

Thomas Flatman, Unlikely First FRS of New College

This Note is partly provoked by our recent purchase of a superb portrait of William Musgrave of New College, FRS, and secretary to both the Royal Society and the Oxford Philosophical Society in the 1680s.¹ He was not, though, the first New College Fellow of the Royal Society, and this note turns to that man, Thomas Flatman, really a poet and painter, as well as an astrologer.

Thomas Flatman (1635–1688), sometime of New College (Winchester 1649; New College, scholar 1654, full fellow 1656) had three occupations, which he practised to very different standards: law, poetry, and painting.² As the later poet and antiquary William Oldys wrote on him:

Should Flatman for his client strain the laws,
The Painter gives some colour to the cause:
Should Critics censure what the Poet writ,
The Pleader quits him at the bar of wit.³

But, despite leaving New College for the Inner Temple, whence he was called to the bar in 1662, Flatman probably never practised law; at any rate, he wrote in some lines on himself that—how little things change—after his study in the arts he had only gone into law to keep his father happy: ‘From liberal Arts to the litigious Law | Obedience, not Ambition, did me draw’ (‘The Review’).⁴

As for his second trade, that of poet, for this he was well known in his time. His first collaborative exploit was a hilarious volume called *Naps upon Parnassus* in which Flatman and his Oxford friends published the execrable verse of one Samuel Austin of Wadham College, along with their own ‘commendatory’ verse and commentary, a mock-edition in every sense.⁵ Flatman did however fancy himself as a serious poet, and much of his surviving verse is in the form of vernacular ‘Pindaric Odes’, as popularised by the poet Abraham Cowley in the period.⁶ In his role as poet, Flatman also intersected with the world of music: three settings of his poems, one by William Gregory and two by John Blow, were printed in John Playford’s *Choice Ayres* of 1676, and a 1686 ‘Song for St Cæcilia’s Day’ survives as a broadsheet poem, said to have been set to music by Isaac Blackwell, at that point organist of St Michael’s, Cornhill.⁷ Flatman’s 1686 *Poems and Songs*,

¹ See William Poole, ‘[William Musgrave \(1655–1721\): An Early Modern New College Natural Philosopher, Physician, and Antiquary](#)’, *New College Notes* 16 (2021), no. 7.

² The earliest accounts are those of Anthony Wood (*Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss, 4 vols (London: Rivington, 1813–20), IV, 244–6) and John Aubrey (*Brief Lives*, ed. Kate Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 452, with commentary pp. 1381–2); Walpole, as in the next note, assembled some material from the notebooks of George Vertue. In modern times the only major biographical study, after A. H. Bullen’s sympathetic article for the old *Dictionary of National Biography*, is Frederic Anthony Child, *The Life and Uncollected Poems of Thomas Flatman* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1921). (Child’s study was enabled by a manuscript of Flatman’s poetry containing many items not printed in his subsequent collections now in the University of Pennsylvania; helpfully, there is a nineteenth-century ink transcript of this in the Bodleian, MS Firth d. 7.) Most of what we know is summarised in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. New College Library acquired its own copy of Flatman’s 1686 *Poems* in November 2015, now BT3.173.18. The Folger Union First Line Index of English Verse (<<https://firstlines.folger.edu>>) lists no fewer than 392 Flatman witnesses, many printed, but many manuscript too, attesting to his popularity at the time.

³ Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting*, 2nd ed. (Twickenham: Strawberry-Hill, 1765), III, 29, also quoted in Bliss’s edition of Wood’s *Athenae*, as above.

⁴ He also took an MA from St Catherine’s Hall, Cambridge, in 1666, which he could not have done without an Oxford BA first, although that former degree is not recorded. For an academic oration of his from St Catherine’s, see Bodleian, MS Rawl. letts. 104, fols. 126–9.

⁵ On this see William Poole, ‘[Naps upon Parnassus: Some Attempts at Literary Humour in Elizabethan and Jacobean New College](#)’, *New College Notes* 13 (2020), no. 5.

⁶ Interestingly, Flatman also performed the role of editor, for he saw through the press the posthumous publication of the poetry of Thomas Shipman (1632–1680), under the title *Carolina: or, Loyal Poems* (London: Samuel Heyrick, 1683).

⁷ See Ian Spink’s article in Grove Music Online, where this is noted as a lost piece.

the fourth and final life-time edition of his collected verse, contains most of these, and several more songs with their composers named. Henry Purcell's 'When on my sick bed I languish' is a setting of Flatman's 'A Thought of Death'.⁸

Flatman's third trade was that of the miniature painter. It is for this he is primarily known now, and in it he excelled.⁹ What is particularly remarkable is that we know nothing of his training at all, and yet he probably ranks as the most significant New College artist up to his time to whom we can put a name. A fine self-portrait survives—it is in the V&A, and illustrated in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography's* article on him—as well as miniatures of the well-to-do patent clerk Charles Beale and his wife Alice, the noted artist, and their friend and relative by his marriage Samuel Woodforde, also a poet.¹⁰ Woodforde had originally attended Wadham College, and he and Flatman both had a hand in the *Naps upon Parnassus* venture; later, in London, Flatman and Woodforde shared a chamber in the Inner Temple. New College acquired a Flatman miniature in the time of Warden Smith, anecdotally from funds raised by selling port, but fine thought it is, we do not know the identity of the sitter.

Flatman's friendship with particularly Woodforde brings us to his unlikely claim to college fame. In 1664, Woodforde had been proposed as a fellow to the recently founded Royal Society of London by its initial mastermind, John Wilkins, not coincidentally the former warden of Wadham College. Wilkins appreciated that the New Science needed its literary apologists and defenders, and so among the early Fellows of the Royal Society we find such major poetic names as Abraham Cowley, John Denham, Edmund Waller, and John Dryden.¹¹ Woodforde's own anticipated contribution—fortunately or unfortunately, it never got written—was to be a creation epic, versifying the first week of Creation as recorded in Genesis, but illustrated by examples from the discoveries of the Royal Society: John Milton meets Robert Boyle, as it were.¹²



Portrait of a man (tempera) by Thomas Flatman
New College Oxford, NCO 292162 © Courtesy of
the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

⁸ Z. 144; Purcell's autograph is in British Library, Add. MS 30930.

⁹ John Murdoch et al., *The English Miniature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 148–53, and the same author's article in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹⁰ For Flatman's letters to Charles Beale, see Bodleian, MS Rawl. letts. 104, fols. 108r–121v. He always calls Beale 'Master' or 'Dearest Master'. The letters are additionally interesting for the variety of different seals Flatman evidently used. Charles kept various diaries entered by hand into printed almanacs, of which a local example is Bodleian, Rawl. 8^o 572, copied into Lilly's *Merlini Anglici Ephemeris* for 1677. The Beales and Woodfordes remained keen on keeping diaries—the famous 'Parson Woodforde' of the next century is of this ilk. For the Woodforde in question here, see Lori Anne Ferrell, 'An Imperfect Diary of a Life: The 1662 Diary of Samuel Woodforde', *Yale University Library Gazette*, 63 (3/4) (1989), 137–44, based on an almanac there, especially Woodforde's comment 'Mr Flatman an old acquaintance of mine took me into his chamber at the Temple, and as we were chamber fellows so our acquaintances were the same; here I began to be a little Civil, and god made this man to be a check upon me as I was upon him' (quoted in Ferrell, 'Imperfect Diary', p. 143). Bodleian, MS Eng. misc. f. 381 is Woodforde's harrowing but fascinating diary for October 1663 to February 1665.

¹¹ Murdoch, *The English Miniature*, pp. 152–3, is keen to see Flatman's poetic style as itself influenced by the Royal Society's avowed preferences: 'Poetry for him was a sort of applied science, a mechanical invention or a kind of medicine intended to ease constrictions of communication and expression'.

¹² William Poole, *The World-Makers: Scientists of the Restoration and the Search for the Origins of the Earth* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010, pbk. 2017), p. 5.

It is probably in this context that we are to understand the election of Flatman himself to the Royal Society, in 1668, four years after Woodforde. He was proposed by the FRS and antiquary John Aubrey, renowned today as one of the creators of modern biography, but in his time better known as an experimental philosopher with a particular interest in mathematics and what we now call archaeology, especially the study of megaliths.¹³ It is notable that Flatman was the only person proposed by the otherwise extremely gregarious Aubrey.

Flatman is the earliest New College FRS. In that role, however, he was totally and utterly inactive. Although elected, he was never formally admitted, and so cannot even be shown to have attended a single meeting; it has to be said that Aubrey's proposal was a flop. Woodforde, granted, did nothing either, but he at least had plans to turn his pen to the uses of the Society, which in its early decades needed all the literary defence it could get. Moreover, Woodforde's diary for the period records how excited he was to attend this new club, and the day he was proposed by Wilkins he records that he was out drinking, for the first time, with none other than the poet Abraham Cowley, the poetic idol of both Flatman and Woodforde. The day he was finally admitted he wrote, under 16 November 1664, 'I went in the afternoone to Gresham Colledge & was then admitted a fellow of the Royall Society *quod felix faustumque sit*'.¹⁴ As for Flatman, Aubrey's motivation may partly have been to get Flatman into the same club as his friend Woodforde. As we shall see, Flatman also had some acquaintance, probably through Aubrey, with Aubrey's friend the prominent experimentalist and FRS Robert Hooke. Hooke appears to have discussed painting with Flatman: Hooke noted in his diary for 27 February 1675 that he was 'at Tom Flatmans', and later the same day 'told T Flatman of my picture box', probably a portable camera obscura.¹⁵

But fundamentally Flatman was at odds with the Royal Society's emerging objectives because Flatman, it seems, had a fourth trade—astrology. Wood claimed that Flatman was the author of several works under the pseudonym of 'Montelion': *Don Juan Lamberto, or a Comical History of the Late Times* (1661), and the 1661 and 1662 continuations of a mock-almanac, *Montelion's Almanack*, which had first appeared in 1660, by John Phillips, the nephew of John Milton.¹⁶ This may associate Flatman, too, with a satirical astrological textbook also attributed to 'Montelion'. The work is satire, but again can only have been put together by someone who understood the basic terms and practices of both astronomy and astrology.¹⁷ Few have wanted to believe Wood's claim, presumably because Montelion's satirical character seemed out of keeping with the rest of Flatman's work, and it is easy to foist the whole lot on Phillips. But on the other hand, Wood was careful to evidence his rather precise statement that Phillips was the author of the first, but only the first, *Montelion* by referring to Phillips's own *Mercurius Verax* of 1675. And when we turn to that book, we indeed see on the title page the printed ascription 'By the author of the first Montelion', a strange phrase if Phillips were indeed responsible too for the second and third. So I think Wood was correct to restrict Phillips to the first, and if he had heard that Flatman was responsible for the next two, then the burden of disproof lies on those who would doubt Wood. To this we need to add Flatman's widely accepted if (anonymous) authorship of a weekly pro-Royalist publication,

¹³ See Thomas Birch, *History of the Royal Society of London*, 4 vols (London: A. Millar, 1756–7), II, 271, 273 (meetings of 23 and 30 April 1668); Michael Hunter, *The Royal Society and its Fellows, 1660–1700: The Morphology of an Early Scientific Institution*, 2nd ed. ([Stanford in the Vale]: British Society for the History of Science, 1994), pp. 64, 184–5 (F260).

¹⁴ Bodleian, MS Eng. misc. f. 381, fol. 186r–v.

¹⁵ In passing, Flatman will have known of the description of a tented camera obscura from William Sanderson's *Graphice* (London: Robert Crofts, 1658), p. 86, as Flatman contributed two liminary poems for this work on painting. Sanderson, however, recommended the technique for 'Chorography; but to make *Landskips* hereby, were too illiberall'.

¹⁶ Perhaps the first serious mention of Flatman as a poet came from John's brother Edward, in his *Theatrum Poetarum* (London: Charles Smith, 1675), where he included Flatman as a very recent English poet, with the description: 'Th. Flatman, a Gentleman once of the Middle-Temple, equally ingenious in the two noble Faculties of Painting and Poetry, as by the several choice Pieces that have been seen of his Pourtraying and Limning, & by his Book of Poems, very lately come forth, may appear' (p. 176). Flatman was later one of the many names who subscribed to the plans for Pitt's English Atlas (Moses Pitt, *The Proposals for Printing the English Atlas* (London, 1679)).

¹⁷ See *An Introduction to Astrology, after A New but more easie way. By a Well wisber to the Mathematicks* (London: Henry Marsh, 1661). Wood gathered together this and the Montelion tracts, now Bodleian, Wood 15.

Heraclitus Ridens, of which he managed no fewer than eighty-two issues between February 1681 and August 1682.

Notwithstanding the authorship of these satirical pieces, Flatman was obviously interested in astrology as a serious activity. Elias Ashmole owned Flatman's horoscope, and Flatman's son's horoscope survives in Aubrey's papers, presumably submitted to Aubrey by the father.¹⁸ Flatman's poem 'The Review', dedicated to his spiritual mentor Archbishop Sancroft, to whom he wrote several interesting letters too, including one on the Great Fire, works through his various vocations, of which one was the 'starry Language' of astrology:

Nor here did my unbridled fancy rest,
But I must try
A pitch more high,
To read the starry Language of the East;
And with *Chaldean* Curiosity
Presum'd to solve the Riddles of the Skie . . .¹⁹

Aubrey, who proposed him to the Royal Society, was obsessed with astrology, partly as a way of explaining (away?) his own terrible decline in fortune, as he bankrupted himself and turned into an early modern aristocratic version of a couch-surfer. Aubrey collected horoscopes, and he evidently talked about such matters with Flatman. In his 'hermetick' *Miscellanies* (1696), he discussed the various images by means of which the famous astrologer William Lilly purported to have prophesied the Great Fire and the Great Plague. But he then noted that the same 'Hieroglyphicks' could be found in 'an old Parchment Manuscript Writ in the time of the Monks'—and his source was 'Mr. *Thomas Flatman* (Poet)'.²⁰ (That this is an attack on Lilly is interesting, as Lilly was a major target of 'Montelion' too.) Aubrey's astrological notes on Robert Hooke's niece Grace also mention Flatman as his source,²¹ so he at least discussed Grace with Aubrey, and may have done so with Hooke, albeit Hooke had little time for astrology or astrologers.

Now the Royal Society in its early decades, as the work of Michael Hunter has so incisively demonstrated, kept a carefully neutral stance on what we would today call supernatural matters.²² There was no 'Society' policy on, say, the existence or otherwise of witches or ghosts. This was because the experimental philosophers had to evade accusations of materialism or atheism, and robust denials of the spirit world risked confirming for the detractors of the new science that its practitioners were indeed scoffing sceptics. And yet it is also clear that the majority of those involved in this movement excluded from research especially judicial astrology, and this extended to figures such as the FRS and Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who proved very keen on the existence of ghosts and witches, but as extremely critical—academic and cleric as he was—with the idea that laymen tracking planets could thereby directly access God's providence.²³ Most were, as individuals, even more critical of the 'paranormal', to use an anachronism, especially Aubrey's friend Robert Hooke, who extended his scepticism to alchemy.²⁴ There were exceptions: the aristocratic Robert Boyle, a crucial figurehead for the early experimentalists, flirted with magic,

¹⁸ Bodleian, MS Ashmole 436, fol. 50r; MS Aubrey 23, fol. 58r; J. K. Fotheringham, 'Thomas Flatman's Horoscope', *Bodleian Quarterly Record* 7 (1932–4), 8–10.

¹⁹ 'The Review', in *Poems and Songs*, 4th ed. (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1686), p. 21.

²⁰ John Aubrey, *Miscellanies* (London: Edward Castle, 1696), p. 95.

²¹ Bodleian, MS Aubrey 23, fol. 56r ('[v]ide her scheme with Mr Flatman').

²² See, e.g., Michael Hunter, 'The Royal Society and the Decline of Magic', *Notes & Records of the Royal Society of London*, 65 (2011), 103–19.

²³ See the recent, rather prosecutorial, book by Tony McAleavy, *The Last Witch Craze: John Aubrey, the Royal Society and the Witches* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2022).

²⁴ This did not stop amiable if wrong-headed attempts by some of his correspondents to send him ghost stories for his assessment: for this see William Poole, 'Three Versions of a Restoration Ghost Story', *Notes & Queries* 65 (2018), 213–19.

albeit with his usual neurotic Christian self-interrogation; and another important figure is the tedious Elias Ashmole, founder of the Ashmolean Museum, who with his dash of charlatanism had an almost operatic interest in the occult. But Hooke's attitude was probably that tacitly shared by most, and as we turn over the pages of the minutes of early Royal Society meetings, we find no discussion of astrological topics at all. The Society simply, but pointedly, ignored the subject.²⁵

This may be why Flatman would not have fitted in. Evidence for this comes from a letter he wrote to his erstwhile proposer John Aubrey in 1670, in which he is openly critical of the Royal Society's lack of interest in judicial astrology. I append a text of this letter, as it has not hitherto been published, although scholars of Aubrey have long been aware of it. It is clear from this letter, in which Flatman provides his opinion on Aubrey's own horoscope and its gloomy portents, that he had been disappointed by the Royal Society, and even though he swipes within parentheses, it is a clear swipe nonetheless: '(whatever the RS. say to the contrary [to his astrological convictions] whose curiosity was either too little, or their capacities not comprehensive enough of so accurate a piece of learning)'. This is fascinating evidence that, two and a half years after his abortive election, Flatman still felt that the Society had snubbed a whole field of 'accurate . . . learning'; and this, I suggest, is why New College's first Fellow of the Royal Society simply ignored that now famous institution, and in turn was ignored by it.

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²⁵ Compare the earlier establishment of the Savilian Professorships at Oxford: for Henry Savile had banned his lecturers from discussing judicial astrology too.

APPENDIX: LETTER OF THOMAS FLATMAN TO JOHN AUBREY, 6 SEPTEMBER 1670

Source: Bodleian Library, MS Aubrey 12, fols. 116r–17v (116v, 117r blank).

Address: ‘These For Mr John Aubrey att Broad-Chalke. To be left at the signe of the Lambe in Katherine-street: in Salisbury. Wilts’, with seal and Bishop Mark of 6 September (117v).

[166r]

London September 6. 1670.

Worthy Sir

At my return to this towne I found your letter to me, for which I am heartily sorry I am in no manner of capacity to make you a suitable returne, all I can doe is to assure you ’twas extremely welcome, comming from a person I so entirely affect, & whose accomplishments & friendship I so exceedingly admire & value. Sir, when you throughly know me, my conversation will convince you that I am a person of no ceremony, possibly scarce enough to pass for a civill man where I am not truly acquainted; yet this I dare affirm of my self that you doe not know any body who has a greater valuation of & reverence for Ingenuity & candor then my self; finding these in so great a perfection in your self you must not blame me if I heartily begg a share in your friendship from this day forward; you can impose no conditions on me which I will not readily comply with to make so glorious a purchase. Sir I have bin rambling a month in Norffolk, & am not master of so much time since my return to look curiously into your Nativity as I wish & hope for; I have made the figure, & finde it correct, & agreeing with all the misfortunes of your Life for every of which they that ar skilld in the Science can finde in the Radix a sufficient reason (whatever the RS. say to the contrary whose curiosity was either too little, or their capacities not comprehensive enough of so accurate a piece of learning.) In generall your position is an infortunate one & the greatest part of your unhappiness has proceeded from Venus, love, & love affairs altogether heertofore ineffectuall & Saturn in the house of marriage signifies perpetuall cælibate. if you have either a mark or hurt on the foot, a mole on your brest, & another on your knees I shall be better assur’d of the truth of your Radix, & be encourag’d to proceed in my judgment. sed hæc raptim. I have not yet met the persons you mention for my acquaintance. If you use my name to Mr Kelsey²⁶ Minister of Newton Toney you’l find him worth your acquaintance. No more at present from

Your humblest servant

Thomas Flatman

²⁶ Joseph Kelsey (*d.* 1710) of Queens’ College, Cambridge (MA 1659, BD 1668), was the long-serving rector of Newton Tony from 1669 until 1710; among his other appointments, from 1695 he was also archdeacon of Salisbury (ACAD; *Victoria County History: Wiltshire*, xv, 143–53; his testament may be found in The National Archives, PRO, PROB 11/520/165).