup>48</sup> But it ended tragically four and a half months later when Prince Arthur died of the English sweat, or the sweating sickness, a devastating illness in which, according to More, "death always comes, if it does come, on the first day."<sup>49</sup> Catherine, however, would recover and enter into a second marriage, which perhaps because of failure to bear a royal son, would end even more tragically than the first.

Eight years later, on April 22, 1509, King Henry VII, who had annually presided over the elaborate ritual and ceremony of "Touching for the King's Evil,"<sup>50</sup> died of "consumption" following a course resembling tuberculosis. The next day, "to the blast of trumpets," Henry VIII, who had been reared in an atmosphere of serious study of language and theology in preparation for a re-

ligious vocation, was crowned King. He was eighteen. Tall and handsome, gifted and deeply religious, he would later earn for his zeal in theological controversy with Luther, the papal title, Defender of the Faith. But insufferably unpredictable — doubtless a strain on the character of anyone around him—he also had an immensely passionate compulsion for having his own way.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, six weeks after his accession he proceeded forthwith to marry Catherine, 23 years old, the wife of his deceased brother, Arthur.

Meanwhile, Linacre spent increased time on the preparation of his Latin grammars and translations of classical works in medicine. But he also entered the private practice of medicine. Insatiable in both work and practice, his skill as a physician became widely recognized, and King Henry VIII also appointed him Physician to the King.<sup>52</sup> In London Linacre lived on Knighttrider Street not far from the palace, nor far from the Cathedral of St. Paul where John Colet, one of Linacre's closest friends and associates — and apparently the only person with whom he ever really quarrelled — was the Dean.<sup>53</sup> Linacre, enjoying the confidence and favor of royal amenities, fared well; he attended the health of those in state and Church, and developed a busy court and consulting practice. His position became one of influence, and he promoted increasingly the cause of science and the welfare of the public. Moreover he carried out his painstaking studies of hu-

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mane literature and completed translations of some of Galen's Greek medical works: *De Sanitate Tuendo* (*On the Preservation of Health*) in six books, and *Methodus Medendi* (*A Method of Healing*), in 14 books, were published in 1517 and 1519.<sup>64</sup> Each was dedicated to Henry VIII, emphasizing that Linacre sought "not only to provide correct translations of sound Greek text, but to clarify errors in interpretation based, in part, on an incorrect textual tradition."<sup>12</sup>

*De Temperamentis, et De Inaequali Intemperie* (*On the Temperaments and on Unequal Temperaments*) were dedicated to Pope Leo X, and printed at Cambridge in 1521—Linacre's first translations to be published in England. His last three works of Galen also appeared in England: *De Naturalibus Facultatibus* (*On the Natural Faculties*) (1523); *Depulsuum Usu* (*On the Interpretation of the Pulses*) (1523); and *De Symptomatum Differentiis* (*On the Differences Between Symptoms*) (1528).<sup>64</sup>

#### EAGERNESS OF THE HUMANISTS

In the turbulent reign of King Henry VIII, which witnessed the hardening of the King's will and the worsening of his temper, Linacre, whenever and however, gave immeasurable assistance to Renaissance learning in England. Cardinal Wolsey, Henry VIII's Minister of State, and one of Linacre's patients, was so affected over the worth of the new learning that he not only encouraged scholarship wherever he could but endowed

Oxford for a study of the humanities. Thus, for a brief decade of time (between 1509 and 1519) a gratifying change in England's intellectual climate was noted. There prevailed hope and optimism among English scholars that the new humanism was actually replacing medieval ways of thinking and that it would pave the way to widen intellectual horizons and ultimately revive objective thought. Even Erasmus noted: "... It is marvelous how widespread and how abundant is the harvest of ancient learning which is flourishing in this country."<sup>40</sup>

But ignorance and secularism, as well as deep-rooted, medieval complacency, were commonplace. Despite the eagerness of the humanists to reform ecclesiastical abuses by a sterner spirit of faith and reason, Martin Luther, convinced neither of the value of time nor the worth of peace, and not foreseeing the savage consequences of his actions, hammered his Ninety-five Theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The ground-swell of political and religious forays which shortly wracked the backward and brilliant alike of Western Europe was well started.

Linacre's fame in medicine was not in the discovery of new treatment nor in the dogged work of experimental effort. Nor did his ability as a physician even differ much from that of other consulting physicians of the times. His fame was his quality of objectivity—his ability to observe and describe carefully. Thus he "introduced the

seeds of a more precise and objective mode of thought."<sup>55</sup>

Although he translated accurately the actual texts of the classic authorities in medicine and philosophy in their original language, his scholarly translations of Galen, however worthwhile, opened no magic-like doors to the immediate advancement of medical science. Nor was this even intended. If Linacre had anything at all to do with it, even the later advancement of medicine—and medicine, in order to advance, had to cut itself free from the unquestioned authority of Galen—he broke the chains of Galen's ancient authority and of intellectual infantilism primarily through his attitude of objectivity, obviously the very core of the scientific attitude. He pointed out errors and mistakes of the past, but neither made nor urged a complete break with the past. He put tradition—whether it concerns medicine and art or religion and political science—in its proper perspective, and emphasized a fact, which eternally needs emphasizing, that new knowledge need neither destroy high ideals nor bury what is right and good.

#### FOR THE MORE LEARNED

Linacre, however, was concerned over the quality of medical practice and the standards of medical learning existing in England at the time. On one occasion he said critically:

... whilst medicine, the most profitable of the sciences, whose reputation and power had been almost annulled by the presumption and importunity of the unskilful and ignorant, has been duly estimated, [there is] certain hope excited not only of its less abuse in future,

but of its re-establishment in its ancient state and dignity.<sup>56</sup>

Linacre labored to establish medicine in a state of dignity and to increase the standards of medical care and learning. He also desired to establish in England one or more schools of medicine which would probably be patterned after the one at Padua. But caught in the inexorable binds of political hostility and ecclesiastical strife, and in the violent changes coming about in every area of social and intellectual life, the fulfillment of many of Linacre's reform-aims in medicine and medical education was deterred for centuries to come. All essential steps had been taken which would bring about a religious revolution. To make matters desperately worse, the country was beset with the dreadful ravages of plague.

Sir Thomas More, an enlightened health reformer himself, envisaging public-water supplies and drainage systems, established a system of public-health administration and quarantine laws to help counter the spread of plague.<sup>57</sup> In 1518 he ordered "the mayor of Oxford, where the plague was raging, to confine infected persons within their homes for forty days, to prohibit all animals indoors, and to appoint special officers to keep the streets cleansed and to burn refuse."<sup>58</sup> But in addition, there were epidemics of chickenpox, tuberculosis and smallpox, and indeed of the newly introduced syphilis, hitherto pandemic in Italy. Each flourishing epidemic took a toll of life, and of body and mind, not only of the ignorant but

of the brilliant. And however incredible now, the hysteria of witchcraft and all the frightful consequences of belief in witches, was everywhere rampant.

The English doctors were not organized then as the medical profession is today. As a matter of fact, only a few physicians were Doctors of Medicine, and they usually were consultants. Even most physicians had scant training, many only in schools of experience, and licensed only by human credulity.<sup>12</sup> Most general practice, for instance, was carried out not by physicians but by barbers and apothecaries. Although the doctors themselves were not an unorganized rabble,<sup>32</sup> the profession was beset with persons plainly unqualified and untrained. It also was beset with vice, for it was made up of herb and root doctors, plain everyday quacks, unqualified midwives, and "wise women, of whom there was no scarcity."<sup>60</sup> But the medical profession—and this would appear to be a handicap at any stage of the profession's evolution—was open to anyone who could read, indeed, to some who couldn't read. Thus medicine included not only illiteracy and quackery but empiricism at its very worst. Linacre worked for a system which would correct this, a system that would not merely grant a person the right and license to practice medicine, but restrict the privilege to those qualified to practice it. In 1511, for the first time in England, and largely through Linacre's leadership, authority to regulate the practice of medicine by licensure

was established. This authority and power was set up by an Act of Parliament but was granted to the Bishop of London, or the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, or in case of physicians practicing outside London, to the diocesan bishops.<sup>60</sup> Although this put the examination of physician-candidates, thus the licensing of physicians to practice medicine, in the hands of the Church, it nonetheless was the start of an effort to correct irregular medical practitioners and lessen incompetent practice.

The practice of medicine as well as its control, however, was already emerging as a function distinct from the Church. Indeed, in England, seven years later, Linacre, with the assistance of Cardinal Wolsey, the Lord Chancellor, through whose hands for 14 years the entire affairs of the royal kingdom passed, and who would be succeeded by Thomas More, procured from King Henry VIII on September 10, 1518, through the authority of Parliament, a royal charter which established for the "more learned members of the profession," the Royal College of Physicians.<sup>60</sup> This was England's first coherent medical organization; but it was a stern organization. Linacre, a person also outstanding in affairs of state, drew up the constitution of the Royal College of Physicians, itself a standing monument to his constructive genius and far-seeing judgment. In the annals of the Royal College, John Caius, the second president of the College, and like Linacre, one of its most influential mem-

bers, wrote of the Constitution:

Henry the Eighth, the most serene King of Britain, in order that he might preserve his people from the dangers and errors of unskilled persons, on 23 September 1518, and the tenth year of his reign, by his charter or letters patent, sealed with the great seal of England, granted in perpetuity the establishment of a College of Physicians of London, and, in the name of the College, he gave to John Chamber, Thomas Linacre, Ferdinand de Victoria, his physicians, and to Richard Halswel, John Franciscus, and Robert Yaxley, leading physicians of the city of London, power to choose a president from the fellows, . . . to plead lawsuits before any judges to prevent anyone, unless licensed by the College, from practising medicine in the City of London, its suburbs or within an area of seven miles around, or be fined five pounds for each month: to make statutes, to call meetings, to establish four judges or censors of the writings, morals and medicaments of anyone practising medicine, . . . to punish offenses by imprisonment or fine, and to be exempt from the burdensome affairs, commands, and services of the city.<sup>60</sup>

Linacre was the first president of the Royal College of Physicians, holding that office until his death six years later.<sup>61</sup> He also was its first benefactor, providing the College substantial financial support and bequeathing it his books and his Stone-House on Knighttrider's Street. The College would continue to hold its meetings in Linacre's house for nearly a hundred years. Both house and the majority of the books, however, were destroyed in the London fire of 1666.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to his reforms in medicine (and this would be of interest to administrators of modern university departments) Linacre was one of the first persons to endow, however modest the precedent might seem today, uni-

versity teaching and a professorial chair to encourage both the study and the teaching of medicine. He appointed a board of trustees to which he conveyed his estates in Kent, England (apparently acquired in part from his successful medical practice), and founded at Oxford and Cambridge what is one of his lasting accomplishments: the Linacre Lectureship.<sup>63</sup> Special medical lecturers would be required to have studied Aristotle and Galen, and during their teaching period, usually for three years, abstain from medical practice.<sup>64</sup> The Linacre Foundation, however, was not granted an official license until eight days before his death. In addition, because of dawdling mismanagement, as well as administrative corruption which later came about in the universities, the lectureship would become completely lost at Cambridge, but eventually revised at Oxford to establish innumerable years later, the present Linacre Professorship of Physiology.<sup>20</sup>

#### SPIRITED CONFLICT

Like most Englishmen of the time, Linacre was Catholic. His intimate Catholic friends were often occupied with the innumerable complex factors leading to the full-blown Reformation, a brutal sequel, indeed a theological failure, to the once bright promise of the Renaissance. While both clerical and lay humanists openly attacked the abuses and egregious weaknesses of ecclesiastical life, and Erasmus was literally shaking the ecclesiastical timbers in all their parts, a series of women would

prove the love of King Henry VIII both dangerous and deadly. As the shadow of papal wrath stretched ominously over the thunderous and stubborn will of Henry VIII, the latter, in 1533, announced his secret marriage to Anne Boleyn. On September 7, 1533, the future Queen Elizabeth was born, and after that the number of men who would keep their heads would be fewer and fewer. As a matter of fact, however iconoclastic Henry VIII's notions on the indissolubility of a valid marriage and his views on the supremacy of the Holy Pontiff, his infatuation with Anne and his efforts to secure an annulment from Catherine served to bring about in England the kind of political and theological chimera that would allow the Reformation to survive as a world force.

Erasmus had been in spirited conflict not so much with Luther, but primarily with Church authorities. A deeply religious man, Erasmus desired passionately to repair what was wrong and clearly amiss, seeking however, to strengthen the Church not by cleavage and violent religious provincialism but by reform of ecclesiastical practices through peace and unity. Thus he would gain in the history of the birth and growth of the Reformation—and he was under serious pressure and suspect from both sides—the well-known parental-like reputation: "Erasmus laid an egg; Luther hatched it." Erasmus and More, unlike chameleons, however, kept their faith.

"The problem of what is due to

the individual conscience, what to the State, is indeed an eternal one, and not a few people have been surprised and distressed to find it emerging today, as much alive as ever it was."<sup>65</sup> But for a point of individual conscience and of faith, and for denial of Royal supremacy, Sir Thomas More, on the morning of July 6, 1535, lost both head and beard on Tower Hill and had them exhibited upon London Bridge. Eighteen years earlier Erasmus, fearful of his future under Henry VIII, had left England and settled in Basel, Switzerland. When news of More's execution reached Erasmus, the latter, "worn out by work, disease and disappointment"<sup>66</sup> and who would die the next year, wrote of his life-long friend:

Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, whose soul was more pure than any snow, whose genius was such as England never had—yea, and never shall have again . . . In More's death I seem to have died myself: we had but one soul between us.<sup>66</sup>

One of the choice specimens of the ideals of wisdom and virtue. More, however vengefully disliked by Henry VIII, would grow immensely in stature and importance as the years passed. He would be proclaimed a martyred Saint, and become popularly known not only as the Saint of the Renaissance, but as the Patron of Catholic laymen everywhere. More, like Socrates, it is said, died for freedom of conscience, with a jest of potent meaning on his lips:

. . . that they should pray for him in this world, and he would pray for them elsewhere, protesting that he died the

King's good servant, but God's first.<sup>65</sup>

But also as the years passed, however once keen-witted the master of political art, Henry VIII would instead not only bring about the dissolution of hundreds of monasteries in England but the plunder of hospitals for the sick, poor, and aged, and deliberately lay waste more things of beauty—indeed the very things he once wanted, loved and stood for—and more things of promise than any other man in European history.<sup>67</sup>

#### AN EMINENT PERSON

Meanwhile, Linacre had undertaken the study of theology in order to prepare for the priesthood. Four years before his death—and probably about the time of Pope Leo X's official excommunication of Luther—Linacre was ordained priest. "Much confusion, (however) exists as to the time, place, and prelate at his ordination."<sup>12</sup> He gave up his practice of medicine, serving neither as parish priest nor as member of an order. He lived quietly in London, and devoted his time to further translations and writing, using his vast learning and wealth "in ways dictated by the ideals of manhood."<sup>32</sup>

During his scholarly lifetime Linacre left no original creative work except his Latin grammar. His chief occupation was the translation of the Greek writers into Latin which would continue as the major language, even in medical writing, through the eighteenth century. And because of a lack of proper English words at the time, the translations of the Greek medical works would result

in our modern Greco-Latin medical vocabulary. Thus Linacre gave to medicine, to paraphrase Sir William Osler, one of its most distinctive features—the light and liberty of Greek thought.<sup>68</sup> But he also left what has been even more valuable—"an example of a life of devotion to learning, to medicine, and to the interests of humanity."<sup>69</sup>

In 1522, two years before his death, Linacre published Leoniceus' earlier translation of Galen's manuscript, *De Moto Musculorum* (*On the Motion of the Muscles*).<sup>9</sup> Leoniceus, one of the first medical humanists and author of one of the first clinical accounts on syphilis,<sup>12</sup> with whom Linacre had visited many years previously in Ferrara, Italy, had looked up to Linacre as the person who would become one of his brightest and soundest pupils.<sup>9</sup> However prophetic, Leoniceus apparently was confident in Linacre's ability as a Greek scholar and translator, and in his ability as a leader to develop in medicine the attributes of intellectual and objective perspective.

On October 20, 1524, in London, Thomas Linacre died in his 64th year from complications of kidney stones, and was buried in old St. Paul's Cathedral in London in a spot he himself chose.<sup>70</sup>

Upon Linacre's death John Caius, distinguished graduate of Cambridge and Padua, and admirer of Thomas Linacre, was appointed a physician to King Henry VIII.<sup>60</sup> He would also become a court physician to Edward VI, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth. Caius himself was elected

second president of the Royal College of Physicians, and 33 years after Linacre's death, had erected at his own expense at St. Paul's Cathedral a memorial brass to Linacre's memory. "This monument was erected near the north door of the Church, over or near Linacre's grave, and remained till the year 1666, when the great fire of London involved the Church, monument, and remains of him whom it commemorated in one common ruin and desolation."<sup>71</sup> The text, however, has been preserved:

Thomas Linacre, physician to King Henry VIII; a man in Greek and Latin and in the art of medicine most learned of all: during his lifetime he restored to life many who were ill, some even who had despaired of life; with marvelous and unique eloquence he translated many works of Galen into the Latin language. At the request of his friends he published, a little while before his death, an outstanding work on the grammar of the Latin language. For students of medicine he endowed two public lectureships at Oxford and one at Cambridge. In this city, he organized the College of Physicians by his industry, and was elected its first president. Marvelously aloof from guile and deceit; faithful to his friends; distinguished in every class of society, a few years before he died he was ordained priest. Full of years he departed this life, much beloved, in the Year of Our Lord 1524, on the twentieth day of October. Virtue lives beyond funerary rites: John Caius has erected this monument to Thomas Linacre, a most distinguished physician, in the year 1557.<sup>72</sup>

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