

A Translation by Falkner
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In 1930 Dent published their volume on Durham Cathedral in their series 'Cathedrals, Abbeys and Famous Churches'. Its author was James Wall, Sacrist of the Cathedral. He mentions the memorial tablet to Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham 1333-1345, in the Chapel of the Nine Altars at the site of his tomb. It was presented by the members of the Grolier Club of New York. The tablet quotes some lines from the text generally attributed to Bury entitled *Philobiblon* (lover of books). Below the Latin text Wall gives a translation into an English verse quatrain, under which are the initials J.M.F. (i) Here I propose to examine more closely this verse and say something of its background. I shall also touch on Falkner's own writing about Richard de Bury.

Richard de Bury and *Philobiblon*:



Richard d'Aungerville was born near Bury St Edmunds (hence his name) on 24 January 1287. Study in Oxford from c. 1302 to c. 1312 did not lead to a distinguished academic

career but induced in him a lifelong interest in books and learning. In 1312 he joined the royal household, eventually entering the entourage of Prince Edward of Windsor, the future King Edward III. After Edward's coronation in 1327 Richard de Bury acquired both official posts and ecclesiastical offices. On 24 October 1333 he was made Bishop of Durham by papal provision. A monk of Durham and Oxford theologian, Robert Graystones had already been elected by the monks and consecrated by the Archbishop of York. Graystones'

election was quashed after royal pressure on the Pope and he returned to the monastery, leaving Bury unchallenged.

As bishop Bury divided his time between the London home of the bishops of Durham, where he continued in royal service, and his diocese. (ii) As a diocesan bishop he was renowned for his generous distributions of alms. (iii) He was also a devoted public servant and successful administrator. A patron of scholars, his household included distinguished figures such as the Oxford theologians, Thomas Bradwardine, later Archbishop of Canterbury and Richard Fitzralph, later Archbishop of Armagh, and the Dominican theologian Robert Holcot. (iv) He also built up perhaps the largest collection of books in England, round which he intended to found an Oxford college. *Philobiblon* represents his response to critics of the time and money he spent on books.

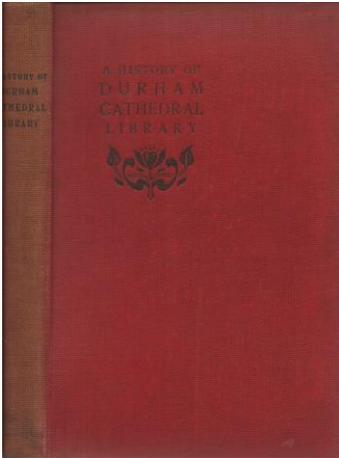
(v) This erudite, and in places whimsical, text (part of it is put into the mouths of books themselves, replying to their critics and misusers!) is now generally attributed to Bury himself, although Holcot may have assisted. The author not only sets out a bibliophile's philosophy but also gives sound advice on the collection and storage of books. In addition, he makes sharp criticisms of contemporary scholarly practices. Richard de Bury died shortly after the completion of *Philobiblon*, on 14



April 1345. Sadly, the cost of maintaining the opulent household deemed appropriate for a Bishop of Durham and his spending on manuscripts led to his leaving substantial debts. His books were sold off to pay his creditors and his project for an Oxford college

abandoned. However, *Philobiblon* endured. Several editions appeared over the next two centuries and the late 19th century saw English translations. (vi) Bury came to be regarded as a pioneer in librarianship.

Falkner on Bury:



One might have expected such a figure to appeal to John Meade Falkner but, surprisingly, he disparaged him. In the history of Durham Cathedral Library he disputes Bury's authorship of *Philobiblon* on the grounds that:

... its pleasantly autobiographical and whimsical character [does] not seem particularly consonant with what is known of the Bishop's life, or with such a sorry episode as the deposition of Robert de Graystones... (vii)

Here Falkner perhaps tells his readers more about himself than about Bury. One cannot reasonably draw a comparison between a literary style and the supposed personality of the author. How well would he himself withstand a comparison between John Meade Falkner as author and as capitalist and entrepreneur? The ousting of Graystones, which, incidentally, does not appear to have led to bad personal relations between the two men, seems all too close to boardroom conduct! Bury left a reputation as 'a good man and very kind to the poor'. (viii) The modern academic consensus shares the views of his contemporaries in seeing Richard de Bury as not himself a distinguished scholar but as a superb book collector and great patron of scholarship. (ix) These factors influenced both the nature of the memorial and the identity of the donor.

The Memorial Tablet to Richard de Bury:

The Grolier Club of New York was founded in 1884, as a society for bibliophiles. Among its aims is:

to foster the study, collecting, and appreciation of books and works on paper, their art, history, production, and commerce. (x)

It has carried out that aim ever since, mainly through lectures, exhibitions and fine publications. Significantly, among the first of its publications, from 1889, was an edition of *Philobiblon*, with English translation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Richard De Bury's tomb had long disappeared and the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral were anxious to mark his burial place. An excavation confirmed the site of the tomb.



(xi) A Sicilian marble slab was chosen to cover the reopened grave and the figure of Bury based on his surviving seal carved on it. Round it was an inscription to him together with some lines from the *Philobiblon* selected by the Grolier Club, who by this time had undertaken to finance the work. (xii) The memorial was set in place during the third week of September 1903. (xiii) We now turn to the quotation from *Philobiblon*.

Richard de Bury's Seal

The Latin Text:

The four lines consist of two extracts from the fifteenth chapter. They read as follows:

DELECTANT LIBRI PROSPERITATE ARRIDENTE
CONSOLANTUR NUBILA FORTUNA TERRENTE

ECCE PER LIBROS ADJUTI BEATITUDINIS NOSTRAE
MERCEDEM ATTINGIMUS, DUM EXISTIMUS VIATORES

Here is my literal translation:

Books delight when good fortune smiles;
They comfort when luring fortune (or fate) frightens.

See! Aided by books we reach the reward of our blessedness,
Even while we consider ourselves travellers on the way.

Dictionaries render the main meaning of *Nubila* as 'cloudy' but here the suggestion is definitely of thunderclouds, so I have preferred the word 'luring'. These humane, if rather sententious, lines taken in isolation do not give a full impression of Bury's beguiling text. The second couplet, with its theological overtones, is the stronger of the two. The author is saying that we, who see ourselves as pilgrims journeying towards the reward of our blessed state, already reach that reward, even as we journey, through our reading of books.

Falkner's Translation:

It is now time to see what John Meade Falkner does with them:
If Fortune smiles Books bring delight
And if She frowns they mock her spite.

And Books shall guide a travelling Soul,
When daylight dies to reach its goal.

One can only agree with Wall when he says that the original Latin lines 'have been freely and generously paraphrased!' (xiv) One obvious difference is that Falkner has turned the prose into four lines of verse, in the process preserving, if not the exact sense, the word and sound play of the original (*arridente... terrente*). The use of the conditional 'if' conveys the intended meaning more strikingly than the more correct translation of the present participles as 'when'. The personification of fortune makes a livelier image than

the original although the distinction between good fortune (prosperitas) and fortune with overtones of fate that can be good or bad (fortuna) is lost. In the second line the meteorological metaphor is abandoned. Fortune is a female personage rather than threatening storm clouds.

Falkner translates the second couplet with even greater freedom. The first person plural is not used. There is no longer an author, as in *Philobiblon*, addressing like-minded people. The statements are depersonalised. Hence the demonstrative Ecce disappears. Some theological overtones are lost. Falkner replaces the powerful concept of pilgrims attaining the reward they aim at even as they travel towards it with a simpler image, that of the soul travelling on a day's journey and of books as guides to enable the traveller to reach the final destination. There is no equivalent in the original for 'When daylight dies'. 'Goal' does not have the force of merces with its meanings of 'reward' or 'just recompense'.

Falkner may not have rendered the text exactly, but his achievement in these lines is considerable. The lines from *Philobiblon* were being used on the monument out of their original context of an elegantly written text making serious scholarly and theological points. Falkner has produced an accomplished quatrain that is in many ways more suitable for an inscription on a monument than the original. The text makes its point concisely and memorably. I have not so far traced it to any other context than Wall's book or discovered when or why Falkner made this version. It does not appear in the *Collected Poems*.

Concluding remarks:

No one would claim that these lines take a high place in Falkner's oeuvre. Yet I submit that they are of interest. I am not aware of any other translations by Falkner – although the *Collected Poems* include an original poem by him in Latin. (xv) We see him here

working with another's text and from it fashioning something that is his own. Here also is a sign of Falkner's continuing creativity years after his major works appeared- a witness to the manifold and diverse activities of this complex man.

End notes

- (i). James Wall. *Durham Cathedral* (London: J.M. Dent, 1930) pp. 48-49.
- (ii). W.J. Courtenay. "Bury [Aungerville], Richard (1287-1345)" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 9: pp. 67-69.
- (iii). Wall, *Durham Cathedral*, p. 49.
- (iv). W.J. Courtenay. *Schools & Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987) p. 134.
- (v). Alfred Hessel (trans. Reuben Press) *A History of Libraries* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1955) p. 38.
- (vi). e.g. E.C. Thomas (trans.) *The Love of Books being the Philobiblon of Richard de Bury* (London: De La More Press, 1902).
- (vii). J. Meade Falkner, "Notes on Some later Durham Bibliophiles." In H.D. Hughes, *A History of Durham Cathedral Library* (Durham County Advertiser, 1925) pp. 111-112.
- (viii). J.E. Bygate. *The Cathedral Church of Durham...* (London: Bell, 1899) p. 90.
- (ix). Courtenay, "Bury", 9: p.69.
- (x). Grolier Club website <http://www.grolierclub.org>
- (xi). G.W. Kitchin. *Monument to Richard of Bury, Bishop of Durham (A.D. 1333-1345)*. (New York: Grolier Club, 1944) pp. 11-12.
- (xii). Kitchin. *Monument*, p. 13.
- (xiii). Kitchin. *Monument*, p. 7.
- (xiv). Wall, *Durham Cathedral*, p. 49.
- (xv). 'In Vigilia Nativitatis.' In John Meade Falkner *Collected Poems* (s.l.: John Meade Falkner Society, 2005) p. 40.