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THOMAS CORBYN, QUAKER MERCHANT

by

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The remains of Thomas Corbyn (1711–91), wholesale and manufacturing chemist and druggist, lie in a copper coffin at Bunhill Fields, London. No inscription marks his burial place, nor has any portrait of him been found. Vanities of such a kind would not have been to his taste, since he was not only a Quaker, but one of the plainest Friends of his day, not only in dress—he wore clothes of a uniform liver colour from head to toe—but in his relentlessly sober conduct. His parents were both Quaker Ministers, as was his wife. He himself became an Elder at an unusually early age, and for the rest of his life he took a prominent part in the Society's affairs, and a zealous role in enforcing its discipline. By the time of his death he could be described as "Pope Corbyn", unofficial head of the Society in London.¹

Corbyn's contemporaries recognized his piety, probity, and virtues as husband, parent, and friend. They noted his custom of taking poor apprentices without fee,² and his readiness to join with others in relieving the London poor in times of crisis.³ But even fellow Quakers could find him over-strict, or, at worst, authoritarian and bigoted. To the young Betty Fothergill he was "a little too severe in his notions"; she felt a keen sympathy for his daughter, "an extremely fine girl . . . tho deprived of every advantage from dress".⁴ His exclusive concept of the Society of Friends as the Lord's people, and his readiness to cast out the less than perfect, earned him a rebuke from his fellow

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¹ The fullest character sketch of Corbyn, by James Jenkins (1753–1831), is contained in *The records and recollections of James Jenkins*, ed. J. William Frost, New York and Toronto, Edwin Mellen, 1984, pp. 224–9. Additional information may be found in the unpublished *Dictionary of Quaker biography*, in progress at the Library of the Society of Friends, and in T. D. Whittet and J. Burnby, 'The firm of Corbyn and Stacey', *Pharm. J.*, 1982, 228: 42–8. On inscriptions at Bunhill Fields, transcribed in the nineteenth century, see Guildhall Library, London, MSS 897 and 2066.

² Jenkins, op. cit., note 1 above, pp. 258 and 542, on Corbyn's apprentices and partners John Beaumont and George Stacey.

³ A. Douglas Selleck, *Cookworthy 1705–80 and his circle*, Plymouth, Baron Jay, 1978, p. 200.

⁴ Society of Friends Library, MS S/51/3, week beginning 6 May 1770. The diary of Betty Fothergill, niece of Dr John Fothergill, covering the years 1769–70.

chemist and druggist Thomas Cookworthy.⁵ “Pope Corbyn”, according to James Jenkins, was only one of his three nicknames. He was also “the preacher taster”, maker or breaker of young Ministers, and “the hat regulator”, always ready to chide his co-religionists in matters of dress. Jenkins told a string of anecdotes against Corbyn’s ostentatious strictness, his bigotry, and his inquisitorial enforcement of discipline. He was said, for instance, to keep a record of every wedding in the Peel meeting so that he could investigate any birth within the succeeding nine months. Yet, hostile as it was, the character sketch which Jenkins penned only emphasized Corbyn’s power within the Society, even if it was “an authority entirely assumed, and therefore improper”.⁶

Corbyn’s Quakerism was a vital element in his success as a wholesale chemist and druggist, and fundamental to his American trade. The commercial advantages of the eighteenth-century Quaker merchants are well known.⁷ Hard work, frugality, honest fair-dealing, and the prudent avoidance of debt and insolvency (aided by a system of mutual advice and supervision in commercial affairs), gave them the creditworthiness which was essential, especially in overseas trade. In the course of the century at least fourteen London Quaker families amassed fortunes of £100,000 or more, many of them through trade with North America.⁸ Amongst them were Corbyn’s friends, relatives, and neighbours, such as his cousin John Hanbury, the leading tobacco merchant of his day, or his friend David Barclay, whose fortune was based on the North American linen trade. These were men who could provide advice, opportunity, and support.⁹ In addition Corbyn benefited from the formal network of correspondence which bound London Quakers to Friends everywhere. Visitations on behalf of the Yearly Meeting also took him throughout the country—to Plymouth, Darlington, Lincoln, and on a tour of Scotland, to give only a few examples.¹⁰ These were also occasions for Corbyn to visit customers and develop his sales network. In addition he took an active part in the Meeting for Sufferings, which by the mid-eighteenth century had assumed an important role in protecting Quaker interests in the American colonies.¹¹ The correspondence of the Meeting provided the London merchants who dominated it with comprehensive information on colonial conditions, and a host of useful contacts. Corbyn served on a succession of its sub-committees, active, for instance, in monitoring Parliamentary proceedings, in protecting religious

⁵ Selleck, *op. cit.*, note 3 above, pp. 143–4.

⁶ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, note 1 above.

⁷ Arthur Raistrick, *Quakers in science and industry*, London, Bannisdale, 1950; Margaret Stiles, ‘The Quakers in pharmacy’, in *The evolution of pharmacy in Britain*, ed. F. N. L. Poynter, London, Pitman, 1965, pp. 113–30.

⁸ Jacob M. Price, ‘The great Quaker business families of eighteenth-century London: the rise and fall of a sectarian patriciate’ in R. S. Dunn and M. M. Dunn, ed., *The world of William Penn*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, pp. 363–99. Invaluable on the North American trade are A. T. Gary, ‘The political and economic relations of English and American Quakers (1750–1785)’, D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1935; and Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting house and counting house. The Quaker merchants of colonial Philadelphia 1682–1763*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1948.

⁹ Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5442, pp. 2, 5, 24, 216 etc. Corbyn regularly introduced himself to correspondents as the dear friend or neighbour of leading Quaker merchants.

¹⁰ *Memoirs of Ruth Follows*, ed. S. Stansfield, Liverpool, 1829, p.29; Selleck, *op. cit.*, note 3 above, pp. 143–4; *J. Friends Hist. Soc.*, 1916, 13: 11 and 1917, 14: 87.

¹¹ Gary, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 32 and following.

freedoms in Pennsylvania, and in opposing the slave trade.¹² Typically, in 1775 he was one of four appointed to present a petition to George III urging a peaceful settlement to the disputes with the American colonists, and he again attended the King with an anti-war petition in 1783.¹³ This was a cause in which his business interests and religious sympathies went openly hand in hand.

The sources for Corbyn's Quaker activities are to be found in London in the records and Library collections of the Society of Friends. The recent acquisition of his business records by the almost adjacent Library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine therefore offers a double opportunity for research.¹⁴ Although the Corbyn business records are anything but complete, they are sufficiently rich to illuminate Corbyn's manufacturing processes, the range and prices of the drugs and preparations in which he traded, his distribution network, and the fortunes of his firm from the eighteenth century down to its liquidation in 1927. Here there is only space to highlight one item from the papers, the book in which Corbyn recorded copies of his letters to trading partners overseas between February 1742 and January 1755 (plate 1).¹⁵ More than any other section of the papers, this volume illustrates Corbyn's rise to prominence as a Quaker merchant, and his pharmaceutical trade with the North American colonies.

By 1742, Corbyn had served his long apprenticeship, followed by six years as a journeyman, in the employ of Joseph Clutton, a London apothecary with a substantial domestic wholesale business. Slowly dying of consumption, Clutton put Corbyn in charge of the firm. In return Corbyn gained the freedom to engage his own money in trade, anywhere outside England. The letter book charts the course of Corbyn's export venture from its first beginnings in 1742 until the end of 1754 when, on the death of Clutton's son Morris, Corbyn was able to acquire sole possession of both sides of the business, at home and abroad.¹⁶ It is, therefore, a record of success. Jacob M. Price has noted that the years from 1740 to the early 1760s were an era of opportunity, when most of the Quaker fortunes from transatlantic trade were built up.¹⁷ Corbyn developed substantial outlets, notably in Boston, Connecticut, New York, Rhode Island, Philadelphia, and throughout the West Indies. By 1752, for instance, he had

¹² Society of Friends Library, minute books of the London Meeting for Sufferings, especially vol. 29, 1749–56, pp. 475, 495; vol. 30, 1756–61, p.364; vol. 32, 1766–71, p. 17; vol. 36, 1780–83, pp. 46–7, 317. Cf. A. M. Rees, 'English Friends and the abolition of the British slave trade', *Bull. Friends Hist. Ass.*, 1955, 44: 74–87, especially pp. 78–80.

¹³ R. Hingston Fox, *Dr. John Fothergill and his friends*, London, Macmillan, 1919, p. 339; Minute book of the London Meeting for Sufferings, op. cit., note 12 above, vol. 36, pp. 374–5, March 1783.

¹⁴ The Corbyn papers were purchased in 1986 with the generous support of the Wellcome Trust. The papers are catalogued as Wellcome Institute, Western MSS 5435–5460, and a typescript list is available. A few strays may be found elsewhere. Corbyn's catalogues of drugs and preparations, used for stocktaking between 1789 and 1799, are at the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain; his order book relating to trade with Ireland is at Trinity College, Dublin (MSS 10086–10087, microfilm available at the Wellcome Institute, mf. 596). Corbyn's correspondence with Benedict Arnold was offered for sale separately in 1986 by Richard Hatchwell of Little Somerford, Wilts.

¹⁵ Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5442.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 23, 39, 60, 86, 245. From 1742 to 1747 Corbyn's foreign trade was wholly on his own account, although from 1743 to 1747 he was in partnership with Joseph Clutton's widow in the domestic trade. From 1747 to 1754 he traded at home and abroad in partnership with Clutton's son Morris.

¹⁷ Price, op. cit., note 8 above.

virtually the whole custom of Barbados in his pocket. In personal terms too, it was an expansive period. The same year saw him “engag’d in a weighty affair, viz. of marriage”, and two of his three children were born before the end of 1754.¹⁸

James Jenkins described Thomas Corbyn as no more than middle sized, with a fair complexion and a weak, effeminate voice; his speech was striking neither in content nor delivery. Jenkins alleged that Corbyn came out on top not by real merit but by “weight of character”, by which he meant not strength of personality, but the force of a carefully cultivated reputation.¹⁹ Corbyn’s letter book is more revealing of his energy, his “diligence and assiduity in business” to which Morris Clutton’s will also paid tribute,²⁰ and the resourcefulness of a mind fertile with money-making schemes. But Jenkins was perceptive in realizing that Corbyn’s success rested on his reputation. Corbyn did not claim that his products were the cheapest on the market. He promoted them as top quality, made, with rare honesty, to the Pharmacopoeia standards. This, however, had largely to be taken on trust, since, as he admitted, they could not always be distinguished from adulterated medicines: “as for chymical and galenical preparations, they may be made to any value and so artfully manag’d as not to be discovered.” Corbyn’s “fair character” was therefore vital, and he fought vigorously against any slur, if necessary calling for the arbitration of other Friends: “the imputation of such gross things to a person professing religion I think is quite necessary to be cleared up.”²¹

Inevitably Corbyn traded mainly with fellow Quakers, with whom he could engage in a relationship of trust. With great advantage he could address them not only as a partner in trade, but as an exemplary Friend. He could urge them to fair dealing as a moral duty (“religion leads to do as would be done to”), reprove them where necessary (“thy letter savours too much of being a little lifted up”), or press them to arrange, in the event of their deaths, for creditors to be paid speedily.²² Joseph Jackson was even sent a list of Corbyn’s other correspondents on Barbados and their debts, so that he could keep a Friendly eye on their affairs and step in if there was danger of default.²³ A bad debtor like John Easton of Newport, Rhode Island, could be reported to his Monthly Meeting, and Corbyn insisted on his full due (even though it meant the sale of Easton’s land), with a righteous indignation: “tell him I would sell the coat off my back but would I do honourable by my creditors, and should have no peace till affected.”²⁴

Corbyn’s hold over his trading partners was the stronger in that most were not customers, but vending on his behalf on a commission basis. His system on opening a new outlet was to dispatch a chest of drugs and compound medicines, (including many items of American origin, such as Jesuit’s Bark or jalap, which were now crossing the Atlantic for the second time), with a list of minimum sale prices. It was left to the agent

¹⁸ Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5442, pp. 167, 192.

¹⁹ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, note 1 above.

²⁰ Public Record Office, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, Prob. 11/812, f.134 and following. Corbyn’s will may be found in the same series, Prob. 11/1201, f. 136 and following.

²¹ Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5442, pp. 160, 175.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 178.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 72, 93, 155.

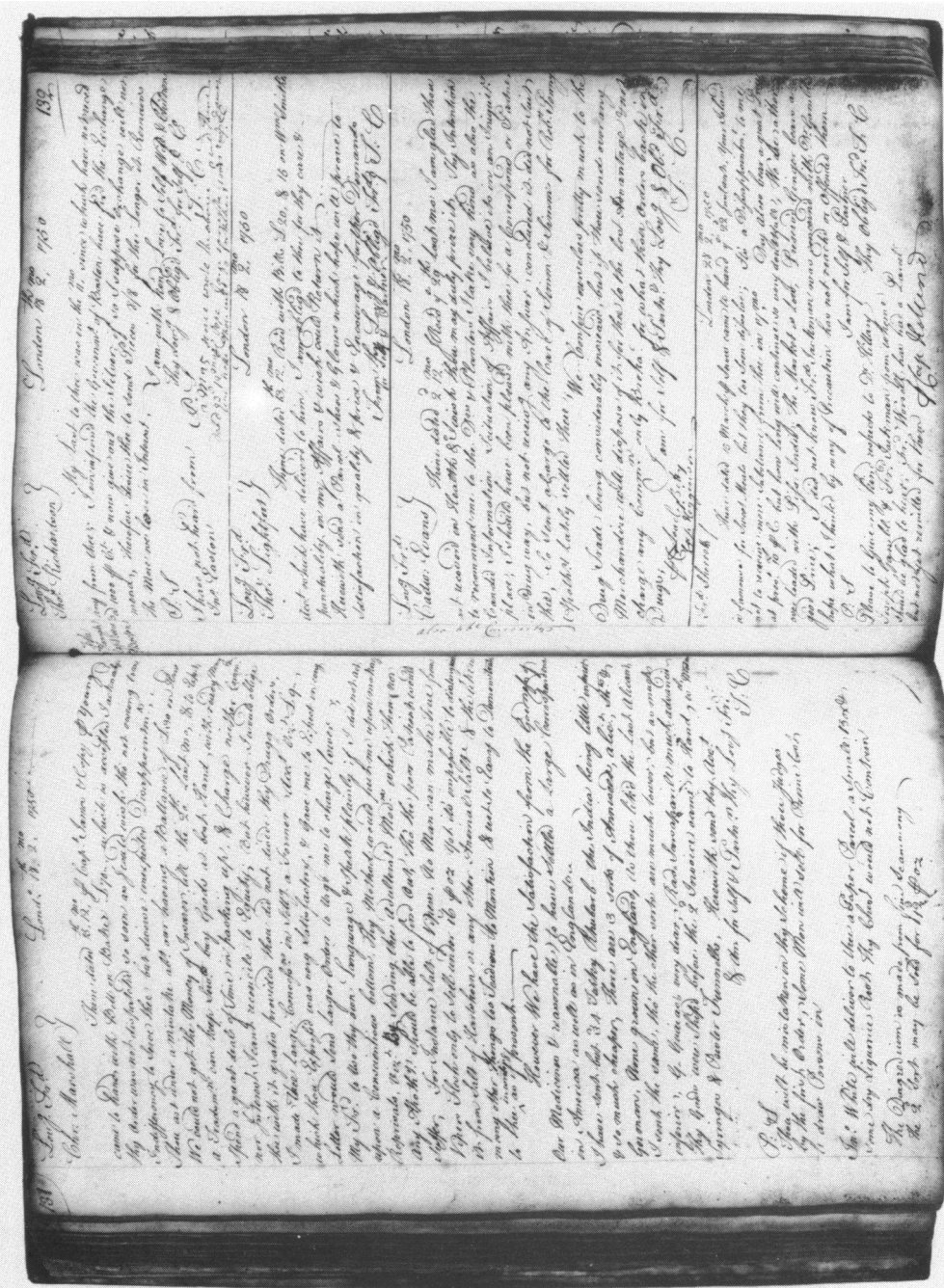


Plate 1. The letter book of Thomas Corbyn, 1742–55 (Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5442), pp. 131–2. Letters from Corbyn to correspondents in Philadelphia, Jamaica, and Barbados, April 1750 (photo: Wellcome Institute Library).

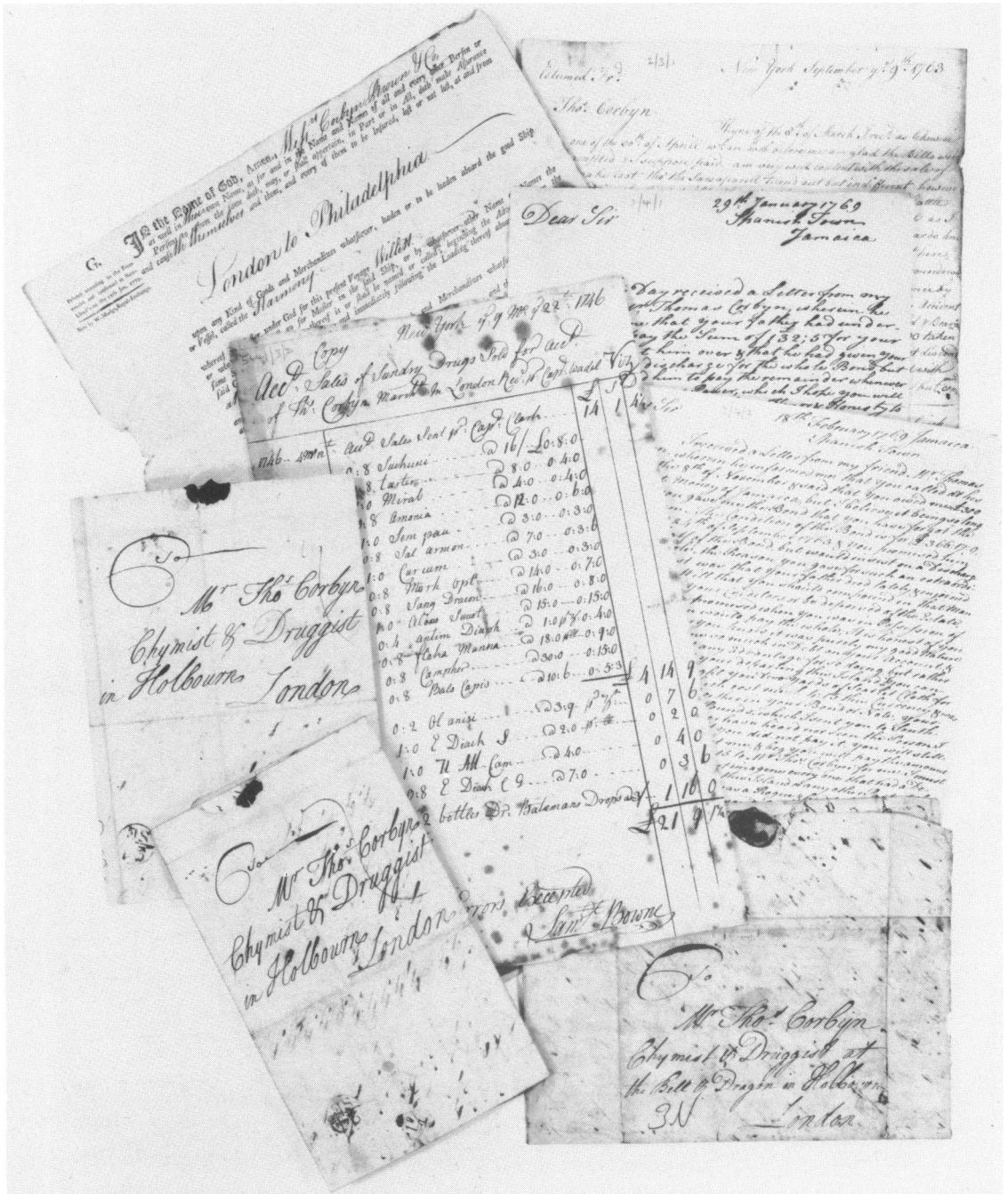


Plate 2. Letters to Thomas Corbyn from correspondents in North America and the West Indies, 1746–87 (Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5441. Photo: Wellcome Institute Library).

to sell as high as possible, and a 50 per cent advance seems to have been common.²⁵ A number of Corbyn's agents were well-known apothecaries, like Christopher Marshall in Philadelphia, owner of one of the best-stocked apothecary shops in North America, Daniel and Joseph Lathrop of Norwich, Connecticut, who also ran a large wholesale business as well as practising medicine, or Cadwalader Evans of Jamaica, afterwards physician to the Pennsylvania Hospital.²⁶ Many however, like Thomas Lightfoot, John and Esther White of Philadelphia, and Elijah Collins of Boston, were general merchants. Corbyn's letter book reflects the relative under-development of pharmacy in the colonies, and his system can be seen as an attempt to supply doctors and planters in the absence of a fully developed network of retail apothecaries. To this end, Corbyn sent out his goods ready packaged and labelled, in varying quantities to suit retail distribution. Often he added advice on how to store them and how best to present the boxes, bottles, and galley-pots on the shelves. His agents therefore did not need the normal apothecary skills, although he did promise to send a dispensatory to Robert James in Antigua to explain vocabulary should his trade prosper.²⁷

Corbyn kept a minute watch on the activities of his agents. His letters were full not only of advice, but of reproof when they sold too cheaply or lost profits by distributing goods wholesale rather than retail. The relationship was not an easy one, especially as the lion's share of the profit went to Corbyn, and many agents chose to drop out after a time. Christopher Marshall, for instance, one of several who complained that the prices Corbyn expected were too high, ceased to trade with him in 1752, in an atmosphere of mutual recrimination. Corbyn certainly drew a hard bargain, and was relentless in the pursuit of sums owed to him. To Esther White he confessed, "tho' I don't love money, yet it affects me very much."²⁸ His letters to his closest ally, Isaac Greenleaf, who travelled for him in North America in 1745 and 1746, even hint at something of the humbug implicit in the character sketch by James Jenkins: "try if thou can get the money of Jn Easton and threaten him stoutly . . . I hope thou squeez'd or frightened something out of P. Agar."²⁹ On the other hand, Corbyn served his agents' interests by his willingness to accept payment not only in bills of exchange, but in kind. He took in a range of produce for sale on the London market—deer and beaver skins, cotton, beeswax, turpentine, and tar from the North American mainland, sugar from the West Indies. American drugs also reached him in this way. Rattlesnake root, just introduced into England, was welcome in 1742, although the market soon became overstocked. In 1748, writing to Allen Sharrett in Barbados, Corbyn recommended sarsaparilla, Barbados aloes, cassia fistula, balsam of Tolu, and candied ginger as items

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–1, 43. The accounts of Thomas Lightfoot for his sales in Philadelphia, sent to Corbyn in 1743, survive as pp. 266–9. They include Corbyn's calculation of his own profit on the transactions as around 55 per cent.

²⁶ Maurice B. Gordon, *Aesculapius comes to the colonies*, Ventnor, New Jersey, Ventnor Publishers, 1949, especially p. 451; David L. Cowen, *The colonial and revolutionary heritage of pharmacy in America*, Trenton, New Jersey Pharmaceutical Association, 1976.

²⁷ Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5442, pp. 8, 10, 30–1, 44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

which would fetch a good price in London; balsam of copaiba, on the other hand, had fallen in price and was not worth sending.³⁰

Corbyn's letter book terminates in 1755, well before the non-importation agreements of the 1760s and the Revolutionary War of the 1770s brought the expansive era in transatlantic trade to an end. Of Corbyn's trading partners, John Greenleaf in Boston and Christopher Marshall's family in Philadelphia led the way in supplying medicine chests to the revolutionary armies.³¹ In general, however, American Quakers, urged on by their London correspondents, disassociated themselves from the radical cause. In Philadelphia, Edward Pennington and the influential loyalist Israel Pemberton were but two of Corbyn's correspondents who were imprisoned as a result, and it was to Corbyn and his fellow merchants in London that Philadelphia Quakers turned in their distress.³² At present the effect on Corbyn's fortunes can only be guessed at, for here his papers are silent.³³ Almost certainly this was a time of retrenchment, although the overseas trade was by no means extinguished. A second letter book, covering the years 1809 to 1851, shows the vigour of the firm's foreign trade well into the nineteenth century.

The present issue of *Medical History* presents an introduction to the Corbyn papers as a rich source for the rise of the English drug industry, pharmacy in colonial America, and the role of the Quaker merchant. Incidentally the papers illumine much more. Corbyn's letter of advice on how (and at what price) a young Bostonian might obtain a medical education in London and Edinburgh offer a case in point,³⁴ as does his interaction with John Bard, one of the traditional heroes of American medical education.³⁵ The Corbyn papers are now available for research, and should prove an invaluable resource for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies in the history of medicine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 112.

³¹ George B. Griffenhagen, *Drug supplies in the American Revolution*, Madison, Wisconsin, American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, 1976. Reprinted from the *U.S. Museum Bull.*, 1961, 225.

³² Gary, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, pp. 391, 515–31.

³³ The papers of Corbyn's American correspondents, such as the Pemberton manuscripts in the Pennsylvania Historical Society, may prove a useful supplementary source.

³⁴ Wellcome Institute, Western MS 5442, pp. 63–4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 49, 52, 77, 95, 145. Corbyn's contact with Bard lasted from 1746 to 1748, when he sought to have Bard arrested for non-payment of debt. On Bard, cf. *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 1.