

## JACOBEAN GOSSIP

### JOHN CHAMBERLAIN (c. 1554-1568)

**A**lthough he lives in times as turbulent and fear-ridden as those of More and Ascham, John Chamberlain passes through them as an amiable and easygoing observer, distressed, it is true, by the deaths of friends, but troubled more by the difficulties of winter travel, occasional want of company, and fear of Roman Catholic infiltration, than by any peril of imprisonment or execution. He does, however, ask Dudley Carleton to keep his thoughts secret, “and then there is no danger,” and once, late in James I’s reign, he expresses reservations about what he commits to paper, for “the times are dangerous and the world grows tender and jealous of free speech.” Four years earlier, he has dared to report, “I am sorry to hear that he [the King] grows every day more froward, and with such a kind of morosity that doth either argue a great discontent in mind, or a distemper of humours in his body, yet he is never so out of tune but the very sight of my Lord of Buckingham doth settle and quiet all.”

The great majority of Chamberlains’s surviving letters are written to his friend Dudley Carleton, most of them during the latter’s service as Ambassador in Venice and the Hague. Though they support a friendship and involve good turns, for the most part they consist of matter we would today find in a newspaper—in the local, national, foreign and business news, the society pages, and the gossip columns. Alluding to a death that Carleton may already know about, he admits, “no doubt you have heard of that before, as perhaps of all or most part of the rest, but I love to leave nothing that comes to my knowledge or remembrance.” A lifelong bachelor, despite his reference to Anna Bray as “mine ancient valentine,” Chamberlain passes his life as an observer of men and manners who enriches his information with occasional touches of moralizing and irony, but gives us only brief glimpses of the material details of his life and a few snatches of the conversations in which he takes part. His surviving correspondence with Carleton and his mostly lost correspondence with others make him seem something like a lesser Horace Walpole of the seventeenth century.

Despite their historical fascination, it has to be admitted that long passages of Chamberlains’s letters are devoted to lists of actual and hoped

for appointments; of M.P.s elected; arrivals and departures of ships; births, deaths, marriages and sicknesses; sums of money that change hands; and other matters of more interest to researchers than to general readers. But as one peruses Chamberlain's Jacobean chronicles — they also cover events in the last years of Elizabeth — one can be caught up in the suspense of the writer: will his friend Winwood become Kings James's principal secretary? will public fears avert Prince Charles's Spanish marriage? — and one becomes fond of this gossipy, companionable man while noticing his conservative bent. When a marriage takes place in a private house, he objects that "holy things should be solemnised in holy places." He opposes the application of the Earl and Countess of Essex for a divorce, "for if such a gap be once let open, it will not be so easily stopped but that infinite inconveniences will follow." To him, tobacco is "that filthy weed." He endorses James I's and the Bishop of London's censure of "the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn, and some of them stilettos or poignards." He complains "this is the age of *il mondo riverso*, wherein parents observe their children more than children the parents." Admitting that Dean John Donne's "Hymn to the Saints and to Marquis Hamilton" is "reasonable witty and well done," he adds, "yet I could wish a man of his years and place to give over versifying," and when George Abbott, Archbishop of Canterbury, accidentally shoots and kills a keeper while hunting deer, he asks, "what should a man of his place and profession be meddling with such edge-tools?"

For all his moralizing and his fear of a resurgent Catholicism, Chamberlain is a moderate and kindly man, who will spend days waiting for access to those in high places to help a friend, and who continues to visit a house he has long frequented to comfort a survivor after the master or mistress has died. He speaks harshly of Lord Chief Justice Sir John Popham, who in campaigning against prostitution "persecutes poor pretty wenches out of all pity and mercy." When a congregation of Catholics has dared to meet in a house next to the French Ambassador's and an upper floor collapses with disastrous results, he is indignant that "our people" have "grown so savage and barbarous that they refused to assist [the injured] with drink, *aqua vitae*, or any other cordials, but rather insulted upon them with taunts and jibes in their affliction" and that "as good order [had to be] taken as might be on the sudden, to repress the insolency and inhumanity of the multitude, and for relief of the distressed."

Alongside less momentous matters, Chamberlain chronicles such events as the Earl of Essex's rebellion against Queen Elizabeth, the Gunpowder Plot, the invidious granting of monopolies, and the execution of Sir Walter Raleigh. Disappointingly, however, he is oblivious to the great literature being created in his time. To him, William Shakespeare is invis-

ible, Ben Jonson is an author of court masques and verses, and the recently ordained John Donne is a man given the reversion of the deanery of Canterbury over the heads of more deserving churchmen. One reference to the death of Edmund Spenser, "our principal poet," cannot compensate for such a blind spot in this educated man, who is a friend of the great preacher Lancelot Andrewes and an acquaintance of Sir Francis Bacon, and who reads political pamphlets, history and sermons and takes great delight in John Barclay's Latin romance *Argenis*.