NOTES AND QUERIES

MARGARET SPITLEHOUSE, FEMALE SCRIVENER

John Craig

The author is a research student at Peterhouse, Cambridge, at present writing a Ph.D. thesis on the relationship of ecclesiastical authority and local communities: case studies from the diocese of Norwich, 1560-1610.

Margaret Spittlehouse was an unusual woman. In an age of small educational opportunities for women and an estimated rate of illiteracy pegged at 95 per cent (plus or minus 2 per cent) by David Cressy in the period 1580-1640,1 Margaret Spittlehouse was not only literate, but worked as a scribe in the market town of Bury St Edmunds throughout the last two decades of the sixteenth century. Her hand stands out in the bundles of original wills proved in the commissary's court of Bury St Edmunds as a fine example of carefully wrought secretary script, often in striking contrast to those of her fellow male scriveners such as Thomas Kyrby or Richard Collyn. Her written testaments are invariably drawn to a close with a list of witnesses that ends with the attestation 'and me Margaret Spittlehouse'.

Margaret's maiden name was Legge, which explains much about this singular woman. Although there is no surviving record in the parish registers to attest to the relationship, she must have been a daughter of another Bury scrivener, Nicholas Legge, who was active in the 1560s. She married Thomas Spittlehouse, a yeoman of Bury St Edmunds, on 21 October 1571 in the parish church of St James and was kept busy with the task of bearing and raising children.2 The Spittlehouses belonged to the parish of St James and the surviving parish register records the baptisms of no fewer than 11 children born to Margaret and Thomas between 26 February 1573 and 12 December 1596. Two of their children, their first-born Ellen and their third child John, died in infancy; Ellen at eleven months and John at one month.3 In spite of the demands of children, Margaret found both time and opportunities to employ her abilities as a part-time scrivener, writing at least thirteen wills between 1582 and 1596.4

From 1579 to 1601, there are 157 wills from the town of Bury St Edmunds proved in the Bishop's commissary's court resident in Bury. Twelve of these were written by Margaret Spittlehouse, a contribution of about 8 per cent of the total number of surviving wills for this period. Summary details of the thirteen wills found to have been written by Margaret Spittlehouse are given in Table 1. Her testators were men and women of middling status or lower: yeomen, a haberdasher, a maltster, a labourer and widows. Few of these disposed of much wealth and her wealthiest testator, the haberdasher Edmund Wither, was a Brownist who dictated a forthright statement of his spiritual beliefs.5 Her
Table 1  Summary of wills written by Margaret Spittlehouse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Testator</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Clement</td>
<td>labourer</td>
<td>19 March 1582/3</td>
<td>IC 500/1/42/146.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Revell</td>
<td>widow</td>
<td>18 March 1584/5</td>
<td>IC 500/1/43/59.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Williams</td>
<td>yeoman</td>
<td>22 March 1585/6</td>
<td>PCC 16 Brudenell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Cadge</td>
<td></td>
<td>12 July 1587</td>
<td>IC 500/1/44/62.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Taylor</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 Nov. 1587</td>
<td>IC 500/1/44/36.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmund Wither</td>
<td>haberdasher</td>
<td>7 Feb. 1588/9</td>
<td>IC 500/1/46/140.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joane Cockeyll</td>
<td>widow</td>
<td>23 April 1589</td>
<td>IC 500/1/46/84.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Carre</td>
<td>yeoman</td>
<td>22 Dec. 1589</td>
<td>IC 500/2/41/349.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Kembolde</td>
<td>maltster</td>
<td>19 May 1590</td>
<td>IC 500/2/41/370.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Gardner</td>
<td>yeoman</td>
<td>20 Dec. 1592</td>
<td>IC 500/1/49/137.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Secker</td>
<td>sherman</td>
<td>8 Sept. 1595</td>
<td>IC 500/1/53/59.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Wyflyn</td>
<td>widow</td>
<td>16 April 1596</td>
<td>IC 500/1/55/43.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: All of the will references are from Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds with the exception of the will of Henry Williams found in the Public Record Office.

testators may have been her neighbours and friends, or possibly those who, in an earlier day, would have gone to her father Nicholas for his services, or perhaps she represented a less expensive and religiously sympathetic alternative for poorer folk and nonconformists. It is intriguing to speculate but difficult to determine.

The form of her written testaments followed a definite pattern. An extract from the opening lines of John Clement's will drawn up in 1582/3 is representative of this form. She wrote,

I, John Clement thelder of Bury St Edmundes in the Counttie of Suffolk and diocese of Norwich, Laborer, beinge sicke in Body yet neverthelesse wholl of mynde and perfect remembrunce (thankes be to god) make this my present Testament and Laste will all other sett apartt aswel by writinge as nuncupative in maner and forme followinge, firste I bequeth the my Soule to almightie god (throughe feithe in Jesus Christe) my only Redemer and Savioure, and my Body to the earthe.6

With the exception of her use of parentheses, this form is unexceptional and one that Margaret habitually employed with only slight variation. The use of parentheses, which are occasionally extended to embrace 'my only Redemer and Savioure' is curious, but probably indicates little more than the presence of a qualifying and subordinate clause.

What is clear is that writing surrounded the events of Margaret's life. As Margaret Legge, she witnessed Rose Wither's will on the day before her wedding. Eighteen years later, on 22 December 1589, she appears, eight months pregnant, carefully inscribing the will of yeoman Thomas Carre.7 Christmas Eve, 1587, was partly spent in drawing up the will of carpenter John Goddard.8 The formal record leaves us with glimpses all too fleeting of the many aspects
of her literate life. Husband Thomas, styled ‘bayly’, was buried on June 15, 1600 and Margaret herself died within weeks of composing her own will on January 11, 1604. They were not wealthy. When Thomas died he spoke in general terms of ‘goods chattells plate implements of household and ready money’ which he bequeathed to Margaret. Four years later, Margaret made arrangements to pay off her debts. The Spittlehouses do not appear in the 1582 subsidy. Presumably, Margaret’s employment as a scrivener was determined more by economic realities than any other factor. The very fact of her existence, however, affords a striking instance of the less formal opportunities that existed in Bury for learning and literacy, opportunities that were available for females as well as males.

In the main, formal education in Bury St Edmunds was for males only. The language of the episcopal licences may have been pro forma, but it spoke of pueros and not filius. Edmund Atkin was licensed in 1582 ‘ad erudiendum pueros in Abedario et literis anglicanis infra villam de Buria Sancti Edmundi’ and the following year both William Bradley and John Saunders were licenced ‘ad erudiendum pueros in arte scribendi legendi calculandi et similibus’ within the town. This schooling was the first and most basic rung of an educational ladder that might proceed to the grammar school and from thence to one of the colleges at Cambridge. The statutes of the Free Grammar School of King Edward VI in Bury required that boys who were admitted to the school were able to both read and write.

The example of Margaret Spittlehouse might afford some evidence of the less formal methods of instruction that were available in Bury. Margaret was advantaged in possessing a father who worked as a scrivener. During Margaret’s childhood, the scriveners in Bury were a small but sophisticated group of men. In addition to the clergy, Bury had at least fifteen scriveners working in the town over the course of Elizabeth’s reign. Her father, Nicholas Legge, enjoyed a close association with other Bury scriveners, some of whom were strong Protestants. In 1560, Legge drew up the will of another scrivener, John Smythe, who not only requested that several funeral sermons be preached for godly edification but detailed the specific texts for the occasions. Earlier, in 1552, another scrivener, John Tylney, left ‘to Nicholas Legge the writer hereof my presidentes and bookes.’ Scriveners who owned and bequeathed books exemplify the close connections that existed between this profession and opportunities for learning. Gilbert Sergeante, a scrivener who worked in Bury in the 1560s and 1570s, was also a ‘petty teacher’, or so he styled himself when he came to write his own will in 1578. Nicholas Legge may well have been, like Gilbert Sergeante, a petty teacher, and probably taught his daughter Margaret to both read and write.

This supposition is supported by Edmund Coote’s instruction manual of 1596 entitled The English School-Master. Coote’s work consisted of a course of instruction in reading and writing English described as the ‘most easie, short and perfect order of distinct reading and true writing our English tongue’. In a well known passage, Coote explained his desire to direct his manual unto ‘such men and women of trades (as Taylors, Weavers, Shop Keepers Seamsters and such other) as have undertaken the charge of teaching others’ and how these
might ‘sit on thy shop bord, at thy loomes, or at thy needle, and never hinder thy worke, to heare thy scholers, after thou hast once made this little booke familiar to thee.’ What has been less noted is Coote’s position as Master of the grammar school in Bury St Edmunds from 1596 for one year. It is probable that Coote’s book for his ‘teaching trades-man’ originated in his observations of informal teaching that existed in Bury. Perhaps more in towns than in villages, was the existence of these informal structures of schooling the means whereby young girls might learn to read and write. But this rare instance of a girl who became a female scrivener owed as much to the determination of Margaret Spitlehouse as it did to those who taught her.

NOTES

4. Twelve wills were proved in the comissary’s court of Bury St Edmunds and one in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. It is possible that more of the PCC wills from Bury were written by Margaret Spitlehouse as I have only read twenty-four of the seventy-five wills proved between 1570 and 1604.
5. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds (hereafter SROB), IC 500/1/46/140. Wyther’s statement of faith is quite singular including the statement ‘I beleve also that god hathe his Churche which are A Company of Faytheful Belevers scattered over the face of the earthe of the whiche numbre I doo beleve that I am one, and unto these Company alone belongeth the all the Benefites of Christe and mercyes of god, this Churche is the Body of Christe who ought to be gyued by ther heed Christe, who is also our Kinge priste and proppet; whom we ought to heare and obey in all thinges;’ Wyther also left bequests to the widows Copping and Thacker whose husbands were executed at the Summer Assize of 1583 for dispersing Brownist tracts. British Library, MS Lansdowne 38, no.64, fos. 162v-163r.
6. SROB IC 500/1/42/146.
7. SROB IC 500/2/35, fo. 265.
8. SROB IC 500/2/41, fo. 349v.
9. SROB IC 500/1/45/1.
10. SROB IC 500/1/58/69. Thomas Spitlehouse signed his own name to his will.
11. SROB IC 500/1/63/107. Margaret’s will was written by Thomas Kirby, public notary and consisted of a single sheet in which she charged her executors to pay off unspecified debts owed to Stephen Ashwell of Bury St Edmunds and Roger Sturgeon of Whersted.
13. Norfolk Record Office SUN/2 (a), fos. 4r, 12r, 28v. Atkin was licenced for ‘the instruction of boys in the English language and alphabet within the town of Bury St Edmunds’ while his colleagues Bradley and Saunders were licenced for ‘the instruction of boys in the arts of writing, reading, arithmetic and the same’.
14. SROB E5/9/201.7, fo. 12. Statute 47 stated that ‘no scholer shalbe admytted into the saide schole unles he can wyte and reade competently’.
15. SROB IC 500/2/8, fo. 355. Smythe’s will, drawn up on 13 November, 1560, read ‘I will that if Mr Harte, parisse prieest of St Mary’s parisse will take paine to make a sermon in the daie of my myrrial or shortly after I will he he have 3s 4d for his labour and yf he shall thinck it good to take his theme out of the vii chapter of St John his Gospell. And further yf he will take paine to make two other sermons out of the first epistle of St Paule to the Hebrues, to have 6s 8d for his labour’.
16. SROB IC 500/1/36/216.