

THE GOUT OF WILLIAM CECIL— FIRST LORD BURGHLEY (1520–98)*

BY

W. S. C. COPEMAN, O.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P.

THE gout of a Prime Minister must in any time and in any important country attract the attention of the medical and lay public. This was particularly so in the England of Elizabeth I when the great Lord Burghley was Lord Treasurer of England, and leading her to the heights of world power. He was a considerable sufferer.

William Cecil went up to St. John's, Cambridge, then 'the most famous place of education in England', when he was fifteen. There he met John Cheke, 'whom men esteemed the profoundest Greek scholar of his time, whose widowed mother, to support her family, had been driven to keep a small wine shop in the town'. They became devoted friends and this took Burghley there, according to the *D.N.B.*, 'more frequently than was prudent'. He was shortly removed from Cambridge without a degree; but later married Mary Cheke, the daughter of the house.

He then entered Gray's Inn and soon came to the notice of the King, and seemed assured of a brilliant career. Stamford elected him M.P. in 1547, and he was made a Secretary of State in 1550. From then, until his death, he 'continued to occupy a position in the affairs of the Nation such as no other man in Europe below the rank of a sovereign attained to'.

At the age of thirty-three his first acute attack of gout necessitated a temporary retirement (1553), so when Mary succeeded as Queen he was out of office, and as she did not reinstate him he was powerless to oppose her marriage to Phillip II. Her vigorous attempt to reverse the Reformation, and the tragedy of the Smithfield martyrs, disgusted him. Parliament met in October 1555 to consider a measure for confiscating the estates of those Protestant gentry who had fled from her persecution, and Cecil succeeded in getting this Bill thrown out, and shortly afterwards got into secret touch with Elizabeth.

On her accession next year he was appointed Chief Secretary of State, of which the modern equivalent would be Prime Minister, and owing to another sudden prolonged attack of his gout she held her first audience at his house at Hatfield and assumed government from there. His responsibility 'stresses' at this time included Phillip's outrageous proposal (with the dangers inherent of refusal), lack of money, the constant plotting by the Pope and English Catholics, France and Scotland, all of which he

* Presidential paper read before the Osler Club on 8 November 1956.

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successfully dealt with. When Elizabeth withdrew somewhat next year from routine business to amuse herself with Lord Robert Dudley, however, Burghley's health again began to suffer under the strain of constant labour of mind and body. This showed as a succession of minor 'break-downs' characterised by acute attacks of gout. As the result of one of these he signed the Treaty of Edinburgh whilst in pain, and so made some concessions that so much annoyed the Queen that he lost his influence with her almost completely for a time. This he only recovered when the prevailing unrest in the country became so great that she had to appoint a Commission of Inquiry of which he was the only acceptable chairman. The unexampled provocation which this one-man government endured during the next few years included daily risk of assassination until the Popish menace was ended with the final defeat of the Armada, and it is evident that the resultant stresses produced frequent acute attacks, which must have affected his outlook, and perhaps his policy.

As his sufferings in this respect were well known it is not surprising that one of the most usual of the many gifts which were sent to him from all over the civilized world from admirers, or candidates for the favour of the most powerful man in the kingdom, took the form of secret and often exotic prescriptions to cure these attacks. Amongst the Lansdowne manuscripts in the British Museum there are letters to Lord Burghley from all parts of Europe in English, Latin, French and Italian, offering him nostrums of the most infallible kind.

The first of these is a letter from a Mr. Dyon dated 24 January 1553, at which time Burghley was thirty-three years old, recommending him to pursue a certain course of diet and physic which is marked on the outside in Lord Burghley's handwriting *Receipe pro podagra*. There are other directions of a similar nature from the Lady Harington dated 4 February 1573, and an Italian letter concerning a special secret powder for the gout dated 12 December 1575. Four years later Dr. Henry Landwer sent him a prescription in Latin for *medicated slippers* to relieve his gout, whilst 'Dr. Hector' (Dr. Hector Nones or Nunez, one of the heads of the Spanish Jewish colony in London, and a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, who enjoyed the confidence of both Burghley and Walsingham) bombards him regularly with remedies selected from the works of Averroes, Joannes Anglicus and Mattheus Gradeusis. In 1583 another letter from one, Nicholas Gyberd, was received in which he pretended to have discovered an infallible cure in the form of an alchemical tincture of gold. The Earl of Shrewsbury also wrote (MS. 75, art. 80) heartily wishing that His Lordship 'wolde make trial of my OYLE OF STAGS BLUD, for I am strongly persuaded of the rare and great vertu thereof. I know it to be a most safe thyng, yet some offence there is in the smell thereof'.

The following letter was sent in 1592 from Henry Bossevyle, an alchemist living in Calais, offering for a fee of four or five hundred pounds and suitable preferment to furnish *some infallable plaisters to cure the gout*. It seems, however, that Lord Burghley preferred his disease to the remedy:

Touchinge the substance of the things that go to this cure the styll is used, and there are several waters and things spread upon a certayne beste skynne made leather.

Concernynge the applyinge thereof, one water [solution] must bathe the place nere unto the payne, leaving a joynte between the place of payne and the place bathed, if conveniently it maye be. Then must a peece of the sayd lether be cutte convenient to make a plaister, which muste be well moystened in one of the saide waters, and thereon severall other powerful things spredde, which plaister muste be layde upon the place bathed, there to remayne XII howers; and afterwards there must be freshe bathinge and plaisters.

For the operacion thereof the paciente shall shortly fynde the humore stirred, blisters or pymples to rise where the plaister is layde, out of which shall yssue the badde humore, some of which blisters wyll drye up, and others wyll unely breake out so longe as any parte of the humore remayneth.

When all the badde humore is drawne out they will drye up and the patient shall fynde hymself for the present cured, by havinge the use of his joynts as nymble as ever they were, and afterwarde shall feele no more payne of the goute . . . I do affirme yt upon my faythe, that besides the laboure and charges of the things that go to the cure . . . yt hath coste me more fayre gold than I thinke was ever given in England for a medecyne. (MS. Lansdowne. Brit. Mus., Num. 69, *art.* 60.)

From 1572, when he was created Lord High Treasurer of England, until his death, to write of his career (in the words of Froude) 'is to write the history of England; for by him more than by any other single person was the history of England shaped'. Can we doubt, therefore, that his increasingly frequent, lengthy and painful attacks of gout influenced the history of his country and of Europe at that time and for many years afterwards. Some day further and more detailed evidence of this will be extracted from the State Papers, where it undoubtedly exists.

To Robert, his son (Earl of Salisbury, 1563?–1612) and successor in several of his offices of State, he also bequeathed his gout, from which indeed he died on his return from a 'cure' in Bath (24 May 1612) which had been ordered by Sir Theodore Mayerne, the Royal Physician. His eldest son, Thomas, Earl of Exeter (1542–1622), also suffered to some considerable extent, which led to his retirement from court life and confined him to his house at Wimbledon intermittently until his death.

To bring the story up to date, it is interesting to know that neither Lord Burghley, now Marquess of Exeter, nor his late father have suffered from gout (verbal communication), although there remains a familial tendency to degenerative joint disease.