



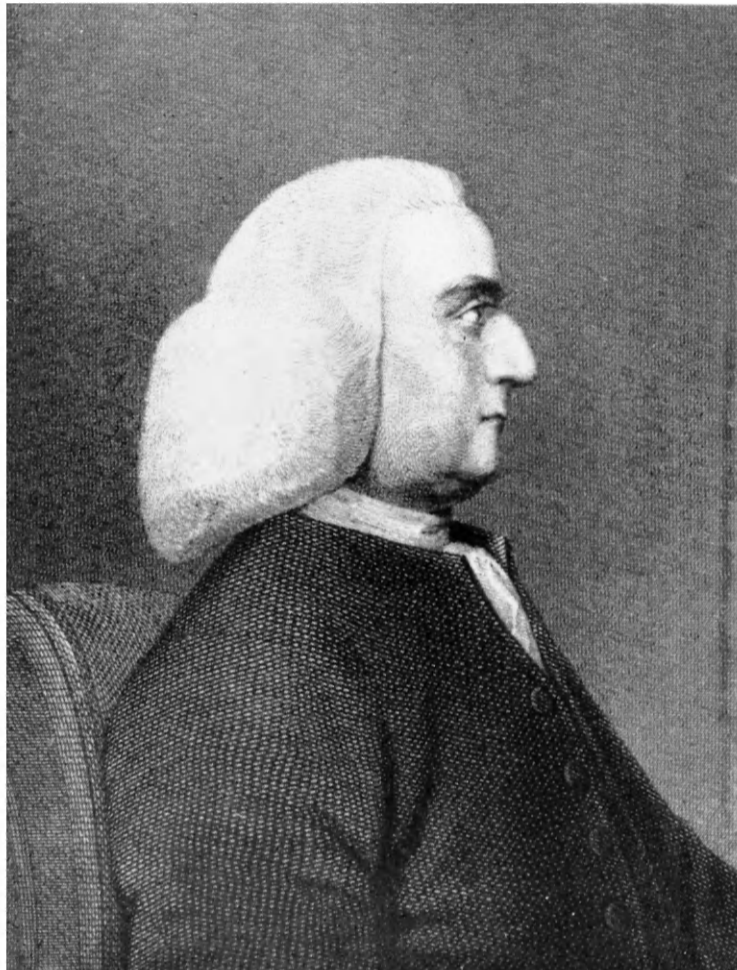
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June 2015





NATHANIEL COTTON, M.D.

A St. Albans Worthy: Dr. Nathaniel Cotton 1705 to 1788

BY CHARLES E. JONES, F.S.A.

IN the year 1661 was born in London Samuel Cotton, a scion of a Little Gaddesden family. After being admitted to the freedom of London by patrimony in 1690, he carried on business as a silk merchant in the parish of St. Helen, Bishopsgate, in partnership with his brother John. Their trade was with the Near East, which may perhaps account for the fact that family tradition refers to him by the nickname of "the Levant pirate." In 1696, at the age of thirty-five, he was married at St. Dunstan's, Stepney, to Mary Johnson who was eighteen. The brothers prospered so considerably that by 1714 Samuel was residing in a country house he had purchased at Leyton. Two years later his wife was dead and he had married a second Mary, whose family name we have been unable to trace.¹ The business eventually met with ill fortune and, in February 1729, the firm became bankrupt. Samuel's house in Essex was sold and he took up his residence in the parish of St. Matthew, Bethnal Green, apparently making no further ventures in commerce. He and his second wife both died in 1747.

By his first marriage Samuel had four sons, the youngest being Nathaniel, the subject of these notes, who was born in 1705.

Of Nathaniel Cotton's boyhood and youth nothing is known, but we learn that at the age of twenty-four he was studying medicine at Leiden² under Hermann Boerhaave, the eminent Dutch physician and man of science, whose widespread fame brought him pupils from many European countries.³

After obtaining his degree Nathaniel returned to England and became assistant to a Dr. Crawley, who owned a private lunatic asylum at Dunstable. On the death of Crawley, Cotton decided to open an asylum

¹ But which may have been Withers.

² Peacock's *List of English Students in Leiden*, 23 Sept., 1729.

³ Leiden is also memorable as being the birthplace of Gerard Dou and Rembrandt, and the home of the Elzevir family of printers.

of his own at St. Albans, whither he removed about the year 1735, taking with him the housekeeper and some of the patients of his former employer. Starting here on a modest scale, his growing success prompted him to remove to a large Elizabethan house in Dagnall Street which he named the Collegium Insanorum.⁴ It should be noted that College Street, which took its name from Cotton's house, was not built until 1825, when Verulam Road was made. Before that date Dagnall Street extended to Fishpool Street by the roadway now called Wellclose Street.

In 1738 Cotton married Ann, daughter of Joshua Pembroke, a near neighbour, as we learn from the fact that in 1712 the Corporation of St. Albans granted permission to Joshua to enclose with rails and posts the waste ground in front of his house in Dagnall Street at a rental of £4 per annum.⁵ The family was well known in St. Albans at that time; Joshua was Receiver-General of the County of Hertfordshire and the Borough of St. Albans; one of his sons, George, was Mayor in 1754 and 1776, and another, Joseph, was Town Clerk from 1766 to 1792.⁶

As Cotton's medical practice grew he must have found the Collegium an unsuitable place from which to conduct it, while the surroundings could not have been congenial for his wife and rapidly increasing family. So they removed to a residence in St. Peter's Street, from which he supervised the institution in Dagnall Street during the remaining years of his life. Of his new home it is recorded that it was "almost if not absolutely the only house in St. Albans that possessed a conductor to defend it against the effects of lightning."⁷

As mentioned above, the doctor's father and step-mother both died in the year 1747. The death of the latter brought Nathaniel an accession of fortune, for his stepmother, by her will made nine months before her death, appointed the doctor an executor and trustee of her estate as well as residuary legatee.⁸ The estate

⁴ The Collegium was demolished in 1910, and the site is now occupied by the boot factory of H. E. Joyner & Co., Ltd.

⁵ Gibbs' *Corporation Records of St Albans*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1807.

⁸ P.C.C., 91, *Potter*.



Photo: E. Stanley Kent.

THE "COLLEGIUM INSANORUM" AS IT APPEARED IN 1910.



was to be administered for the benefit of her husband, Samuel, during his lifetime, and on his decease small legacies were to be paid to a number of relatives and the residue was to go to her stepson, Nathaniel Cotton.

Ann Cotton died in 1749, leaving to her husband the care of five young children (three others had died in infancy), aged respectively, nine six, three and two years, and eight months. From what will follow later it seems likely that the two youngest, Phœbe and Catherine, may have been adopted at that time by Cotton's friend, Dr. Matthew Clark of Tottenham.

Two years later, on August 28th, 1751, at St. Vedast's, London, Nathaniel married Hannah Everett, youngest daughter of John Everett of that parish, "haberdasher of small ware." She bore him three children and died in 1772.

Dr. Cotton is to-day chiefly remembered for his connection with William Cowper and for his poetical efforts.

The poet during his first mental breakdown was committed to the care of the doctor and was a patient at the Collegium from December, 1763, to June, 1765. He has left on record his appreciation of the treatment he received there and his high opinion of Cotton: "I was not only treated with kindness by him while I was ill, and attended with the utmost diligence; but when my reason was restored to me and I had so much need of a religious friend to converse with to whom I could open my mind upon the subject without reserve, I could hardly have found a fitter person for the purpose." Cotton was a man of deep piety, as his writings show and his friends have testified.

While at the Collegium Cowper became much attached to one of the attendants, Sam Roberts by name, who accompanied him when he left the Collegium and of whom he wrote from Huntingdon: "I am not quite alone, having brought a servant with me from St. Albans, who is the very mirror of fidelity and affection for his master." This, again, is proof of the kindness shown to Cotton's patients, treatment so different from what was usual in those days.

Cowper's connection with his "little physician," as he called Cotton, did not end when he left the Collegium

in the summer of 1765. It will be remembered that the poet was again suffering from melancholia in 1767, when he and his friend, Mrs. Unwin, were staying with the Rev. John Newton at Olney. On November 18th of that year Newton wrote to Lord Dartmouth: "My amiable guests are at present from home. Mr. Cowper has accompanied Mrs. Unwin this evening to St. Albans to consult Dr. Cotton." Again, six years later, a recurrence of the same trouble caused Newton to journey to St. Albans to consult Cotton as to his friend's treatment.

Of the Doctor's poems it can be said, and surely it is much, that they had a wide appeal to his own generation. Does it really matter what critics think of them to-day? In 1751 he published anonymously *Visions in Verse for the Entertainment and Instruction of Younger Minds*, and by 1767 seven editions had been issued none of which bore the author's name. In the *Epistle to the Reader* prefixed to the book he wrote:—

"All my ambition is, I own,
To profit and to please unknown,"

which is characteristic of the man. Not only did he shrink from publicity, but he was so reticent about his family antecedents and his own life history that even his children knew hardly anything on these matters. Only once did he publish anything under his own name; a medical treatise entitled *Observations on a particular kind of Scarlet Fever that prevailed in and about St. Albans, 1749*. Being intended for members of his own profession, he no doubt realized the advisability of stating its authorship.

The *Visions in Verse* have a strong moral and religious tendency, as have all Cotton's writings.

Three years after the Doctor's death his eldest surviving son, the Rev. Nathaniel Cotton, Rector of Thornby, Northants, published two volumes entitled *Various Pieces in Verse and Prose by the late Nathaniel Cotton, M.D.*, and so the secret of the authorship was revealed. These volumes include five sermons, extracts from letters, and other writings not previously published, but contain little of interest except for the light they throw upon the Doctor's character.

Among Cotton's numerous patients was Dr. Edward Young, dramatist, poet, and Rector of Welwyn; now chiefly remembered as the author of *The Complaint: or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality*. The two men became fast friends and the doctor of medicine attended the doctor of laws during his last illness in 1765.

In a letter written by Dr. Cotton while in his seventies he tells of his failing health, saying: "I am emaciated to a very great degree, and my trembling limbs are so weak as to feel insufficient to support my weight." Yet he lived to the age of eighty-three.

Dr. Matthew Clark of Tottenham, who has already been mentioned as a friend of Cotton, died in November, 1778, and in his will,⁹ dated October 14th, 1777, made generous provision for the two youngest daughters of Nathaniel and Ann Cotton. By his will he left £2,000 each to Phœbe and Catherine Cotton "who now live with me, daughters of Doctor Cotton of St. Albans"; by a codicil of May 29th, 1778, he left them a further £1,000 each; by another codicil, dated November 19th, 1778, he left to each one-third of £1,000 (this being a legacy he had received); and, finally, by a codicil of November 19th, 1778, he directed that the two sisters should be paid in priority to all other beneficiaries.

The above influenced the will¹⁰ made by Nathaniel Cotton a month after Clark's death. He left £1,200 to his daughter Anne, wife of William Brooke of Farnham;¹¹ £20 to his son Joseph ("as a mark of my love to him and for whom I have made no further provision, I having at his request already given him his fortune and I think it proper to make this declaration lest it should be looked upon as a slight upon my said son Joseph Cotton who has on all occasions behaved himself in a very dutiful and affectionate manner"); £20 each to his daughters, Phœbe and Catherine ("whereas my good friend Matthew Clark, doctor in physic, deceased, hath made a very handsome provision for my daughters Phœbe Cotton and Catherine Cotton

⁹ P.C.C., 479, *Hay*.

¹⁰ P.C.C., 391, *Calvert*.

¹¹ Afterwards a Major in the Army.

who have lived with him many years,¹² I give them the sum of £20 a piece only as a mark of my love for them who have on all occasions behaved themselves in a very dutiful and affectionate manner"); all his shares in the Sun Fire Office to his son John, subject to his continuing to pay two small annuities amounting together to £50 per annum; to his son Nathaniel all the stock on his farm at Felden in the manor of Hemel Hempstead and the contents of his houses in St. Peter's Street and Dagnall Street.

Dr. Cotton died on August 2nd, 1788, aged eighty three, and was buried with his two wives in St. Peter's churchyard. The altar tomb bears only the words:—

HERE ARE DEPOSITED THE REMAINS
OF ANN, HANNAH AND
NATHANIEL COTTON

without dates or any other particulars. The parish register records the burial in the words "Aug. 8, 1788. Nathaniel Cotton, M.D., aged 88 at least," which serves to show the ignorance of the family with regard to the Doctor's life.

Joseph, a son of Nathaniel, had a distinguished career. Born in 1746, he entered the Royal Navy at the age of fifteen and was later appointed fourth mate in the marine service of the East India Company. After making two voyages in command of the *Queen Charlotte*, East Indiaman, he was able to retire on the fortune thus acquired and lived for the rest of his life at Leyton in Essex. In 1788 he was elected an elder brother of the Trinity, and in 1803 deputy-master, an office that he held for about twenty years. He was a director of the East India Company from 1795 to 1823, was on the board of the East India Docks Company, being appointed Chairman in 1803, and a governor of the London Assurance Corporation. He died at Leyton in 1825, leaving a son, William, who was a director of the Bank of England from 1821 to 1865 and inventor of the machine for weighing sovereigns.

Those of Doctor Cotton's family who were buried in this neighbourhood are Elizabeth, who married John

¹² *Vide supra.*

Clarke of Sandridge Bury and died in 1797, aged forty three;¹³ Mary, wife of John Osborn of St. Albans, who died in 1790, aged fifty, and was buried at St. Peter's; and Catherine, who died unmarried in 1780, aged thirty-two, and was also buried at St. Peter's. It is recorded that Mary's and Catherine's graves are on either side of that of their father, but the inscriptions are now illegible. Catherine's is said to have borne the following lines under her name:—

Time was like thee she life possess'd
And time shall be that thou shalt rest.

[I am greatly indebted to Mr. W. E. C. Cotton of Dunfermline, a descendant of the Doctor, for much kind assistance in the compilation of these notes. My grateful thanks are also tendered to Mr. E. W. Green for allowing me to use the portrait and to Mr. E. Stanley Kent for lending his photograph of the Collegium.]

¹³ See memorial tablet in Sandridge Church.