

A New Setting: John Heath's translation of *The Accomplishment of the Prophecies* 1613,
and the state of religion in New College in the reign of King James I

One of the aspects of collecting Tudor and Jacobean books that I like most is the sheer serendipity of it all. There is no way of knowing from one month to the next what will come your way. Most booksellers, even those that deal in antiquarian books, may only see a handful of pre-1625 books in English in a year. Yet equally these volumes can turn up in the strangest of places. The book featured here popped up on eBay in February last year under the catch-all heading, 'Christianity Protestant Pope French English Scarce 1613' from Tristanbooks, a dealer who specialises in 'modern first editions of Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror, and Literature'. It was the date that caught my eye, and when I looked at the rather fuzzy picture I realised that this was a copy of an early seventeenth-century French Protestant work by Pierre du Moëlin, *Accomplishment of the Prophecies; or the Third Booke in defense of the Catholicke faith, contained in the booke of the high & mighty King James I translated by a New Colledge fellow, John Heath, and printed locally by Joseph Barnes in 1613*. In my ignorance, I had never come across it (or him) before, but I thought it would be fun to learn more, so I took a risk and bought it.

Once I had unwrapped it, I looked up the copy in the definitive source on such things, the British Library's Electronic Short Title Catalogue (estc.bl.uk). As it turns out, this copy is a previously unknown setting. The tell-tale for this is a small difference in the title pages. The two versions mentioned in the ESTC vary in the setting of the title page, line 17 beginning 'Translated out of French by I.Heath' in one issue, and 'Translated into English by I. Heath' in another. Line 17 in this issue simply has 'Translated by I.Heath'

As I began to study it, I wondered what this book, and whatever I could learn about John Heath, could tell us about New College in the first half of James I's reign, and its engagement in the religious developments taking place at that time.

helped him secure his place, writing in 1605 to the Warden and fellows via the Earl of Salisbury that 'she doth much affect to bring hym to the perfection of that course wherin she was his first meanes to place hym. And that yf he speed not now, there will be no hope of that purpose by reason of the Statuts of those Colleges'¹. This must refer to Wykeham's Statutes which specified that no one over twenty years of age was to be admitted as a scholar² if the ODNB has correctly identified Heath's baptism in Bath Abbey, on 7

Nonetheless, if change was slow at first, by the time of bishop Horne's third visitation of the College in 1577, New College appears to have been shaped into an essentially Protestant institution, and continued scrutiny and doubt reinforced this during the following twenty-eight years prior to John Heath's matriculation.

So if New College was no longer a hotbed of Catholic recusancy when Heath arrived there, nonetheless, the question remains: how lively was New College's Protestantism by the early seventeenth

faces (make-up), the reading of fortunes in men's palms, Sabbath breaking and visits to the London theatre, to wit the Globe, the Fortune, and the Curtain. That said he does seem to have enjoyed himself and was not immune to a playful joke against his fellow fellows when they ate too much, drank excessively or did not wash ('...of all the Authors common here with us, It seemes he ne're heard of Go-clenius').

Thomas Bilson's role in shaping New College's student intake, 1572-1616

What Heath's Epigrammes underline in my view is that by the beginning of James's reign, Winchester was more than nominally conformist but was able to produce actively protestant and talented scholars in a steady stream that fed the fellowships in New College. There were some individuals like Henry Garnet, one of those executed for involvement in the Gunpowder Plot, who emerged as committed Catholics from the school (a 'saint of straw' according to Heath). However these had become rare throwbacks from the Colleges' past rather than the norm.

While both Penry Williams and Patrick McGrath are rather hesitant to ascribe a root cause for these changes in Wykehamists' beliefs, Heath, by implication at least, was first, perhaps from piety, but no doubt with good reason, he praised the education he received from the school, stating in his Epigram Collegium Wintoniensis in this booke there be one witty line, / I utterly disclaim't, t'is wholly thine'. He describes Thomas Bilson, by then Bishop of Winchester, as his 'Maecenas and benefactor', and if there is one person who took the school beyond conformity into active protestant learning, it was surely Bilson. A fellow of New College from 1563 to 1572, Bilson then resigned to focus on his teaching at Winchester, becoming Headmaster there that year with the support of Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury. Although he resigned the headmastership in 1579 to complete his higher degrees in theology, by 1581 Bilson became the first married Warden of the school, and his son, also Thomas, was to become one of Heath's firm friends. From then until 1596 when he was called away to be bishop of Worcester and then in a matter of just four months to be bishop of Winchester, Bilson was tireless in the propagation of the new religion both in the school and through his published academic work in the wider realm. John Harington in the 1650s wrote of Bilson, that he was 'infinitely studious and industrious in Poetry, in Philosophy, in Physick, and (which his genius chiefly call'd him to) in Divinity'¹⁰. As bishop of Winchester he remained Visitor of the school and of New College, and so was able to keep his eagle eye on both institutions' affairs. As a role model, mentor and disciplinarian at Winchester throughout the forty years preceding Heath's arrival in New College, Bilson must have had a hugely important influence on the religious beliefs and academic interests of the scholars and fellows in both places.

The significance of Heath's translation of The Accomplishment of the Prophecies 1613 & its reception by a contemporary reader

How much more do we learn about New College, and about John Heath from his translation of French Protestant minister Pierre du Moulin's work, and from examining the specific copy I bought on eBay? The book identifies the papacy with the Antichrist as described in Biblical prophecy, and supports the case that James I had made in person against the Jesuits and others involved in, or supporting, the Gunpowder Plot.

However the time taken by Heath on this translation and putting it through the press also underscored the College's active support of the established church. One wonders whether either Thomas Bilson, George Ryves the outgoing New College Warden, or Arthur Lake, Ryves' imminent successor as Warden and future Bishop of Bath & Wells, had encouraged Heath to undertake the work and bring it to fruition. All of these academic figures had been eulogised by him in *Epigrammes* just three years earlier and all would have

There is at least one piece of evidence from the College that suggests he was not accused because no evidence was found against him. It seems unlikely that Heath left the College under a cloud, since, true to tradition amongst respectable departing fellows, he left the library a donation, in his case a copy of Peter Ramus's magnum opus, *Scholae in Artes Liberales*, published in Basel in 1569¹³. This was a useful and important gift. It summarised much of Ramus's work. In particular it outlined how Ramus aimed to break away from scholastic and Aristotelian models, and redefine and simplify the core university curriculum, the liberal arts, in particular the teaching of logic, rhetoric and mathematics. A convert to Protestantism, Ramus was murdered just three years after the publication of this book in the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris in 1572, so the gift would also have underscored Heath's confessional position.

In 1619, one 'I. H. Gent' published in London *The House of Correction: Or Certayne Satyricall Epigrams*. Reading through them it is just possible from the style to conclude that John Heath could have written them. If so the different circumstances in which he found himself meant that allusions to theology and church politics had been largely supplanted by social satire and an interest in the exploits of seamen such as Drake and Raleigh. The few specific references in the text suggest someone who was studying or practising chancery law, probably in Middle Temple. This was not an uncommon path for a New College man to take at that (or any) time, but if it is our John Heath, then given his talents it was not perhaps the destiny that his Maecenas, Bishop Thomas Bilson, who had died three years before, would necessarily have anticipated or desired.

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