

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68605-2 - Johannes De Mirfeld of St Bartholomew's, Smithfield:

His Life and Works

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§ I

Introduction

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JOHANNES DE MIRFELD

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INTRODUCTION

JOHANNES DE MIRFELD, author of the *Breviarium Bartholomei*, had already been advanced to an honourable place amidst medieval English medical writers, both by the publication of a small section of this work—the *Sinonoma* or Glossary¹—as well as by the labours of eminent bibliographers, when the late Sir Norman Moore, in the first of his Fitz-Patrick Lectures for 1905–1906,² devoted considerable attention not only to this book but also to another work by the same author, namely, the *Florarium Bartholomei*.

In the course of his lecture Sir Norman mentioned that Mirfeld was the first genuine writer on Medicine to be in any way connected with St Bartholomew's Hospital as distinct from the chronicler of the miraculous cures recorded in the *Book of the Foundation*.³ For this reason alone it is to be hoped that the publication of these additional extracts from Mirfeld's works may be held justified, even though an examination should disclose the fact that they do not contain anything that can be regarded as an original contribution to medical science in itself, or new to the student of medical history.

The value indeed of these excerpts lies rather in the fact that they provide the modern reader with a genuine historical document: a record which demonstrates the nature

¹ The *Sinonoma*, or Glossary of medical terms, the meanings of which are given sometimes in Latin and sometimes in English (edited by J. L. G. Mowat, M.A., in *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, Mediaeval and Modern Series, Vol. 1, Part 1, 1882). It is one of the authorities quoted in the *New English Dictionary*.

² *On the History of the Study of Medicine in the British Isles* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 44.

³ British Museum MS. Vespasian B IX; see also St Bartholomew's Hospital Reports, Vol. xxxi.

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of the medical doctrines accepted by an author who was a contemporary both of the Black Prince and of Chaucer, and an acquaintance, if not a friend, of Adam Rous, surgeon to King Edward III; who would seem to have lived for many years within the Priory and to have been closely connected with the Hospital of St Bartholomew in Smithfield; and who may actually have been within the precincts at the very moment when Wat Tyler was brought in to die after that eventful interview with the young king under the conventual walls which provides the most picturesque, as well as the most decisive, incident of the Peasants' Revolt of A.D. 1381.

Before, however, embarking upon any discussion as to the nature of his works, it will be advisable to state the little that can be ascertained definitely concerning the writer himself.

I. THE LIFE OF JOHANNES DE MIRFELD

Johannes de Mirfeld has generally been described as a Canon of the Augustinian Priory of St Bartholomew, Smithfield. Such an assertion, however, is unfounded: for a study of available records clearly demonstrates that Mirfeld was never admitted to full membership of the Augustinian Order, although he appears to have resided for many years within the precincts of one of its Houses, and gave to his books the name of the Institution with which he was thus associated.

That he was in fact not a full Canon can be readily deduced from an inspection of the Clerical Subsidy Roll for A.D. 1379,¹ where it will be found that "Johannes Meryfeld" is described not as a Canon ("Canonicus"), but as one of the "Clerks of the Priory" ("Clerici eiusdem Prioratus") of St Bartholomew Smithfield: and that he

¹ Now preserved in the Public Record Office. See the extract from it relating to St Bartholomew's Priory printed by E. A. Webb, *The Records of St Bartholomew's Priory... West Smithfield* (1921), Vol. 1, p. 172.

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paid, as his share of the tax, no more than 4*d.*, whereas each Canon was assessed at not less than 3*s.* 4*d.*¹

Moreover, the name of John Mirfeld does not appear in the Register of Bishop Braybroke as one of the Canons who voted at the election of Prior William Gedeney, an event which took place in 1382 whilst Mirfeld presumably was residing in the Priory.

Nor indeed would it appear from documents still extant that our author was ever known to his contemporaries as an Augustinian Canon. He was certainly not so regarded in 1395 by the Bishop who ordained him priest (and by whom he was enrolled simply as “*ciuitatis Londonie*”²), nor to the executrix who proved his will (who is called his mother) and who described him as a “*Dominus*” and “*Capellanus*”, i.e. a fully ordained but unbeneficed priest who acted as a chaplain: had he been a Canon the records in each of these cases could hardly have failed to give such information. Again, Mirfeld when recording his various legal transactions never refers to himself by any style which implies membership of a monastic Order.³

It is impossible to state with precision the exact nature of his connection with the Priory and the Hospital of St Bartholomew, especially as the two institutions were distinct, though connected, and were quarrelling with each other during the earlier years of his residence in the Close to such an extent that the arbitration of the Bishop of London (Simon of Sudbury) became necessary.

All that has hitherto been discovered regarding this connection—in addition to the information obtained from the

¹ Not 3*s.* 4*d.* as given by E. A. Webb, *op. cit.*

² See Appendix C, p. 175.

³ Mowat's statement that in 1392 and 1393 Mirfeld represented the Priory in the King's court (and the inference drawn therefrom that he was a senior Canon), is based upon a misinterpretation of certain entries in the *Calendarium Inquisitionum Post Mortem*, Vol. III (Record Commission, 1821). These entries merely relate to his conveyances of real property to the Priory.

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Clerical Subsidy Roll previously mentioned—is an entry on the Patent Rolls dated the 4th of April 1390, which consists of a Royal *Inspeximus* and Confirmation of an Indenture between John de Mirfeld of the one part and the Prior (Thomas de Watford) and “Convent” of St Bartholomew of the other part. This enrolled agreement was dated the 9th of May 1362, and by its terms the Prior and Convent grant to Mirfeld an annual pension of 4*l.* 8*s.* for life, with the stipulation that if this pension be not paid, then Mirfeld (or his attorney) shall have power to obtain an equivalent amount of food and drink in lieu thereof, by levying, if necessary, a distress upon the Priory’s possessions in London; furthermore, the Priory leases to Mirfeld, at an annual rent of 4*s.*, “a certain chamber . . . on the South side of the said Church, and adjoining the Great Altar”, which chamber Sir Norman Moore identified as the room formerly situated at the level of the triforium and built out into the Close from the South wall of the Priory Church at a spot corresponding roughly to the second bay eastward of that which now contains Prior Bolton’s window.

One feature of this deed which appears to have been generally overlooked is that whilst, according to the contract which it embodies, the Priory is given no power to terminate the lease of the chamber, yet Mirfeld is permitted to retain possession of his room for so long as he shall think fit, and may vacate it at any time upon giving three months’ notice.¹ It is difficult to believe that such terms would have been granted, or such latitude permitted, to a man who had accepted the conditions imposed upon those who became full members of the Augustinian Order; and this provides yet another indication that Mirfeld’s position in the Priory was that of a resident stranger—a “commorans”

¹ “. . . *quamdiu eam tenere voluerit et in casu quo eam amplius tenere noluerit premuniet predictos priorem et conuentum per vnum quartum anni.*”

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(or “sojourner”) as he is termed in the *Incipit* of the Oxford copy of the *Breviarium Bartholomei*—rather than that of a member of the Order.¹

In the absence of other evidence it would normally follow that the annuity was given in return either for personal services rendered to the monastery, or else for some substantial gift (generally of land) made either by the annuitant himself or by some person acting on his behalf. Into the latter category, however, Mirfeld’s various donations to the Priory do not seem to fall; for, as will be shown later, the various properties which he transferred to St Bartholomew’s were probably not his own private possessions but those which he held merely as trustee for others. Nor is there any record extant to show that the corrody was originally granted by royal command. These facts, taken in conjunction with the entry in the Clerical Subsidy Roll, seem to justify the assumption that Mirfeld’s position in the Priory was that of a salaried official, although it is impossible to be certain of the actual nature of the services which he performed.

No evidence is available to explain why the *Inspeximus* was obtained, but it is just possible that Mirfeld was contemplating ordination, and that he desired either to resign his duties in the Priory, or to transfer to the Hospital, but still to retain the lease of his chamber, and that he therefore went to the trouble of obtaining the royal recognition of the deed executed nearly thirty years before. On the other hand it is quite possible that an attempt was being made by royal officials to obtain a corrody from the Priory, and that Mirfeld was forced to secure his *Inspeximus* in order to protect his interests from being overridden.

With the exception of the grants made by him to the Priory of St Bartholomew (and to which reference will

¹ *Infra*, p. 39.

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again be made), no further information of an authentic nature has hitherto been discovered concerning Mirfeld. He has usually been regarded as an Augustinian Canon, but sometimes, however, as a layman who was a professional physician. The following facts, now brought to light, may perhaps have the effect of modifying these views.

The Register of Robert de Braybroke, Bishop of London from 1381 to 1404, contains a section (curiously neglected by the historians of St Bartholomew's) in which are recorded the names of those who were ordained to the priesthood either by the Bishop himself or by his deputies. A search of these ordination lists discloses the fact that on Saturday, the 19th of September 1394, one John Mirfeld, of the City of London ("Johannes Mirfeld, Ciuitatis Londonie"¹), presented himself in St Paul's Cathedral amongst the candidates for admission to the order of Acolyte, but for some reason now unknown he was refused ordination. The cryptic note written against his name, "iste non fuit ordinatus" ("this man was not ordained"), gives no indication as to the cause of his rejection. Probably he merely lacked a "title", because his pension was too meagre to be considered as sufficient for the purpose; but one is tempted to suggest that, since he had already written a medical book,² he was regarded as a physician and one who might, it was feared, have incurred such an "irregularity" during his practice as to be disqualified for the higher orders of the priesthood—a problem which he himself discusses at length in the *Florarium*. Whatever may have been the impediment to his promotion, it did not, however, prove permanent; for at a subsequent ordination, held in St Paul's on Saturday, the 6th of March following (1395), all was well, and he was made first an Acolyte, and then a Sub-

¹ See Appendix C, p. 175.

² The *Breviarium* was probably composed between 1380 and 1395 (see p. 38).

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deacon. Here an interesting fact emerges. His title is set down as being “The Master and Confraternity of the Hospital of St Bartholomew, Smithfield” (“...Magistri et Confraternitatis Hospitalis Sancti Bartholomei in Smethefeld Londonie”), which proves that he was to derive his subsistence, not from the Priory, but from the Hospital, since the former is designated in the register as the “Prior and Convent”. Mirfeld is not described as a “Canon” of the Priory, nor is he called a “Brother” of the Hospital; and it is difficult to ascertain his exact status, since he is simply set down as being “of the diocese of London”. He proceeded normally to the Diaconate on the 27th of March and finally was ordained a Priest on Saturday the 10th of April 1395, still retaining the “Hospital” as his title.¹

Nothing further is heard of him until his death, which must have occurred between the 15th of April (xvii Kalends of May) and the 5th (iii Nones) of May 1407, since his will was made on the first, and proved in the Archdeaconry Court of London on the second, of these two dates.² In this will (which was a nuncupative, i.e. an unwritten, or verbal, one) he described himself as a “Dominus” and a “Capellanus” or Chaplain; in other words, he was an unbeneficed priest. He directed that he should be buried, not within the Priory of St Bartholomew as would be expected were he a Canon, but in the cemetery of St Botolph, without Aldersgate, which at the time of his death was the parish church of the inhabitants of St Bartholomew’s Close. He bequeathed all his possessions to “Margaret Schadelok”, whom he named sole executrix and described as his mother. The actual identity of this Margaret is a mystery, for all the efforts which we have made to glean further information about her have proved fruitless: nor has her discovery provided any other clues

¹ See Appendix C, p. 175.² See Appendix C, p. 176.

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concerning the ancestry or mode of life of her son, and these must now be sought elsewhere.

Accordingly, the following abstract of a deed, executed in London on the 1st of April 1379 and copied into the Hustings Rolls now preserved among the archives at the Guildhall of the Corporation of the City of London, merits consideration:¹

KNOW ALL MEN, etc...., that I, John Mirfeld, have granted... to John Herthull, "clerk", all those tenements, etc., situate in the parish of St. Andrew, Holborn, which lately came to me and to William atte Vyne, citizen of London, by the deaths of Dom. William de Mirfeld and Dom. Roger de Barnesburgh, Clerks (they having obtained them by feoffment of Elias de Sutton, Clerk), and which the said William atte Vyne has already released to me; To be held by the aforesaid John Herthull for life, with remainder to Master Adam Rous, Surgeon ("surrigicus") to the Lord King, and to his heirs for ever. I grant also to the same John Herthull all those tenements situate in the parishes of "St. Mildrith in Pulletria" [St Mildred in the Poultry] and St. Edmund the King in Lombard Street, and in "Bercherneslane" [Birchin Lane], of which I, together with William atte Vyne and Robert Bryen, received joint possession lately by the gift of Adam Rous and which the said William and Robert have already released to me; To be held by the aforesaid John Herthull for life, with remainder to the said Adam Rous and his heirs. Dated, London, 1st of April, 2 Richard II [1379].

Professor George E. Gask has shown² that Adam Rous was appointed Surgeon to King Edward III between the years 1349 and 1359 and that his will (which was proved on the 25th of July 1379)³ was executed on the 27th of April 1379, that is within less than a month after the date of the deed quoted above. In this will Adam Rous bequeathed to the Prior and Convent of St Bartholomew de Westsmythefeld the reversions of certain tenements and rents held by John Herthull, clerk, in the parishes of St Andrew de Hol-

¹ Hustings Roll 107, No. 135. See Appendix C, p. 177.

² In his paper entitled "The Medical Staff of King Edward III", printed in *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol. XIX, No. 1, 1926, p. 1.

³ Hustings Roll 108, No. 13.

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born, St Mildred, St Edmund the King in Lumbardestrete, Bercherneslane, and All Hallows the Great in the Roperie. The various properties comprising this legacy (with the exception of those situated in the parish of All Hallows) are obviously identifiable as the subject-matter of the conveyance to Herthull quoted above, and which (excluding the tenements obtained from William de Mirfeld and Roger de Barnesburgh in St Andrew's) Rous had previously given to John Mirfeld and his two co-feoffees Robert Brien and William atte Vyne,¹ probably upon condition that they should ultimately be conveyed to Herthull or to some other person whom Rous should stipulate.²

It would seem then that Mirfeld was evidently acting in a fiduciary capacity on behalf of Adam Rous, with whom he must obviously have been on terms at least of business acquaintanceship, even if not of personal friendship; and it may well be that the man to whom Mirfeld refers in the *Breviarium* as "My Master" was none other than the Royal Surgeon himself; that is, indeed, if the "Master" had any existence in reality and was not, as appears more probable, merely a literary abstraction. Reference to this problem will be made below (pp. 22, 23).

¹ The grant of the houses in St Mildred's was dated 11 December, 1 Richard II [1377] and can be found in Hustings Roll 106, No. 74. The deed states that King Edward III granted the property to Rous for life by Letters Patent, dated 4 Nov. 1361; and in fee, by a further patent, dated 1 Sept. 1372. (N.B. These two patents have been printed in abstract by Prof. Gask, *op. cit.*) The property formed the subject of a law-suit between Rous and the Priory in 1362.

That granted in St Edmund the King, Lombard Street, and Bercherneslane is registered in Hustings Roll 107, No. 11, and is dated 19 July, 2 Richard II [1378].

² These complex transactions arose owing to the fact that the law at that date prevented a man from making a grant of land to, or a settlement upon, himself: in order to found a trust which should operate after his death, it was necessary for him to convey to a friend, who would re-convey to the trustees (including perhaps the "settlor"). By associating several friends as joint trustees, the settlor obtained the advantages of the doctrine of survivorship, thus avoiding payment of dues to his feudal lord on his own death: the surviving trustee formed another trust in the same way, thus continuing the process. (N.B. The foregoing applies to William de Mirfeld as well as to Rous.)