Chapter 6

English Contagionism and Hans Sloane’s Circle

Introduction: Sloane’s Early Years and Association with Sydenham

At the center of every medical web in the early eighteenth century was Hans Sloane (1660–1753): Fellow (1685), Secretary (1693–1713), Vice-President (1712–1727), and finally President (1727–1741) of the Royal Society; and Fellow (1687), Censor, Elect, and President (1719–1735) of the College of Physicians; the only person who has been President of both the College and the Society. Sloane also held many other offices, including Physician Extraordinary to Queen Anne, Physician-General to the army under George I, and First Physician to George II.

Botany, especially medical botany, was Sloane’s greatest scientific interest. Sloane played an important role in the introduction of cinchona into widespread medical use and was largely responsible for the fourth edition of the London Pharmacopoeia (1724), the first to contain a list of “simples.” His role in the introduction of inoculation for smallpox and his (unpublished) advice on the plague will be discussed below. Sloane’s circle was nearly coterminous with the circle of contagionists; examining his own biography and the nature of his coterie enables us to place contemporary contagionism in a specific political, religious, and scientific context: one that embraced both religious and cultural outsiders, appreciated “vulgar Baconianism,” and remained distinct from both Galenism and mechanism.

Historians have depicted Sloane as a pillar of the scientific and medical establishment: a “Court Whig” who had little personal involvement in medical reform beyond his advice on inoculation. Sloane’s social tact and skill are unquestionable, as is his high status in medicine and science. He could not have been effective if he had not excelled at climbing the social ladder. However, he also quietly served as a patron and encourager of many Dissenters,
Nonconformists, medical reformers, and contagionists. It was Sloane whose extensive correspondence, tact, and determination swayed the balance over inoculation; Sloane, who together with Richard Mead and John Arbuthnot, advised the Privy Council to maintain a contagionist plague policy; and Sloane who asked the Royal Society to write to Leeuwenhoek about investigating itch mites and smallpox pustules to see if he could find animalcules. As we shall see, Sloane supported Richard Bradley’s work over decades despite Bradley’s personal shortcomings. In addition, there were ties between Sloane and Johannes Groenevelt, one of the Oracle doctors; this gains significance from the connection that has come to light between Groenevelt and Benjamin Marten. Looking behind the scenes, we find Sloane’s influence behind many of the contagionist developments of the early eighteenth century.

Sloane’s background was unusual for a man who attained such distinction in early-eighteenth-century England; he was born an Ulster Presbyterian of Scottish descent. His maternal grandfather had been chaplain to Archbishop Laud; his father Alexander (d. 1666) had been an agent for James Hamilton, first Viscount Clandeboye of County Down and later served as a commissioner of array for Charles II. Sloane’s paternal ancestors seem to have come from Ayrshire and to have migrated to Ireland with the Hamiltons, with whom their fortunes were entwined. His stepfather, John Baillie, served the Hamiltons. A disaffected member of the Hamilton family described John Baillie as a perpetual turncoat, “first a royalist, then a Cromwellian; Presbyterian, Anabaptist, Episcopalian by turns.” Hans’s eldest brother, James Sloane, who also served the Hamiltons, was an attorney and later became MP for Killyleagh. A second brother, William, married into the Hamilton family and became a fabulously wealthy merchant, leaving a fortune valued at one hundred thousand pounds at his death in 1728. The connection with the Hamiltons may also have given Hans Sloane a link to Robert Boyle, son of the Earl of Cork. Sloane’s parents were well connected, and it is clear that he and his brothers had substantial support from some quarter or he could not have spent four years studying in London and abroad. It was surely helpful to him to have two brothers who were also prospering, and in later years he was able to help them as well.

Hans followed his brothers to the Killyleagh parish school in Lisnagh and from his earliest days loved natural history. In about 1676, at the age of 16, he contracted phthisis and spent three years confined to his home. After recovering, he went to London to study physic, chemistry, and anatomy. He stayed in a house next to the laboratory of the Apothecaries’ Hall and lodged with the surgeon Nicholas Staphorst, a relative and pupil of the Oxford chemist Peter Stahl. Staphorst, who assisted Boyle in his chemical research, taught Sloane how to prepare and use chemical medicines. From the beginning, therefore, Sloane’s medical education was unconventional for a physician and tilted toward iatrochemistry.

Sloane also studied botany at the Apothecaries’ Garden in Chelsea and established a friendship with Robert Boyle and John Ray. He was introduced to Ray by his friend Tancred Robinson. In 1683, with Robinson and