

‘The Origins and Life of William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester’

from the Latin elegiac verses of Christopher Johnson (c. 1536-1597);

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The influential schoolmaster Christopher Johnson (c. 1536-1597) was educated at Winchester and New College (Winchester scholar, 1549; New College, B.A. 1557, M.A. 1562, B.M. 1570, D.M. 1571), before becoming headmaster of Winchester College from 1560 to 1571. He encouraged literary study among his pupils, and several became writers of note, including the pattern-poet Richard Willes, the literary theorist Henry Dethick, and the historian and antiquary Richard White. In a preface Johnson wrote to one of White’s publications, Johnson recalled his own early literary awakening:

For sure I myself, when as a boy I was studying grammar, though I did not scorn other texts, yet whenever I came across the works of Thomas More, either his epigrams or *Utopia* or translations from Lucian, I was excessively pleased, and carried onwards by a violent desire to read him.²

In 1564 Johnson published as a single sheet a Latin verse life of William of Wykeham, of which only a few copies survive. Johnson’s own pupils also remembered him fondly, and when Richard Willes came to publish his own *Poematum liber* in 1571, he reprinted Johnson’s poem as a salutation to his old schoolmaster and mentor.

In 2014 several New College classics students were persuaded by their tutor David Raeburn to translate Johnson’s verse life of Wykeham into English rhyming couplets; this is the first translation of this verse life of which we know. Their text was that printed in Willes’s 1571 *Poematum liber*. This is the result:

The Origins and Life of William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester

In Hampshire’s county ancient Wykeham lies,
A humble hamlet, modest in its size.

There John, with surname Long, lived out his life,
And with him lived fair Sibyl, his good wife.

This very village witnessed William’s birth,
These very folk produced a child of worth.

Thus, through his life as Wykeham he was known,
And through his deeds his parents’ virtues shown.

Longevity his father’s name ensured,

From Sybil prudent foresight he procured.

For eighteen years laid Edward down the law

Before the infant Wykeham daylight saw.

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¹ The shades of Wykeham and Johnson are deeply grateful to David Raeburn and Christopher Jotischky for orchestrating this translation.

² All these details are taken from the life of Johnson in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, by D. K. Money. See also the discussions in J. W. Binns, *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age* (Leeds, 1990), and A. D. S. Fowler’s introduction to his edition and translation of Willes’s [as ‘Wills’], *De re poetica* (Oxford, Luttrell Reprints no. 17, 1958). More on all of this can be found in the [New College Note in this issue on Richard Willes himself](#).

O'er twenty years good manners were attained
At home, for this his father had ordained.
But Winchester he also did frequent,
For to the bishop's household he was sent.
And once he joined the new king's entourage,
His good renown all men proclaimed at large.
And following a long and prosperous spell,
In state affairs and duties he excelled. 20
At Windsor, then a village well-admired,
The king a splendid castle now desired.
Appointing Wykeham, he did thus detect
The man's great promise, loyalty, intellect.
And so the king now viewed him as a friend,
Who soon to greater power did ascend.
But day by day still more was he revered,
And all the while he furthered his career.
In just six years, as bishop to succeed,
He came to Winchester, the flock to feed. 30
And so his friendship with the king matured, 45
As days went by, his honour seemed assured;
Fair England's pride, the Chancellor of the land,
Located always at his king's right hand.
But suddenly (such is the way of things)
He lost the fortune that great honour brings. 50
He fell from grace through rivals' jealousy,
An exile, sent from home across the sea.
The King was swayed by Parliament's suggestions
And not because of Wykeham's own transgressions.
From England, then, to exile, he was bent,
Perhaps without the king's entire assent.
But Edward's life was almost at an end;
His nephew then did to the throne ascend.
The young monarch made haste now to recall
His uncle's friend, his rank to reinstall. 60
For three years' unjust punishment endured,
Three twelvemonths' worth of tribute was restored.
Now Wykeham, recompensed, seized at the chance
His good deeds and great bounty to advance;
He rendered unto God what He was due,
For, in his virtue, wealth he did eschew,
While all that time in Oxford (may its fame
Forever be exalted, great its name!)
A home for scholars erudite and sage
He wished to build, the wonder of an age. 70
His dream in just six years was satisfied,
A Warden was installed, fellows arrived.
The College nearly forty did include,
(Although the boys and servants I exclude).
To his foundation farms and farmers too
Did Wykeham grant, to feed his scholars new.
And yet these deeds, which seem to us so great,

Good William's desires did not abate.
For once his Oxford college was complete,
He sought only his kindness to repeat, 80
Which took root in his own dear bishopric;
A school he there constructed, brick by brick.
No fewer students there did he desire,
And masters too, their young minds to inspire.
Then, when discretion's years were bravely gained,
The Muses' arts and speakers' tricks explained,
The choicest youths did Wykeham now select
To come to Oxford, for their intellect.
Thus, holy Mary, was there now a pair 90
Of colleges which did your chaste name bear.
And for this reason are they both deemed 'New':
The debts of aging they do not accrue.
With this, you might believe, did Wykeham end
His building work, exhausted his stipend.
But of his church of Swithun he now swore
The crumbling roof most richly to restore;
That church wherein the saint is said to lie
Beneath the nave, in holy majesty,
That mighty pile, those towering columns dense 100
He built or rebuilt at his own expense;
A kingly sight for worshippers to see,
If e'er a king so great there were to be.
The story may be true that monks who'd come
From France, as exiles banished from their home,
Received from him what mad King Charles had seized
And with their new estate were surely pleased.
But such largesse did not his servants blight,
For he, as was his wont, kept them in sight;
He fed both rich and poor (as testifies 110
The writing on his tomb to our own eyes).
But when th'advance of years caught up with him,
A feebleness of strength weighed down each limb,
Rest came, as gentle as his gentle life,
The rest that frees us all from care and strife.
He died aged eighty, in the prosperous reign
Of Henry Bolingbroke, King Richard's bane.
And did the good man leave behind a will?
He did, most generous, and further still,
So large and so astounding a bequest 120
By my poor pen can never be expressed.
One thing I'll say: he made the king's own wealth
Look scant; yet still *his* gifts enjoy good health.
Still they endure, gifts Croesus might declare,
Or Julius Caesar, who made Rome his heir;
His works, in fact, go some way to recall
The golden works of Midas e'er his fall.
Nor were such gen'rous gifts bequeathed in vain;
For Wykeham's fame endures, and shall not wane.

Throughout his diocese churches were endowed,
And much to kinsmen and the poor allowed. 130
Much to his servants and the king he brought,
But of his colleges he mostly thought.
These are an everlasting monument
To one whose life was such a testament.
The man who lived and died, showing such love,
Must be an honoured soul in heaven above.
If holy Peter's keys turned not the gate
For him, all other saints must come too late.
No more, I find my verses are inept;
But, Wykeham, these I beg you to accept. 140