MISCELLANY

The Will of Martin Luther

Contributed by Richard Wall

In the pages of Local Population Studies the customary focus is, quite rightly, on the mass of the population. The indigent, the labourer, the craftsman and the farmer feature more prominently than the gentleman. Occasionally, however, it is worth giving some consideration to the famous members of society. On holiday in Budapest I came across the original will of Martin Luther in the Museum of the Lutheran Congregation. Some historians have examined the format of wills for evidence of the attitude of mind of the will-maker. Special features of Luther's will are the absence of the dedicatory clause of the soul, so often seized upon by historians as evidence of the religious beliefs of the will-maker or at least the scribe and Luther's explanation for deciding to bequeath his property to his wife rather than to his children. There is no reason, of course, why the format of Luther's will should have become a model for the wills drawn up by Englishmen in later times but as the will of the leading figure of the Reformation it does serve as an appropriate reference point when assessing the content of the wills of less notable Protestants. In particular one might ask whether later Protestants were always so generous to their wives, so ready to drop reference to the disposal of the soul or so ready to dispense with the formalities that usually accompanied the drawing up of the will.

For the actual wording I have relied on the translation undertaken by Mrs. Ilowski Hobart in Budapest rather than on the more formal translation in the collected edition of Luther's work.

Extract from the will of Martin Luther

I, Dr Martin Luther . . . declare that, to my dear and faithful wife Kate, for her own support (or as it is said for her entire support and disposal) . . . I bequeath . . . a small property at Fulsdorf . . . Secondly the Brune House to be her home, which I purchased for my Wolf in his own name . . . thirdly, the cups and jewellery, . . . .

I act thus because firstly she, . . . valued and tended to me . . . and bore me five children . . . and brought them up diligently; secondly to enable her to repay my existing debts . . . ; thirdly — and especially because I don't want that she should await help by the hands of her children; on the contrary, they should keep her in esteem and be obedient to her . . . . For I have seen and experienced often . . . , that the devil, through wicked and envious slanderers, cause incitement against this commandment, no matter how devoted they might have been before their mother became widowed. The sons and daughters marry, the daughter-in-law often resents her mother-in-law and vice versa. I firmly believe that to her own child a mother is the best guardian who won't use the inheritance to the detriment of her children, but rather to their benefit . . . . And if, after my death, she would be compelled or
have reason to make a change in her life, even then I am confident that she will treat each of our children with motherly love and faithfully share with them, as it is seemly, everything . . . whether it be possessions or anything else.

1542

NOTES

1. In the presentation of this small piece I have benefited from the advice, direct and indirect, of Margaret Spufford, Keith Wrightson and Brendon Bradshaw. Rudolf Andorka checked my transcript of Mrs. Ilowski Hobart’s translation.


3. It is possible that Luther may have felt such a dedicatory clause unnecessary as he had already written a confession of faith, sometimes known as his first will, in 1537. For this information I am indebted to Margaret Spufford.

4. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 34, *Career of the Reformer*, IV ed. Lewis W. Spitz, pp.295-7. The translation by Spitz is probably more faithful to the original. He refers, for example, to the little holding at Zulsdorf rather than a small property at Fulsdorf, the house at Bruno as a dwelling rather than the Brune house to be her home, and to ‘gossips’ rather than ‘slanderers’.