In early January 1540, the English ambassador Sir Thomas Wyatt sprung a trap for the attainted traitor and expatriate Robert Brancester. Using two English scholars in Paris to watch over his target, Wyatt brought the French provost with him to seize Brancester at his lodgings. His subsequent report to Henry VIII is a masterpiece of narrative correspondence, featuring the moment of the traitor’s capture as the centrepiece of an elaborate plot. Nearly lost – and intentionally so – in the detail of his narrative and the subsequent discussion of an interview with Emperor Charles V is the fact that Wyatt had failed in his attempt to extradite Brancester, who was later released by the French king upon a request from the emperor.

This traitor was himself a fascinating character. However, my purpose here is not to rehearse his capture, but to investigate the lives and activities of the men who are perhaps even more obscured by the narrative: William Weldon and William Swerder, the English expatriate scholars Wyatt used to watch over this traitor. Neither of them served in the peripatetic household of the embassy as it followed the emperor’s court on its journey from Spain through France and into Flanders to investigate a rebellion in the Habsburg territory of Ghent. Wyatt mentions them in the same letter to Henry with a passage of obligatory praise:

I have vsid gretly the help off on Sworder a servant off my lord of Cantorbury, a yong man well lernt and well langaged, off good sobernes and discretion, and also of one Weldon a student here and longing to Master Pate, whose industrye and true diligens according to theire duytie I must gretly comend vnto your highnes.

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William Weldon (d. 1545) and William Swerder or Sworder (d. 1575) have barely earned a mention in published studies of Henrician diplomacy and the Reformation, and indeed neither achieved the political prominence of other men associated with Wyatt’s embassy, including John Mason, Thomas Chamberlain and George Blage, all of whom were later knighted. Yet both were well connected in England, and their biographies to this point diverge little from these more prominent examples. Moreover, their activities in these years are surprisingly well preserved in the extant archive. Whether in spying for embassies, reporting continental news to patrons, translating Lorenzo Valla, sending books and other items back to England, or in educating the children of prominent English gentlemen and nobles, these two obscure figures can tell us much about the variety of roles played by servants, scholars and clerics living abroad in the early years of the English Reformation.

II

Though my focus here lies primarily on the activities of Weldon and Swerder abroad in the 1530s and 1540s, some outline of their broader lives and backgrounds will help to establish a context for these years. Among the two, Swerder’s life is more readily available, thanks to the survival of some Swerder family documents among the Loseley Papers in Surrey. He was a cousin of Sir William More of Loseley, who was an heir and executor of his will in 1575. Most of the extant papers relating to Swerder are legal documents regarding land and debts, and were probably kept by More as part of his own financial records. A skeletal life of Swerder can be extracted from these documents with some educated guesses about their contexts.

William was probably the son of Robert Swerder, goldsmith of London, and grandson of another London goldsmith, John Swerder, both of whose papers he preserved. Robert apparently died between 1530, when he last paid rent to the abbot and convent of Stratford, and 1532, when William pays a ‘fine’ (a term often associated with the transfer of lands to heirs) to the abbot of Bury for other lands in Harlow, Essex. The family’s roots lay in Essex, and most recently in Harlow, to which parish church John Swerder gave liberally in his will. William’s mother, Alice Swerder, died in Harlow in 1550, leaving lands there to her son, and it was to Harlow that William himself returned in 1565.