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III.—*Remarks on the Authenticity of the Paston Letters*

Richard Almack

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III.—*Remarks on the Authenticity of the Paston Letters, by RICHARD ALMACK, Esq., F.S.A. : in a letter to C. KNIGHT WATSON, Esq., M.A., Secretary.*

Read November 30th, 1865.

16th November, 1865.

MY DEAR SIR,—

THE authenticity of the Paston Letters having been seriously impugned, it is a duty to give any explanation on so important a question. I would, therefore, beg to state some circumstances which happen to be particularly within my own knowledge.

On the 23rd May, 1860, Sir Walter C. Trevelyan, Bart., drew my attention to a discussion lately raised upon this subject in *Notes and Queries*. I reminded him that we were then within a few miles of Mr. William Dalton, at Bury St. Edmund's, who copied most of the originals for publication, and discussed with Sir John Fenn the reading of many difficult words and their meaning; notes of which discussion he still had in his possession. Sir Walter, on my introduction, called on Mr. Dalton, who was then in his ninety-fourth year, but his mind and memory were, to the day of his death, unimpaired. On the 2nd of the following October, Mr. Dalton died. In *Notes and Queries* for November 3rd following, Sir Walter Trevelyan reminded the literary public that he was the gentleman who had transcribed for the press the Paston Letters "from the originals," and gave a short account of his interview with Mr. Dalton, who had shown him several sheets of notes, which suggested to the Editor various corrections and observations.

On the death of Mr. Dalton I found, what was unknown to me, that he had, seventeen years before, appointed me trustee under his will. I also received a note explaining this, and another dated 3rd May, 1843, in which he gives to me the five presentation volumes of the Paston Letters, "*and the MS. papers with them, which are in fact now of no use.*" This kind and characteristic letter I now

produce for the honour of being mentioned in a manner so highly flattering by so valuable a friend.

I also produce the five printed volumes and Mr. Dalton's MS. notes, and his own written minute of his interview with Sir Walter Trevelyan, which is really the protest of an honourable man against an imputation respecting which he expressed to me his indignation. The note is as follows :—

“ Thursday, the 24th of May, 1860,

“ Between 2 and 3 o'clock P. M.

“ Sir Walter Trevelyan, sending in his card, announced he called respecting the Paston Letters, and said it was doubted whether they were original. I showed him the observations which I made upon Sir John Fenn's copies from the originals, which I had from him for the purpose of comparing the one with the other. I went to Downham, in Norfolk, in 1783, and remained there until 1790, and the observations were made during that time. Sir Walter Trevelyan has therefore my evidence as to the originality and existence of the letters, fortified by the observations upon the different volumes. Sir John Fenn was exceedingly near-sighted, the original letters were very difficult to decipher, from the writing itself, from the state of the paper, the effect of time, and other causes.

“ W. DALTON.”

The title-page of the presentation copy of the first volume contains the following in Sir John Fenn's writing :—

“ To Mr. Dalton :

“ These volumes are presented by his obliged friend

“ THE EDITOR.”

The first of the second publication (vol. iii.) contains this writing by Sir John Fenn :—

“ To Mr. William Dalton :

“ This continuation of original letters is presented as a testimony of *thanks*,
12 May, 1789.” “ From

“ THE EDITOR.”

With reference to some of the circumstances I have mentioned, I had a conversation, in London, on 31st July, 1861, with Mr. Woodward, H. M. Librarian, and it was arranged that I should meet him in the Library at Windsor Castle. I went there on 2nd August, and I understood that the Prince Consort was much interested in the Paston Letters, and was sanguine in his expectation that the missing originals would be found somewhere; and, for reasons given, His Royal Highness considered a place named as most likely, and that a strict search would

be made, for which there would be facility the following summer. It was arranged that I should take to London, when the Court went there for the winter, the MS. Notes by Mr. Dalton, the five presentation volumes, &c., for the purpose of their being seen by His Royal Highness. We all know the calamity which put an end to this.

In consequence of the leading article in the *Fortnightly Review* for 1st September last, by Mr. Herman Merivale, I attended at Windsor Castle on the 2nd instant. Mr. Woodward confirmed my recollection as to my visit in 1861, and the facts I have ventured to allude to respecting the lamented Prince Consort. I am at liberty to add, that searches are already in progress, and that no doubt, under the necessary authority, the missing MSS. will now be found, if possible.

During my long intimacy with Mr. Dalton the Paston Letters were often discussed, and I believe his impression was that the lost MSS. were last seen when "handed by Queen Charlotte to a lady-in-waiting."

Mr. Dalton was a gentleman, well connected, highly educated, and in affluence all his life, remarkable as much for his inflexible integrity as for his talent and strength of mind. If the imputation respecting the Paston Letters be even partly well founded as to the first four volumes, he, as well as Sir John Fenn, must have been not only unprincipled, but also the most wonderful fabricators that the world ever produced. Chatterton would have been a mere child by comparison, for his writings were chiefly romance, and theirs contain facts in almost every sentence.

I venture to mention that I have had the honour to be a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries for thirty-three years, and during that time I have resided in a county adjoining to that in which were the homes of the Pastons and of many of their correspondents, and in the parish where their friend John Clopton lived to the age of about eighty-five, and whose contract to marry Elizabeth Paston is set out, vol. 3, p. 197; also his letter to her brother Sir John, about his "heart's-ease" and the "jointure." He says, "I was on Thursday last past at Cavendish, to deliver an estate to Wentworth in the land that was my brother Cavendish's." He mentions also his brother Denston and his neighbour Crane, &c. These names will bear strict examination; and John Clopton lived to put up their portraits in Melford Church, where I have recently restored and mended them. He did not marry Elizabeth Paston, and probably there was not much love in the matter, as the daughter was willing to marry him if "it shall be both for her worship and profit," and the mother asked nothing but "if it be so that his land stand clear."

In pursuing my particular antiquarian inquiries—often more or less in connection with Mr. Dalton, and I may say with the late Director of the Society of Antiquaries, John Gage, Esq., who became the representative of the historical family of Rokewode (named in the Paston Letters)—my attention has been continually directed to the events and persons mentioned in those letters. I have met with many confirmations, but never with anything to raise a particle of doubt.

No doubt Mr. Herman Merivale's objections and suspicions will be answered by competent persons. As to the Pastons being only Norfolk Squires, and having letters from great public characters, what was their friend John Clopton? Only a Suffolk Squire. Yet he was on terms of intimacy with the same great people. He was executor to the will of Anne Duchess of Buckingham, daughter of Ralph Neville, Earl of Westmerland, and to Sir Thomas Montgomery, K.G., who is much mentioned in the Paston Letters. Clopton was a Lancastrian, and although he was arrested with the Earl of Oxford, Aubrey de Vere his son, Sir Thomas Tudenham, and others, for *corresponding with the Queen of Henry VI.*, he was the only one who saved his head when all the rest were decapitated, and his escape is attributed to the fact of his being a trustee for Cecily, Duchess of York, daughter of Ralph Neville, first Earl of Westmerland, and mother of King Edward IV. The portraits of his connections, still remaining in Melford church, include persons of the highest rank and importance.

I shall not enter into a long account of Mr. Dalton's Notes, or give many extracts. I infer from them that the originals of the two first volumes were copied and translated by Mr. Dalton, and his notes are made on the printed copies which I now place on the table, pointing out errors in the printing, and some second thoughts as to doubtful words and their meaning, and referring to the originals. The notes on the third and fourth volumes are different. I infer that Sir John Fenn had copied most of them himself, and given his translation^a to Mr. Dalton for careful comparison and consideration.

Mr. Dalton's notes on the third volume alone consist of more than four hundred

^a On further consideration, I incline to think that Mr. Dalton made an exact copy or literal transcript of the ancient letters (that copy printed on the left hand), and that Sir John Fenn translated them into modern language (that copy printed on the right hand). Mr. Dalton's manuscript notes were made on the printed copies of the first two volumes, and as to vols. 3 and 4, I believe his comments are on Sir John's translation of the literal copy (which Mr. Dalton had made, and which he refers to generally as the original—being, as he believed, exactly the same as the original), and that these notes were made, as dated, a year before vols. 3 and 4 were published. The observation in Mr. Dalton's note respecting his interview with Sir Walter Trevelyan, in which he mentions Sir John Fenn's copies from the originals, means, I believe, Sir John's translated copies.

corrections, doubts, and suggestions, and in almost every instance Sir John has adopted them, as shown by the printed volume. The alterations are not important to the general history; but the volume, if printed unaltered, would have been much more liable to criticism and doubt than it is now, especially as to names of persons and places and modern words and meanings.

For example, in Letter 34, Sir John Heveningham, in a letter to Margaret Paston, requests that she "will send my Cousin William *Staunton*." It appears that Sir John Fenn first wrote this name "Robert *Fraunton*." This might have been a serious mistake. Supposing that, instead of the unknown name of *Fraunton*, it had been printed Robert or William "*Naunton*,"—both names in an ancient knightly Suffolk family—and that it had now been discovered that the only known member of that Christian name and period had died some years before, this would fairly have shaken faith in the Paston Letters (the originals being lost); and yet, it would have been a mere mistake in reading old bad writing.

The MS. notes on the Letters in this volume are dated "11th May, 1788," the volume being published 1789.

They show the most minute criticism by a clever, learned young man, who was at that time only twenty-one years of age, establish the existence of the original manuscripts, and evidence the care taken by Sir John Fenn to secure the accuracy of the printed volumes.

Believe me, sincerely yours,

C. KNIGHT WATSON, Esq.

RICHARD ALMACK.