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Ramsay the Poet Immortalizes a Virginia Physician

Here one gets a glimpse of a physician and surroundings in the early days of Virginia

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Eighteenth Century Middlesex County, Virginia, was as prosperous as any, peaceful, safe. Two centuries before the frantic bridge-building activities of our Highway Department it was a land delightfully isolated by watercourses worthy of a Housman's attention. To paraphrase him,

*The Rappahannock and the Piankatank and Dragon Run
Are the laziest rivers under the Sun.*

Their very laziness invited human bustle. At the beginning of the second Virginia century the Rappahannock estuary called Urbanna Creek sported a seaport with ocean and river trade. The town of Urbanna and its surrounding Middlesex County also boasted two or three interesting doctors. One, Dr. John Mitchell, became world-known for his medical, scientific, geographical, and historical work. About another, Dr. Mark Bannerman, the most widespread possible investigation reveals tantalizingly little.

The writer first became acquainted with him in the Leamington Bookshop of Washington DC, where Mr. Hamer showed him a quite rare little book entitled *The Tea Table Miscellany* by Allan Ramsay. The author writes a preface to this, his "fifth edition in four years," in which he delights to report the widespread acceptance of his work. He goes on to say, "My worthy Friend Dr. Bannerman tells me from America,

*Nor only do your Lays o'er Britain flow,
Round all the Globe your happy Sonnets go;
Here thy soft Verse, made to a Scottish Air,
Are often sung, by our Virginian Fair.
Camilla's warbling Notes are heard no more,
But yield to Last Time I came o'er the Moor;
Hydaspes and Rinaldo both give way
To Mary Scot, Tweed-side, and Mary Gray."*¹

¹ Ramsay, Allan. *The Tea Table Miscellany or Allan Ramsay's Collection of Scots Songs*. London, 1730, p. viii.

Here we have a small-paned view of life and gayety and youth half a century before the Revolution. Here we glimpse as a doctor, noted only slightly and mechanically in the official records comes to life as he pens a “sonnet” after an enjoyable evening of song and doubtless literary talk in Middlesex and sends it overseas to the predecessor of Bobbie Burns.

This little poem tells us he was no dour Scot. It also reveals the names of the songs popular in Virginia two and a half centuries ago. These Scots “Sangs” run on for many stanzas. A few lines of *The Last Time I came o’er the Moor* should suffice to illustrate.

The last Time I came o’er the Moor,
I left my Love behind me;
Ye Pow’rs! What Pain do I endure,
When soft Ideas mind me?
Soon as the ruddy Morn display’d
The beaming Day ensuing,
I met, betimes, my lovely Maid,
In fit Retreats for Wooing.
Beneath the cooling Shade we lay,
Gazing and chastely sporting;
We kiss’d and promis’d Time away,
Till Night spread her black Curtain.
I pitied all beneath the Skies,
Ev’n Kings when she was nigh me;
In Raptures I beheld her Eyes,
Which could but ill deny me. ²

Interestingly enough, another contemporary Scotch work gives the music score of this little air. It was obviously planned for the tinkle of the harpsichord. I am quite sure only a maiden fair or a counter-tenor could sing it with ease. ³ All the airs seem thus high-pitched.

All this demonstrates sufficiently that Dr. Bannerman enjoyed poetry and song and literature. He had a yen, possibly emphasized by homesickness, for the popularized Scotch Ballads which Ramsay was making intelligible to a large audience.⁴ But who was he? Whence did he come?

A hopeful letter to Scotland inquiring about him brought no information. We do know that he was not a graduate of the Medical School of Edinburgh.⁵ It is possible that he may have merely attended there for a few months, Oregon Aberdeen, or Saint Andrews, or Glasgow. It is equally possible that he merely bought 83 from one of these four scotch medical schools. Such was a relatively painless way by which many 18th century doctors learned medicine: all

² Ibid., p. 41

³ Mitchell, Joseph, *The Highland Fair or Union of the Clans*. London, 1731, p. 16

⁴ For a full discussion of Allan Ramsay’s word see *Cambridge History of English Literature*, Cambridge, 1932, v. ix, p. 366ff.

⁵ He is not mentioned in the Edinburgh University publication, *Nomina aurum qel gradum medicine domaris adephi sunt 1705-1841*, New York, 1946.

they needed was the money and a few doctor friends willing to perjure themselves.⁶ Yet again, he may have served and honest apprenticeship. However, we need not feel too badly about Harry ignorance. Famous as shares Dr. John Mitchell, no one has apparently been able has yet to discover the source of his medical degree.⁷

At any rate, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he was a Scot. His name is very Scotch. To my knowledge there were no other Bannermans in Virginia at that early date. That eliminates antecedents of the name. He liked Scotch songs. He corresponded with arch-Scot Ramsay (our balladeer was a member of the Jacobite Easy Club of Edinburgh and all must get in trouble after the uprising of 1714).⁸ Because of these considerations, it does not seem too far afield to put a strong construction on Ramsay's words, "my worthy Friend", and claim that they were at least acquainted.

It is regrettable that there were no immigrant lists at that time. Thus, there is no record of Bannerman's time of arrival in America, though, as noted above, the supposition is strong that he was not a native. Since he first breaks in two official notice in 1722 and is fairly frequently mentioned in the Middlesex County Orders thereafter, we can at least presume that he migrated to Virginia between 1720 and 1722 and friend Ramsay was in his middle thirties. There is no indication that he landed in any other part of Virginia first. He may well have disembarked at Urbanna, the seaport.

What did he bring with them? Considering the limits of boats space, he brought the minimum of course, besides clothes, instruments and drugs. However, a large part of his allotted space must have been devoted to books. He liked them.

Judging from the inventories of the estates of men dying in Middlesex County in the decades before and after Bannerman's own, we can say that our doctor had the second largest library in the county.⁹ His own library totaled 53 "English and Latin" books, valued at £5:9:0.¹⁰ His only cultural superior in this regard was one John Hay who died in 1709 leaving more than 77 books, valued at £7:12:6.¹¹

Since printing did not begin in Virginia until 1740, all books had to be imported. They were imported from England, not New England,¹² where gloomy or grim religious tracts poured from the presses. Men are men must have realized this before he left Scotland. The only source of supply in Virginia other than direct import would've been purchases at estate settlements from heirs who were rather likely to retain books for their own use. The only retail book outlets in colonial America were in association with printing establishments.

Books, then, were an expensive commodity and Virginia. His library, small as it may seem to us, may have been worth seven or eight hundred dollars in the purchasing power of today.

⁶ King, Lester S. *The Medical World of the Eighteenth Century*. Chicago, 1953, p. 27.

⁷ Thatcher, Herbert. Dr. Mitchell, M.D., F.R.S., of Virginia in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, v. 59, p.133.

⁸ See article on Ramsay in the dictionary of *National Biography*, v. 16, p. 473. Ramsay was a remarkable man.

⁹ *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, v. 20, pp. 394-5

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 391.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

¹² Wright, Louis B. *First Gentlemen of Virginia*, San Marino, California, 1940, p. 111.

Not many contemporaries in the entire colony had much larger libraries than he, always excepting William Byrd. It was a further mark of culture and education in those colonial days to have a respectable percentage of Latin works,¹³ as did Bannerman. The influence of the humanities was strong then. The size and character of his library mark him as an educated man and make it unlikely that he bought his medical degree.

However many books he brought with him, Bannerman's most certainly augmented his library with imports. Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany* did not respond to the immortality of type until 1724. Thus he must have ordered it from abroad (if perchance Ramsey did not send him a copy gratis). And, if he ordered one, he certainly ordered others. If we may speculate that, very likely he bought other books from Ramsey who was a professional bookseller as well as poet and publisher.

If we will now redirect our attention to Bannerman's little poem, we will see that he mentions "Camilla", "Hydaspes", and "Rinaldo". It seems that the first is the name of a female warrior in the Aeneid. Hydaspes was Milton's name for the river Jhelum of India in *Paradise Lost*. Rinaldo was a poem by Tasso of which there were English translations; the Italian poet was held in great esteem. By means of these allusions Bannerman, in accordance with the custom of the time, was exhibiting his own literacy by hinting that he was giving up the old for the new light in poetry.¹⁴ It is likely that these books were in his library. Milton and Virgil were owned by others of Virginia. This study reveals for the first time that certainly Ramsey and probably Tasso were on Virginia shelves as well. That such items have not survived in the records or in substance is not surprising. They were fragile items and, unlike the Latin works and the Bibles, were eagerly read to pieces and discarded. Ramsay's best work, *The Gentle Shepherd*, likely owned by such a loyal Scot and friend as Bannerman, was so ephemeral an item that it is very rare today. The only copy of the first edition which the writer has seen would not endure a reading unless repaired.

Colonial Virginians enjoyed other things besides books. They were very litigious. Perhaps the courts of law afforded a safety valve for emotions pent up by isolation as well as a source of modest excitement to otherwise quiet lives. Thanks to this spirit we can trace many an otherwise person.

Bannerman first entered the legal lists of Middlesex on April 3, 1722, when he sued William Fleet, probably for payment for professional services, in the Middlesex Court. Action was deferred to the next court, in May continued to June, in June continued again, and so on and on and on till judgment day of February 5, 1723 (our style). Poor Bannerman, after a year of monthly appearances at court lost his case and had to pay costs.¹⁵

At the same court, however, showing he did not despair of justice, he sued Col. John Turpeley.¹⁶ This suit was, as was apparently the custom, continued to the next court, when

¹³ Wright, Louis B. *The Cultural Life of the American Colonies*. New York, 1957, p. 132.

¹⁴ I wish to thank Dr. Daniel Woodward of the English Department of Mary Washington College, for his help in interpreting Bannerman's references.

¹⁵ Middlesex County Orders 1721-26, Photostats in the Virginia State Library, pp. 32, 35, 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Colonel Turpeley snarled back with a countersuit.¹⁷ The original suit was continued again. But justice was speedier this time. On April 3, 1723, Bannerman's suit was dismissed¹⁸ and Turpeley's continued, and again continued.¹⁹ Happily for Bannerman, Turpeley's suit was dismissed on July 2, 1723, and, marvel to behold, Turpeley had to pay costs.²⁰

Our doctor was quiet for a while. Perhaps he was discouraged by having been rebuffed twice. Perhaps he tried more strenuous or personal means of collection. Perhaps he was just a peppery Scot. Or possibly someone thought his treatment was unnecessarily rough. At any rate, on March 2, 1725, one Hugh Roach sued Bannerman for assault and battery.²¹ Following the old pattern the case was continued until July 6, 1725, when at a full-blown jury trial, Bannerman was acquitted and Roach had to pay costs.²²

Proving that he had no desire to turn the other cheek, Bannerman on September 7, 1725, slyly struck back at Hugh Roach in an action of trespass of his "dear friend" Gilbert Hamilton against the said Roach. Bannerman entered himself as security for the payment of costs by the plaintiff.²³ This action was continued many times and apparently finally dropped, with no mention of Bannerman's having to pay up. Roach was exceptionally litigious, his name appearing time after time. He won, sometimes, in debt suits.

If he did not receive payment through the agency of the courts, at least the vestry of Christ Church parish, Middlesex, was more kindly disposed. At least three times he or his estate was paid for attending the parish poor. In October, 1724, he was allowed 3000 pounds of tobacco for his attentions to Mary Cosley and Mary Robinson's "girl".²⁴ Two years later he was allowed a mere 300 pounds for services which were not described.²⁵ And still two years later, in October 1728, his estate was allowed 6000 pounds of tobacco.²⁶ Apparently, this particular vestry only got around to paying for services rendered the poor every two years. This is further slight evidence that Bannerman arrived not too long before 1722.

At this time tobacco was worth in the neighborhood of two pence a pound, with variations depending on quality. The price was held down by glut plus all the expenses and risks of shipping, storage, taxes, and commissions.²⁷ Another way of clarifying values might be to note that his first payment would have amounted to about four hogsheads of tobacco.²⁸

That not all his time was spent in working for tobacco scrip or litigating in the Middlesex court is proven by the fact that he married a Lancaster County girl. He must have had time to

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 80.

²¹ Ibid., p. 151.

²² Ibid., p. 159.

²³ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁴ Chamberlayne, C. G., Vestry book of Christ Church Parish, Middlesex 1663-1767, p. 200.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 213.

²⁷ Case of the Planters of Tobacco, London 1735, pp. 42-43.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

sail or paddle across the breadth of the Rappahannock from Urbanna to, likely, Merry point frequently enough to woo Catherine Barker of St. Mary's Chapel Parish. They wed August 12, 1724. Since no parent or guardian is named in the record, both were necessarily of age. Only one witness was present: William Payne.²⁹

It is pleasant to think that Mrs. Bannerman was one of the fair singers mentioned in the doctor's poem.

The Bannermans had one child, Margaret. Likely she died in childhood, for no further mention of her can be found in the usual records.

Bannerman lived but three years after his marriage. We know not of what he died. His will was admitted to record October 3, 1727. The will is so pleasantly worded that we get an impression of a fineness of feeling beyond the set of the legal phrases.

After the usual preamble and doubtless sincere protestations of Christian faith, he writes, having identified himself as a Middlesex County resident,

“...I give to my dear wife all my personal estate as long as she lives, earnestly recommending to her and adjuring her by the love she bore me to bring my child in the fear of God and the Christian religion.

I will and bequeath to my said dear wife all my land in Essex County which I bought of William Winston to be occupied by her during the term of her natural life providing she remains a widow, but if she marries again which is probably she will and from which I no ways restrain her then I leave her only the dwelling house kitchen and all the other office houses upon the said land and two hundred acres of the land adjoining thereto to be had and occupied by her during life.

I give to my dear daughter Margaret all the land in Essex which I bought of William Winston deceased, commonly known by the name of Nehocknay to her and to her heirs forever excepting her mother before my death should bring a boy or at the time of my death should be with child of a son then I give the above mentioned land to the said son and his heirs forever my meaning being that the land shall go to the male heir of my body if there be any....

It is my will that if my wife shall bring a male child after my decease that is of my body that he likewise shall have all the stock of cattle sheep and hogs that shall be upon the said plantation of Nehockney at the time of my death.

It is my will that the heirs to my land whether a son or a daughter should not possess the same during the life of his or her mother providing she remains a widow but if she marry again then the heir shall be put in possession of the remainder of the land my wife does not occupy at the age of twenty-one....

²⁹ Register of Marriages of Lancaster County, in Virginia State Library, p. 6.

I give all my wooling cloths to be divided amongst my white servants as my wife shall think fit.

I give to my very good friend Alex. Fraser a handsome gold mourning ring of a guinea price it being all the legacy my small estate will allow....

I give to my dear friend Gilbert Hamilton if he comes in safe from Scotland my silver watch.

I give to William Gordon now my ward the carbine I bough of Mr. Christopher Robinson's estate.

I give all the rest after the payment of my just debts to my dear daughter Margaret but she is not to enjoy the same until after her mother's decease.

I constitute... my dear wife and my very good Friends Gilbert Hamilton and Alex Fraser as also William Gordon (now my ward) when he comes of age my whole and sole executors... this fourth day of July....1727.

At a court held for Middlesex County the third day of October, 1727, Catherine Bannerman produced this will and it was admitted to record.³⁰

Upon reflection it will be realized that this will tells us a good deal about Bannerman. There is kindness there; he was probably an amiable physician.

His warm references to Gilbert Hamilton remind us that this is the second time that their friendship was noted in the official records. Here we learn of Hamilton's trip to Scotland. It may well be that his friend carried the very sonnet that started this study with him to Scotland. Ramsay was well known to the Hamiltons of Scotland. A poem by William Hamilton is printed in the *Miscellany*, in a revised form a piece by Hamilton of Gilbertsfield was also used. The Ramsays and the Hamiltons were Lanarkshire people.³¹ Incidentally, Gilbert Hamilton did return safely and died in the 1760's in Richmond County, of which he was sheriff for a time.³²

Another point emphasized by the will is that he must have enjoyed a modicum of prosperity. Only a man of some local stature would have a ward. He had white servants; no Negroes are mentioned.

Of yet more interest in this regard is his reference to his lands in Essex County, the plantation named Nehockney (or ay). He bought it from Winston. Land owned by Winston, and others, in 1720 is vaguely described as 1020 acres in the fork of the Rappahannock River in St. Mary's Parish.³³ I could not find any record of its transfer to Bannerman, but if this is the property he bought it is vaguely correctly placed to be the present Mahockney, owned by

³⁰ A Photostat of this will is in the Virginia State Library.

³¹ See articles in Dictionary of National Biography and Cambridge History of English Literature, as above.

³² For references to Hamilton see Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, v. 7, p. 63, v. 15, p. 382, v. 23, pp. 168-9, v. 29, p. 361.

³³ Abstract of Patents, Essex County, August 17, 1720, in Virginia State Library.

Mr and Mrs. Trent Taliaferro. The latter have no record as to who owned the property before 1763. Winston, and then Bannerman probably were the first owners. Somehow it became the property of one Lawrence Duff, of London, who sold it to a Virginian in 1765. Duff is a Scottish name! Examination of the double chimneys of the present house suggests to this amateur that they might have been part of an earlier house than the very interesting one now standing.³⁴

Despite the fact that he owned land in Essex County, the probabilities are that he lived in Urbanna. In his will he firmly fixed his residence as Middlesex County. Urbanna was the bustling little seaport of that county. It thus had a social life which Bannerman seemed to enjoy. It was rather centrally located to the whole county and was thus a trading center. Further evidence is the fact that he was mentioned in the will of Richard Walker, merchant of Urbanna, as a friend.³⁵

Urbanna was the home port of a sloop owned by Makemie, the father of Presbyterianism in Virginia. That minister also owned a lot in Urbanna, despite the fact that Accomack County was the center of his religious activities.³⁶ Otherwise Presbyterians were relatively few in that area. There was no church of that faith in Urbanna, although a small congregation did exist a little later in the century just across the river in Lancaster County.³⁷

Thus, it is entirely possible that Bannerman the Scot was a Presbyterian. We have also noted his interest in one of the Gordons. That is frequently a Presbyterian name.³⁸

Such, then, is the glimpse we have of Mark Bannerman, physician, aspiring land-owner, literary dilettante. Of all the references to him perhaps that by Ramsay is the most tantalizing. Likely he was a coming man locally, but we know nothing of his medical deeds, nor how he died. His life was a mere flash in the pan. Even his surviving daughter leaves no trace; probably she died in childhood. He would be completely forgotten save for a brief mention by a Scotch poet. 'Tis a sobering thought if one reflects on his own self-estimated worth and then remembers the hundreds and thousands of physicians like himself and like Dr. Bannerman who missed immortality simply because they failed to submit sonnets of praise to poets.

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³⁴ Old homes of Essex County, published by the Woman's Club of Essex County, 1940, p. 29-30, has a short description of Mahockney.

³⁵ Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, v. 1, p. 470. That will was dated March 1, 1726.

³⁶ Personal communication from Mr. Carroll C. Chowning of Urbanna.

³⁷ The Reverend James Waddell, famous as the "blind Preacher," is said to have begun his career there, fresh from Scotland.

³⁸ Mr. Chowning.