

L. F. GREGORY

Parson Malthus's Great-Grandfather

DANIEL MALTHUS, ROYAL APOTHECARY

WHAT DOES A man owe to his great-grandfather? It is not easy to say precisely, but perhaps traces of face or fortune; possibly of talent or temperament; or conceivably elements of each, with more besides.

Parson Malthus—as Cobbett called him, with every mark of calculated disrespect—certainly owed something to his paternal great-grandfather, Daniel Malthus, who himself had a notable career. He was probably the chief architect of the family fortunes, which enabled Parson Malthus to enjoy all the advantages of being a son of an independent country gentleman, with ample leisure to pursue his studies; perhaps, too, Parson Malthus inherited from his great-grandfather the mental aptitudes which helped him to become our first systematic and widely acknowledged (if also much disputed) writer on population, expounding doctrines which, Cobbett thought, outraged the humane principles that should guide a clergyman.

For Daniel Malthus was an apothecary, a man eminent in his calling. As a result, he gained the friendship of some of the most distinguished medical men of his day and the coveted appointment as apothecary to two sovereigns. Daniel Malthus was born in 1651, a son of the Reverend Robert Malthus who was educated at Oxford and was for some years vicar of Northolt in Middlesex—a nonconforming clergyman who in the troubles of the times was involved in conflicts with his parishioners. His wife was the daughter of a medical practitioner at Kingston-on-Thames which may have influenced Daniel in his choice of career as an apothecary.

Daniel was made free of the Society of Apothecaries of London in 1678, when he was twenty-seven years old. The term apothecary at this period was capable of more than one meaning. Dr. Johnson, in his Dictionary, defines an

apothecary as “A man whose employment is to keep medicines for sale.” In this instance, however, Johnson unaccountably wrote with less than his usual knowledge of the world around him. For a century, broadly speaking, before he compiled his dictionary many apothecaries had exceeded the limit set by his definition; they acted, in effect, as general medical practitioners, prescribing as well as selling and dispensing drugs. At the time of the Great Plague, when Malthus was a boy of fourteen, the apothecaries provided almost the only attention available to the poor, since the qualified physicians had either fallen victims to the plague or had sought refuge with their wealthier patients outside the danger zone.

Moreover, the system was tacitly accepted by some of the foremost medical men of the time. Such dominant figures as the irascible Dr. Radcliffe and the courtly Dr. Mead regularly attended at their favourite coffee-house, where the apothecaries waited upon them and discussed their more difficult cases. The physicians gave their opinions without seeing the patients, charging half a guinea for doing so. The apothecaries' freedom to treat their patients was in fact upheld by the courts at the beginning of the eighteenth century. All this was symptomatic of the medical world of those days: at the lower levels quackery was rampant; at the higher there was a groping towards a scientific approach.

Where did Daniel Malthus stand in this confused scene? We know nothing of his early life as an apothecary, but as a comparatively young man his status was evident and the main lines of his activities were clear. By this time he was conducting himself within the bounds of Dr. Johnson's definition. He was concerned essentially with dispensing and selling medicines.

He had established a close connection, which was later to ripen into warm friendship, with the

renowned Thomas Sydenham, then in the first rank of practising physicians and now famous in the annals of medicine; he was, too, a man of great force of character. Dr. Sydenham stood no nonsense from anybody and he was not likely to be tolerant towards an apothecary who trespassed upon his preserves. Apart from this, Daniel Malthus described himself in formal documents in terms which left little room for doubt as to his specialized sphere of activity.

Dr. Sydenham, at the height of his career, lived in Pall Mall and Malthus lived next door, his sign being the traditional Pestle and Mortar. Sydenham, however, died in 1689, his last years tormented by gout, and Daniel Malthus, then thirty-eight, faced a turning point in his career. Henceforward he stood alone, with his own way to make. That he did so to good purpose is manifest. By the beginning of the new century life was opening out to him in very attractive directions; he was moving in the broad sunshine of a career that was rewarding in money and prestige alike.

He had apparently been appointed apothecary to King William III. In 1702 he bought the Manor of Hadstock in Essex from the Earl of Suffolk for £5,500—a substantial investment in the money values of those days. A year or two later he was elected Master of the Society of Apothecaries, but was compelled to decline the honour because of the pressure of business. Then, having become apothecary to Queen Anne, he entered upon a period of constant service to the Queen, which lasted till her death.

His surviving letters indicate that he was often in attendance on the Queen at Windsor, keeping the Royal physicians informed about her health. Thus in 1708 he reports to Sir Hans Sloane that "Her Hs. took the purge to-day, but I have not yet directions to pursue the rest of the course." In 1713 he writes again to say that "Dr. Arbuthnot desired me to acquaint the phisicians that Her Majesty is very well," though there was to be a meeting of the "phisicians" the next day. Daniel Malthus has the distinction of being quoted by Sir Winston Churchill in his life of Marlborough.

Malthus was with Queen Anne in her last hours. He writes that on July 30th, 1714 (as Sir Winston quotes him) "Her Majesty . . . had two very violent convulsions," lasting till 11 o'clock. From near noon, he goes on, "Her Majesty had her understanding perfect, but from time to time answered nothing but aye or no." Then "At the coming out of the fit the Duchess of Somerset desired from the Lords of the Council that they might propose something to her of great moment" and for a minute she transacted official business, afterwards sinking into a coma. She breathed her last on August 1st, 1714. If, from all this, Daniel Malthus seems to have been, for an apothecary, very close to the centre of affairs, the explanation may be largely sought in exceptional personal qualities that merited such trust.

When the Queen died she owed her apothecary over £300 for fees, medicines, etc. (including "Spaw Water bought by her Majesty's particular order"). It appears that his annual fee was £320 5s. He was, however, a very patient creditor, for though he himself lived three years longer, it fell to his executors to collect the debt.

We have no means of knowing the extent of Malthus's estate, but it can scarcely be doubted that it was very considerable. Dr. Radcliffe's principal apothecary is said to have accumulated £50,000—an enormous sum in the money values of the time; and other fortunes of like magnitude were known. Daniel Malthus was well placed to match them. His will is one of the simplest documents imaginable. Describing himself as "apothecary", he indicates that he had already made provision for his son and daughter, so all is left to his wife. He died in 1717 at the age of sixty-six, and was buried in Hammersmith churchyard, but there is now no sign of his tomb.

His son Sydenham, engaged in law and finance, achieved no public distinction, though he is said to have further improved the family fortunes. Sydenham's second son Daniel is best remembered as a landscape gardening enthusiast, as a friend of Rousseau and as the father of the great economist, Thomas Robert Malthus.