

REFERENCES

1. PRITCHARD, M. F. L., *Notes and Queries*, 1956, III, 401-4.
2. *The Times*, 29 April 1957.
3. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., article on Friendly Societies.

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SERMON ANENT
THE PESTILENCE

THOUGH now quite forgotten, the Rev. Archibald Skeldie (or Scaldee—his name is spelled in various ways) seems to have been a much respected clergyman in Edinburgh during the earlier part of the seventeenth century. He graduated M.A. (Edin.) in 1620 and was then noted as 'Caecus'. It was probably this blindness that prevented his being appointed to any parish. His name does not appear in Scott's *Fasti*, the 'Who's Who' of the Scots Church since the Reformation, but he was frequently called upon to preach in such Edinburgh churches as were, for the time being, without a pastor. Sir William Brereton, an English traveller who toured Scotland in 1636, and who heard Skeldie preach, refers to him as 'a blind man—much to be admired'. This is testimony of some weight, as Brereton admired very little north of the Tweed! Johnston of Warriston, that unhappy fanatic, often mentions Skeldie in his diary, and always with respect.

The Public Library of Edinburgh possesses a printed copy of one of his sermons in which he advises his hearers how to behave if the plague, then spreading through southern Scotland, should reach the capital. It was published in 1645 by James Lyndesay, Printer to the University. There is no indication of the date on which it was preached, but that may be fixed approximately, as Skeldie explains that the wrath of God against Scotland is being manifested—'by the devouring sword that hath killed many of our brethren in the North, and by the plague of pestilence . . . in the South, wherewith now this citie and the places about are fearfully threatened'. The 'sword' in the North must be that of the Marquis of Montrose, who had defeated the army of the Covenant at Tippermuir on 1 September 1644, and had stormed and sacked Aberdeen a fortnight later. The plague, spreading from the north of England, appeared in the Scots borders about the middle of October and reached Edinburgh about the beginning of 1645—possibly rather earlier. It seems likely, then, that Skeldie's sermon was preached between mid-October 1644 and the end of the year. It is interesting to observe that he considers Edinburgh fortunate in being more likely to fall into the hands of God—that is, to be attacked by plague—than into the hands of man—in this instance, Montrose. As things turned out, it was because the plague was raging at Edinburgh in August 1645 that the great Marquis, fresh from the victory at Kilsyth, was unable to occupy the capital.

Taking the 92nd Psalm, verses 5 and 6, as his text, Skeldie declares that it is useless to discuss 'the second causes of the plague and the fittest outward preservatives from the contagion of it' until one has first considered 'the hand of God, which is the principall efficient, and Sin, which is the procuring cause of it'. But—wiser and more honest than some of his colleagues—he does not attempt to show that disregard of the Solemn League and Covenant, or indifference to ministerial authority, are the special sins that have called down divine punishment. Nor does he suggest that the plague may be stopped by the fasting, public repentance and self-abasement that the Kirk

generally commanded. His real object is to show how the *fear* of plague may be conquered, and how the individual, liberated from this fear, may conduct himself as a Christian and a good citizen—‘for in all danger that can be threatened and trouble that can be felt, there is nothing that bringeth greater discouragement than excessive fear and astonishment’.

Now this fear, he explains, may be due to several causes. First, ‘there is no sicknesse or disease whatever that can be more prejudiciall to the health and life of man . . . for whatever be the member of the body on which it seazeth, the power of the plague worketh always upon the heart’. In the second place, ‘there is no sickness more contagious than the plague of pestilence’. He proceeds to explain that infection is transmitted ‘both by immediat and mediat touching, that is, not only by touching the bodies of such as are infected, but likewise by handling the things that have been used by such as are infected’. Further, one may be infected by smell as well as by touch. These views seem to be based on the teaching of Fracastorius though Skeldie does not include him among the authorities that he cites. Another cause for dreading the plague is the fear that the sufferer will be removed for isolation—an ill-omened separation of those who are ‘most deare and neare to others in the world’. In view of the abominable conditions that generally prevailed in plague camps this fear was natural enough. But, Skeldie says, as St. Paul would not have any, even pagans, partakers of his bonds, so a Christian should not expose any man—‘and especially such as he loveth’—to the risk of contracting his malady. Moreover, according to Marsilius Ficinus,¹ the more closely that nurse and patient are related by birth, by constitution or by planetary influence, the greater is the risk of infection. It is desirable, then, that patient and attendant should be strangers.

As all must die, sooner or later

—the worst that can be threatened by this plague is the bodily death, and truly, if it can be able to do no more, it is not greatly to be feared more than any other disease. . . . And therefore, as a man that escapeth out of prison doth not afterwards much consider the way of his escaping, whether by the doore or by the window, or by the broken roofof the house or by digging of the ground, so a Christian after death will not much care what way he hath died, whether by fever or pestilence, by natural or violent death, seeing he is delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious libertie of the Sonnes of God. Excessive fear [he concludes] is base and childish, and becometh not a man, much lesse a Christian.

But though ‘excessive’ fear must be resisted, foolish rashness must also be avoided. This raises the much discussed problem, whether it is permissible to flee from a plague-stricken city, thus attempting to evade the judgement of God and deserting one’s fellows in their extremity, or whether, by remaining, one is tempting Providence by incurring avoidable risks. In this matter Skeldie follows Theodore Beza, and advises a ‘mediocrity’ between rashness and panic—‘Sed hominis est certe sapientis auream sequi mediocritatem’.² He blames those who remain in a plague-stricken city only in hope of gain, legitimate or otherwise, but equally culpable are those who, ‘called to functions wherein they may serve God and be profitable to his people’, nevertheless desert their posts in time of plague. Nor do they always escape infection thereby. Flight from a plague-stricken town may well indicate a degree of nervousness that actually makes one more susceptible to the disease.

It is most certaine that excessive fear may make a man more liable to the danger of it. . . . And therefore it is that wise Physicians do strictly injoine such as are under suspitione of this

News, Notes and Queries

plague by all means to take courage to themselves, to cherish their bodies, and, so far as lieth in them, to banish excessive fear.

It is perfectly true that many 'wise physicians' did give such advice, though it was not always of a sort that the ordinary citizen could conveniently follow. Nicolaus Massa, for example, makes many suggestions about delightful ways of diverting one's mind from gloomy thoughts of pestilence, but though his recommendations would certainly have appealed to Boccaccio's bright young people, who left Florence during the Black Death and created the Decameron, they smacked too strongly of Theleme to appeal to the Kirk of Scotland in 1644. For its rulers, repentance, confession of sins, fasting and continuous bewailings were imperative.

The 'mediocrity' which Skeldie recommends entails avoidance of all rash and unnecessary exposure to danger and living as quietly as is compatible with doing one's appointed work. During plague one should be more at home than abroad. In particular one must avoid being 'a busie body in other men's matters', for, as St. Peter has said, busybodies are to be classed with thieves and murderers.

What he refers to as 'human preservatives against plague' lie outwith his province. They are useful to the wicked as well as the godly, and should be dealt with by physicians rather than by preachers. Those who wish to study them are referred to 'that worthie treatise of the learned Ficinus'—one may perhaps wonder how many of his congregation had access to the works of that fifteenth-century savant.

Despite his blindness, Skeldie seems to have been a very erudite man, if one may judge by the number of authorities from whom he quotes. Those range from Homer, St. Paul and St. Augustine to Petrarch, Marsilius Ficinus and Erasmus. But to his congregation, threatened alike by war and pestilence, his learning probably seemed of small account compared with his wisdom and courage.

Edinburgh

JOHN RITCHIE

REFERENCES

1. FICINUS, M., *Epidemiarum Antidotus*, 1595, Cap. 24, p. 327.
2. BEZA, T., *De Peste*, 1580.

THE RULE OF THE PESTILENCE

OF the plague that raged through Scotland in 1455 we have no details, and, indeed, no record, save a brief note in the *Scotichronicon*—'Anno Domini MCCCCLV erat magna mortalitas hominum pestilentialis per universum regnum'—but in the following year the Scottish Parliament, impressed, no doubt, by the importance of having rules for the direction of local authorities called upon to deal with such calamities, passed an Act known as 'The Rule of the Pestilence', which is the first attempt by any central body in Scotland to codify the methods of dealing with plague. It runs as follows:

The Clergie thinks that there sould no man to land nor to Burgh that hes gudes to serve himself and his meinzie be put out of his owne house les then he will not remaine nor will not be closed up in his owne house. And gif he disobeyis his nichtbours in that case he sall be compelled to passe out of the towne. And gif there were ony persones that had na gudes put fourth of onie towne, they of the towne sould finde them, and not let them passe awaie fra the place that they were depute to remaine to file the country about them. And gif ony sik put out of the towne wald steall awaie, they of that towne that put him out sould garre