while it seemed to me the biblical passage was confusing because sheep did not usually go to the grave but more typically to the slaughter (I later learned these sentences are among the most linguistically debated in the Bible), what we also derive from the image of shepherded death was the notion that death had a place in the torrent of living.

A high and honourable and ancient seat. It was a partner with life and not its adversary, not the thing that had to be endlessly loathed in order to make clear that almost everything my father went through was better than it. Death was life's shepherd. Death wasn't medicine's enemy.

And I told the mourners that if we didn't change our view on this, if we didn't become more ecumenical in our relationship with death, then we were, as I had, going to hate medicine more and more. Not the doctors, not the nurses, but medicine as a world view, as a technologically arrogant vision displaced from the biology of life. Medicine, which didn't let my father die soon enough, wouldn't let us die either. And I told them to talk to their doctors about this because this sporting contest, this medicalized endless decay was not just our onrushing fate but increasingly the sign of 21st-century humans' alienation from all the rest of biology.

And then I cried both for my dead father and for wholeness in the life/death universe that I felt had been ripped apart in the modern world. And I came back to Toronto and read 14 different translations of the psalm sentences and wrote the following poem.

The sounds of dying are purple, polka dot and piss.
Its colours shriek confusion, caries and abscess.
We are the generation of death walking.
We are the disease our medicine is stalking.
Give me not a never-ending end.
Give me death, life's better than best friend.

I call it "Death: one, Medicine: no score."

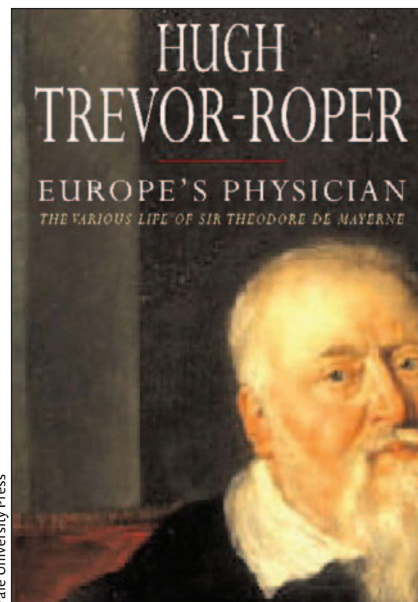
Stephen Strauss BA
Science journalist
Toronto, Ont.

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.070900

Book review

Of kings and alchemy

Europe's Physician: The Various Life of Sir Theodore de Mayerne
Hugh Trevor-Roper
Yale University Press; 2006
464 pp US$35
ISBN 0-300-11263-7



Yale University Press

Hugh Trevor-Roper never had this biography of the 17th- century physician Theodore de Mayerne published. Written in the late 1970s and revised after Trevor-Roper retired in 1987, this manuscript lay fallow for many years and was only recently resurrected by a literary executor following Trevor-Roper's death in 2003.

Trevor-Roper, a career historian and academic administrator at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, was best known for his book *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947). He was not an expert on the Nazi era, however, and achieved great notoriety with his premature and very public certification of the "Hitler Diaries" in 1985, which turned out to be phony. Otherwise politically astute, he managed to obtain an appointment as Regius Professor of History at Oxford University and then a life peerage.

Trevor-Roper's interest in Mayerne, an expatriate Swiss Huguenot, who became court doctor to James I and Charles I of England, comes as no surprise. Trevor-Roper was an expert in the history of Reformation England, especially the first half of the 17th century, and came from a medical family.

Mayerne's role in court life and many of the intrigues of the day, including high-level diplomacy and subterfuge, are fascinating reading. But the physician–reader may be more interested in other aspects of the book. For instance, early on, Trevor-Roper describes conflicts between the Catholic medical establishment of the University of Paris and the "Hermetic" or "alchemical" doctors, who happened to be almost exclusively Protestant, in late 16th- and early 17th-century Paris. Mayerne was one of these "Hermetic" doctors. Rather than adhere exclusively to Galenic doctrine, alchemical doctors also sought cures through chemical means. Their ideas led to the science of modern pharmacotherapeutics.

When the tolerant Henri IV was assassinated and a regime less sympathetic to the Protestant cause assumed political hegemony in France, Mayerne moved to England where he had contact with James I and quickly gained favour and influence. His efforts, on behalf of the King of England, to protect Protestant interests in continental Europe are well documented.

As a fashionable court physician, Mayerne's private practice was always busy, and he amassed a large fortune. When James I became ill and died, Mayerne managed to maintain his various sinecures — no small accomplishment, as he was less popular with Charles I, the new king. After the monarchy fell and Cromwell took over, Mayerne successfully avoided paying taxes through a special Act of Parliament. Mayerne had many influential friends and patients, on all sides, during and after the Civil War. Indeed, despite publishing little, he had become one of the most famous physicians of his time.

Many of Mayerne's letters and prescriptions survive. Through these, we learn some of his methods and much of his wisdom. We may scoff at his pre-

scription for the Marchioness of Buckingham to ease the labour of childbirth — he told her to anoint her pudenda with an emollient unguent, the ingredients of which included "... water of stag's head [as prepared for the King], confection of Alkermes of Montpelier, finger-bones, Cretan dittany, crocus martis corallinus, and dried testicles of horse" — but we sense rather quickly the mastery of psychology that Mayerne possessed, something that is still necessary for successful medical practice.

A story is told of a lawyer who consulted with Mayerne, when he was old and bedridden, but still in full possession of his powerful intellect and personality. The patient had been diagnosed with an incurable gastric tumour. Without performing a physical examination, we are told that Mayerne said he could easily cure the lawyer by throwing the cause of his disease into either his arms or legs. After some consideration, the lawyer resigned himself to the loss of his legs, but then, apparently, recovered completely — just in time to save them!

Mayerne's interest in chemistry extended outside the realm of medicine. He experimented with pigments, enamels and varnishes, and he developed friendships with famous painters of the day, including Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck. Cosmetics and other non-medicinal compounds were also of interest to Mayerne. Indeed, he created the recipe for the coronation oil with which Charles I was anointed. This same recipe has been used ever since, including during the coronation of Elizabeth II.

The tone that resonates most deeply in this book, an assured characteristic of any great physician, is Mayerne's humanity. When consoling a patient over his wife's inability to provide him with an heir, and noting the shortcomings of his own children, Mayerne wrote: "I know not if, in the estate she's in, you ought earnestly to desire it. It is hard to get children with good courage when one is melancholy, and after they are got and come into the world they bring a great deal of pain with them, and after that very often one loses them ... Be in good health and then you may till your ground, otherwise it will be but time lost if you enter that race frowningly."

Trevor-Roper provides us with a look into the very full life of a talented physician, and I recommend this biography heartily for those interested in the roots of modern medicine. The intersection of medicine and politics is not explored in detail, but sufficiently so that one sees how a practising physician can significantly influence national and international affairs, in addition to those of his or her own profession. Kudos to those who found, polished and published this pleasing book.

Ian Ross MD
Department of Neurosurgery
Huntington Memorial Hospital
Pasadena, Calif.