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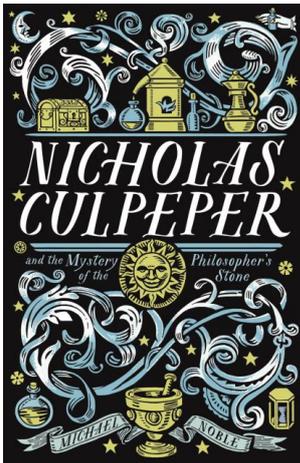
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TEXT Review

Moral magic and medieval medicine

review by Christopher Gist



Michael Noble

Nicholas Culpeper and the Mystery of the Philosopher's Stone

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“History has no libretto...” Alexander Herzen said, “...so why should an ordinary life?”¹ Isaiah Berlin asked (in an era when PPE meant philosophy, politics, and economics). This work of historical fiction by Dr Michael Noble examines real-life 17th century apothecary and alchemist Nicholas Culpeper who lived during one of England’s many turbulent times. Described by the publishers as an ‘enthraling novella’, the book is full of the recondite, the quaint, and the intriguing, but exactly how it resolves the tensions of unshaped history with the imperatives of narrative fiction is central to whether this is indeed a novel(la) or not.

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The book was published posthumously and formed part of Noble's PhD studies at the University of South Australia. Noble was prominent in intersex activism, reportedly having struggled for years with varieties of less-than-successful medical interventions for his Klinefelter's Syndrome.

Insolubility nips at the heels of the novel's protagonist, too. Apothecary Zacharia Jenkins is hired by Culpeper's uncle Sir William after Culpeper's death to search for proof of Culpeper's 'aurum potabile', a medical manifestation of the so-called 'philosopher's stone', a substance that turns base metals into more precious varieties such as silver or gold. We are told that aurum potabile 'cures all ailments and extends one's life' (126), and several dubious characters in the story claim that Culpeper included the secret to this 'drinkable gold' in his writings. If Zacharia can verify both the existence and reliability of Culpeper's work on aurum potabile, then Sir William stands to profit while, at the same time, rescue nephew Nicholas's reputation from its current uneven standing.

I write this review in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis and at the time of Melbourne's first curfew as a consequence of the increasing number of Covid-19 illnesses and deaths, a disease that is embroiling medical workers in PPE disputes and igniting the most focused hunt for a solution the world has seen. The stakes are profound.

In Noble's work the scholarship is clear, the end notes and references erudite and exhaustive, but the stakes less dramatic. This is not for want of catastrophes besetting the English around the time. Incurable disease was ubiquitous with, notably, the bubonic plague endemic throughout Culpeper's life (its various outbreaks culminating in the Great Plague of 1665). The civil wars ran from 1642 to 1651. The Little Ice Age had damaged the food economy locally and abroad and was particularly vicious in London in 1650. 1660 marked the Restoration. While Culpeper died of tuberculosis in Spitalfields in 1654, any one of these calamities could easily overtake daily life with fatal consequences.

The book begins with Culpeper's failing health which soon leads to his death. A vulture hovers in the form of a new lodger, Heydon, who has designs both on Culpeper's wife and Culpeper's works. Sir William quickly deploys the somewhat hapless Zacharia who gets three pounds for his mission to locate Culpeper's works and a stern warning from Sir William to keep their connection hidden: 'During your investigations, please practice caution and only reveal our association if absolutely necessary' (33). Eleven pages later Zacharia meets his first contact and reveals that Sir William is behind this adventure. From here, Zacharia interviews booksellers, publishers, and apothecarial profiteers, dropping Sir William's name like a buttered canon ball as he works his way to the final revelation of Nicholas Culpeper's beliefs.

The narrative's urgency, stakes, and emotional range are delimited by this interview format and by an ordering of events that starts the enquiry after Culpeper's death. That Zacharia himself is an erstwhile friend who has not seen Culpeper for over a decade reduces Zacharia's personal investment, distancing him and us from the outcomes and stakes in direct proportion to Zacharia's distance from Culpeper's life. While this is an authorial choice that allows Zacharia to be the innocent abroad who is able to ask questions that tease out the historical record and Culpeper's life and values, tightening the central relationships would have increased the immediacy.

The usual spheres of memory and emotion exploited by fiction – the loss or gaining of love, wealth, standing or liberty, or the risk to life – are things that by and large have happened off-stage or that don't figure in Noble's presentation of Culpeper's life. We skip the triangle between Heydon, Culpeper, and wife Alice, the event told in reportage. Zacharia, as a character who does not either change, examine his internal state, or journey into self-knowledge is, in a number of respects, a tour-guide. The content of Zacharia's interviews cycles around, variously, Culpeper's texts, legacy alchemical theories and their intersection with current alchemical thought, medical astrology and, in familiar millenarian terrain, how the alignment of certain of these alchemical revelations with Christian mysticism will bring forth the second coming of Christ. 'Mary Rand has recently predicted an alchemical adept will soon discover the philosopher's stone, or *aurum potable*... The Monarchists claim this discovery will herald the coming reign of Christ and bring peace to the Commonwealth' (129).

This is stuff of great moment but more an index of the boundaries of pre-enlightenment thought than a driver of narrative. The menace of the period is referenced but not enacted: we learn in reportage that 'The English Queen jailed a European alchemist who failed to turn base metals into gold' (128), but we aren't invited to live with any of the characters through these kinds of experiences. Rather, the royal edict against alchemy offers the reader a direct example of power constraining sites of knowledge-enquiry during the era – that is, it makes an historical point. In these terms, both Zacharia and Culpeper are non-transitional characters who exist in a pre-enlightenment episteme. The transitions and transitional figures have either been running another track or are on the doorstep: Francis Bacon, Renes Descartes (*Discourse on Method*, 1637), Isaac Newton (*Principia Mathematica*, 1687), John Locke (*Two Treatises of Government*, 1689), the end of the Age of Absolutes, further advances in astronomy, science and civics all causing major tectonic shifts in society. Indeed, as a transitional figure, the fascinating Newton has a foot in both camps: a profound positivist thinker who, at the same time, studied alchemy and advocated toad vomit lozenges as a cure for plague.

Apothecarianism informs much of the story and the specifics of the remedies are entertaining when we see them. For headaches, considered at the time to be caused by

‘excessive heat and dryness of the humours’, Zacharia recommends ‘water lilies or lettuce because being cool and moist, these foods would rebalance the affected humours’ (150).

Through the story and in Noble’s very informative end notes and references we learn that Culpeper himself was a non-conformist who quit his studies at Cambridge (due to romantic matters), did not complete his apprenticeship as an apothecary (financial matters), became ‘embroiled in the battles and was shot in the chest’ (Puritan and Parliamentary political passions) (44), and poison-penned Royalist supporters and the medical hegemony whose good graces could have elevated his rank. While other works on Culpeper revere him as a near rock star revolutionary, there’s no doubt that his efforts to make ‘physic’ accessible to the public by defying the College of Physicians and stripping texts of Latin was a watershed in the approach to public health education.

Scholarship and fiction, then, are intertwined in the purpose and shape of this work and the book’s scholarly antecedents are underlined by the in-text reference numbers. The arresting cover art and the title potentially appeal to the reader of popular fiction as a novel that could sit alongside the antic Harry Potter series. The question concerning which of the many levels of fiction-making the book succeeds at, or succeeds best at, hinges on the positioning of the work. As noted, the publisher markets this as an ‘enthraling novella’, however the work’s origins as historical scholarship leave the stronger impression. Here, *Nicholas Culpeper and the Mystery of the Philosopher’s Stone* successfully introduces the reader to the colourful beliefs and ambitions of 17th century alchemists in a tumultuous age.

Christopher Gist is a writer and screen content producer, previously Commissioning Editor for ABCTV and TVNZ, currently UTS PhD candidate and sessional honours supervisor for Melbourne University VCA.