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## Who is Thomas Linacre?

JAMES F. GILROY, S.J.

FEW PHYSICIANS have ever done more for their profession than Thomas Linacre. When he received his M.D. at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the practice of medicine in England was carried on largely by "a great multitude of ignorant persons, of whom the greater part had no insight into physic, nor in any other kind of learning; some could not even read the letters on the book, so far forth, that common artificers, as smiths, weavers, and women, boldly and accustomedly took upon them great cures to the displeasure of God, great infamy to the faculty, and the grievous hurt, damage, and destruction of many of the King's liege people."<sup>1</sup> Not too long before this, Geoffrey Chaucer in the Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales* spoke of a doctor of his time: "He watched sharply for favorable hours and an auspicious ascendant for his patients' treatment, for he was well grounded in astrology."<sup>2</sup>

Linacre was too intelligent not to perceive the immense need for

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The above thoughtful account of this great physician for whom our journal is named reminds us—and not for the first time—that there seems to be no full-length biography of Thomas Linacre although there are scores for his famous student and contemporary, Thomas More. A definitive biography and at least one popular biography is highly desirable. It would not be an easy task. It does look interesting. A rather good bibliography of source materials on Tho-*

reform and too conscientious not to do his best to bring it about. To combat the ignorance of scientific medical methods he gave lectures at Oxford and established readerships in medicine at Oxford and Cambridge. In order to limit the practice of medicine to competent physicians he founded the Royal College of Physicians to license doctors and regulate their practice and to punish irregular practitioners.

Born about 1460, young Linacre studied at the monastery school of Christ Church, Canterbury, under the learned monk William Selling and then proceeded to Oxford. In 1488 he accepted the offer of traveling to Italy with his old teacher, Selling, who had been appointed Henry VII's ambassador to the Pope. At the most famous of the Italian Universities, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Venice, and Padua, Linacre spent about ten years, associating with and studying under many of the leading figures of the Italian Renaissance, such as Hermaeus Barbarus and the future Medici Pope, Leo X. At Rome

mas Linacre is given in the first part of the article on him in the book *Great Catholics*.

<sup>1</sup> From the Charter of the College of Physicians, quoted by Anthony Bassler, "Thomas Linacre," *The Linacre Quarterly*, I (1933).

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, edited by John Tatlock and Percy MacKaye for modern readers (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1946), p. 8.

Linacre's collation of manuscripts in the Vatican libraries gained him a reputation as an authority in Humanistic learning. During the course of these studies he became so interested in the ancient writers on medicine that he directed his studies to this field and earned a doctor of medicine degree at the University of Padua.

After his return from Italy Linacre was chosen tutor and physician to Prince Arthur and teacher of Italian to Princess Mary. Soon he became domestic physician to King Henry VII and in due course was made King's Physician to Henry VIII. But all this court favor did not turn his attention from what had become a dominating interest in his life—the establishment of a firm foundation for medicine as a respectable profession in England. His first steps in this direction were the medical lectures he gave early in the century at Oxford. Soon, however, he saw that it would be better to carry on his work from London.

When by 1509 he had become firmly established at Court, he gave himself even more completely to the task. At last, in 1518, he received the reward for his long efforts, a royal charter establishing the Royal College of Physicians of London. He became its first President. "It was Linacre's zeal for the advancement of medicine that led him to obtain by Royal Letters Patent a charter from King Henry VIII made out to himself and five other physicians for the foundation of a College of Physicians of London, for the regulation of the practice of physic in London

and for seven miles around, and for the punishment of offenders. Four years afterwards these privileges and responsibilities were confirmed by statute and extended to the whole country."<sup>3</sup> Linacre financed the whole project out of his own fortune, since the royal charter made no provision for support.

The importance of this establishment can be seen, for "no professional foundation, at home or abroad, stands higher today in public estimation than this College. Its Fellowship is recognized as evidence of culture, professional skill, and high character: one might say that by it the attributes of the founder are preserved,"<sup>4</sup> and "it is impossible not to recognize a strong constructive genius in the scheme of the College of Physicians, by which Linacre not only first organized the medical profession in England, but impressed upon it for some centuries the stamp of his own individuality."<sup>5</sup>

His last great contribution to the advancement of medicine was the establishment shortly before his death of readerships in medicine at Oxford and Cambridge. Unfortunately, however, "owing to neglect and bad management of the funds, they fell into useless-

<sup>3</sup> W. J. O'Donovan, "Thomas Linacre," *Great Catholics*, edited by Claude Williamson, O.S.C. (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1939) p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> J. P. Pye, "Thomas Linacre, Scholar, Physician, Priest," *Twelve Catholic Men of Science*, edited by Bertram Windle (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1914), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., Vol. XIV. Article, "Thomas Linacre."

ness and obscurity." But "the Oxford foundation was revived by the university commissioners in 1856 in the form of the Linacre professorship of anatomy. Posterity has done justice to the generosity and public spirit which prompted these foundations."<sup>6</sup>

In 1520 Linacre, unlike Chaucer's physician, whose "studie was but litel on the Bible,"<sup>7</sup> culminated a thoroughly Christian life by being ordained a priest of the Catholic Church. Four years later, on October 20, 1524, he died and was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, London. He had lived his sixty-four years of life to the full. Few before or after him can display a comparable record of intellectual and cultural achievements.

Thomas Linacre was a great physician in his time; of this there can be no doubt. Among his patients were numbered two kings, Henry VII and Henry VIII, a prince, a future queen, the Lord High Treasurer, Sir Reginald Bray, Cardinal Wolsey, and other notables in the realm. Erasmus considered him the introducer of medical science into England. In our own times, "Sir George Newman in his Linacre Lecture . . . (asserted) that to him we owe our conception of the splendor and amplitude and the high purpose of the science and art of medicine."<sup>8</sup> These qualities alone would be sufficient to allow the British and American medical men of today to look with pride to Linacre as a Father of English Medicine.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Prologue, l. 438.

<sup>8</sup> O'Donovan, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

Besides being a great physician, Thomas Linacre was also a great scholar. He knew Greek thoroughly and was famous for the purity of his Latin style. He included among his students such outstanding personages as the Prince Arthur already mentioned, the Princess and future Queen Mary, Sir Thomas More, the Saint and brilliant Humanist, and Erasmus, the greatest scholar of the age. The leading scholars of Europe in his day united in their praise of Linacre as the first great English Humanist as well as the outstanding physician of the time. Indeed, his intellectual gifts were such that Erasmus wrote: "What can be more acute, more perfect, or more refined than the judgment of Linacre,"<sup>9</sup> and "Linacre is as deep and acute a thinker as I have ever met with."<sup>10</sup> It is indeed a credit and high compliment to the profession that such a man should devote himself to the practice of medicine at a time when it was scarcely a respectable pursuit.

Linacre left no original works on medicine in writing, but "his Greek scholarship . . . was applied to purifying the great works of classical science and medicine from medieval accretion,"<sup>11</sup> notably such works of Galen as *De Sanitate Tuenda*, *De Pulsuum Usu*, and *Methodus Medendi*.

But it is less for any specific contribution to medicine than for the man himself that we should be grateful. This at least was the

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> Pye, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Bush, *The Renaissance and English Humanism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1939), p. 72.

opinion of Sir William Osler, the great modern physician and founder of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "Many of the greatest physicians," said Osler, "have influenced the profession less by their special work than by exemplifying those

graces of life and refinements of heart which make up character. These have been the leaven that raised our profession above the level of business. Of such as these Linacre was one."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> O'Donovan, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG in body or in soul, man is in pain; his work in the world is interrupted and may be left unfinished. It is the part of doctors and nurses to co-operate in the plan of God by helping man over these difficult times, to relieve the pain and to cure the sickness by the use of natural means which God has created and placed at the disposal of man.

Doctors and nurses get closer to the heart and spirit of man than anyone else except priests. More than anyone else, they understand the wonders of the human body, how it works, and what interferes with its well-being. God gives them such wisdom and skill because He loves man so much and desires right order to be restored.

Christ became man in order to die for men; and He rose from the dead in order to raise them up with Him in perfect wholeness of both body and mind. We are living in the age of the Risen Christ. Doctors and nurses should live with Him and for Him as did the Apostles and other miracle-workers who worked their cures in His name, in His power, and for His divine purposes.

League of The Sacred Heart  
Apostleship of Prayer  
(Intention for June—Doctors and Nurses)