

Frank Egerton – imaginary interview with Sir Thomas Bodley

FE: Don't ask me how this works but it does. Hello, Sir Thomas.

STB: Hello, Frank. It is an honour to meet you.

FE: The honour's all mine Sir Thomas. So, for the benefit of our audience, it's with great pleasure that I'm here to interview Sir Thomas Bodley, after whom the world famous Bodleian Library was named. Sir Thomas personally paid for and masterminded the library's refurbishment, the original building having been abandoned and its book collection destroyed during the English Reformation. An outstanding achievement, Sir Thomas, for which the world will always be grateful.

STB: It's kind of you to say so.

FE: I should mention that earlier I took Sir Thomas on a tour of the library as it is now. First impressions, Sir Thomas?

STB: Still recognisable – and I'm always pleased to see the extension at the western end. That happened after my death. It balances the building and provides lots of additional space. I'm intrigued by the glowing glass windows that readers look into on the desks. I'd like to find out more about those and these ebooks you mentioned. No swords, of course.

FE: No, I think they were banned quite some time ago. No coffee in this part of the building either. And definitely no smoking anywhere. But perhaps—

STB: I like to keep abreast of new things. I may not have caught up with ebooks but coffee – well that only came in fifty years after my time. And smoking – I remember Sir Walter persuading Her Royal Highness to try some. Clouds of smoke and everyone coughing. I think she saw the funny side in the end.

FE: Now, Sir Thomas, as you know, we're particularly interested in languages and European culture here – as well as books and libraries—

STB: All interconnected.

FE: Quite! Your experience of Europe came at an early age, Sir Thomas, didn't it?

STB: Yes. I was born on 2nd March 1545 and my first journey to Europe was undertaken in 1555. Dad was a merchant in Exeter who had strong Protestant faith and who'd helped pay for the suppression of a Catholic rebellion in the west country. When Queen Mary came to the throne, our family fled, initially to Frankfurt and from thence to Geneva, where Dad set up a printing business – that must have had some influence on my love of the printed word! Europe seemed then to be the heart of Protestantism – at least where we were. We were with John Knox in Frankfurt and at Geneva I studied Divinity at the feet of Calvin himself – a tireless worker and an inspiration to us all. I also studied Hebrew and Greek. And of course we were surrounded by people speaking different languages. After Mary died we returned but by then my west country childhood was but a distant memory.

FE: What memories of Europe you must have had, though.

STB: True but there was something frustrating about being so close to European culture and yet cut off from it by the discipline of the school room. I vowed to go back.

FE: But first to Oxford, the city that became synonymous with the name of Sir Thomas Bodley.

STB: No sooner did we return than I was an undergraduate at Magdalen College. Back on English soil in September 1559 and a matriculated student before the year was out. My studies at the Geneva Academy stood me in good stead. I did well and in 1564 I became a fellow of Merton College. I was its first lecturer in Greek a year later. For a time I thought my career would begin and end in Oxford. But, there's this restlessness in me – perhaps it was being uprooted at a tender age then glimpsing how huge the world is. Questing, questing – I always wanted more. I tried many different things. Languages were at the heart of things – don't get me wrong – Greek and in particular Hebrew, the study of which I and another fellow promoted energetically, opening up the knowledge contained in texts written in that language. But then there were a string of other posts alongside my academic life – college bursar, garden master, deputy public orator. What opportunities there were!

FE: And friendships.

STB: Certainly – one especially. At Oxford I got to know Sir Henry Savile – a cultured and steadfast man who would teach me so much when I started the library project at the end of the century.

FE: But before that, travel and diplomacy.

STB: Travel, yes. I'd never forgotten the vow I made when I returned in 1559. Here's what I wrote in my autobiography: "I waxed desirous to travel beyond the seas, for attaining to the knowledge of some special modern tongues, and for the increase of my experience in the managing of affairs..." I journeyed to France then to Germany and Italy, learning French, Italian and Spanish. I spent over four years in those countries. The languages fascinated me but so too did new skills I could use in the service of our nation. Under the patronage of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and Sir Francis Walsingham, I became a gentleman usher to the Queen and a member of parliament – though the latter was, sad to say, the least well executed of my duties. From 1585 until 1598, when I threw in the towel, my life was devoted to diplomacy and discrete negotiation—

FE: Spying?

STB: We never thought of it in those terms. Not like your James Bond—

FE: Bond?

STB: I told you I like to keep up with things – though there are so many.

FE: So not quite James Bond.

STB: Though I did have an impact on world events, I like to think, at least to begin with. When I was sent, alone, with letters from the Queen to Henry III of France after he had been forced to flee Paris, I was charged with "extraordinary secrecy". Though I say it myself – and I did say it in my autobiography – the outcome benefitted not only Henry but "all the Protestants in France". If only things had continued that way. There was meeting Ann, of course, and getting married, which were the greatest events of that period but then for nine years I lived in the Hague, not always with Ann beside me, endlessly trying to persuade the United Provinces first to support the Queen's war with Spain and secondly to pay her vast sums of money for the privilege. Neither side would give way. I was caught between a rock and a hard place. Talk about the woes of being a middle manager!

FE: I know just what you mean!

STB: Listen to this – the one of the Queen's secretaries writing in 1594: "...her majesty hath had just cause these many years to have expected a grateful offer from the States of some yearly portion of

the great sums by her majesty expended...” She wanted a return on her investment and they claimed they thought she’d simply been doing them a good turn. It was impossible. And then there was the intrigue at court. I couldn’t abide it any longer.

FE: In your own words, “I concluded...to set up my staff at the Library door in Oxford; being thoroughly persuaded that...I could not busy myself to better purpose than by reducing that place (which then in every part lay ruined and waste) to the public use of students.”

STB: I’d been lucky to escape with my head! And so I turned to a project that I’d had in mind for some years. When I was at Oxford as a student and young academic, there was no university library – the manuscripts that Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, had donated had all been snatched under a law passed by King Edward VI and scattered to the four winds. Imagine that. Many were said to have been reused by bookbinders to cover less “superstitious” publications. They were priceless classical texts. Because I’d been most fortunate in my marriage – Ann was a widow, whose first husband made millions at today’s prices out of buying and selling pilchards—

FE: Pilchards!

STB: Like sardines, only tastier. We didn’t have children, so it seemed only right that the money should be used for the good of future generations of students. With invaluable advice from Sir Henry, I arranged for the old building to be refurbished and persuaded my acquaintances to donate books and bought others through booksellers who travelled to Paris and Frankfurt – and even to Italy – to find them. As Sir Francis Bacon said of the library it was an “Ark to save learning from deluge”. We collected European texts mainly but also books in Arabic and Persian – one two in Chinese, though no one could read them then.

FE: People considered Chinese books to be curiosities, didn’t they, and of no real value?

STB: I didn’t – someone had taken all that trouble to write those characters, and someone else had paid them to do so. Who could know what wisdom the books contained? But I did know that one day a scholar would come to Oxford who would unlock their secrets. Soon we had scholars visiting from beyond our shores – twenty-two in the first two years. In 1610 I made an agreement with the Stationers Company, whereby they would give the library a free copy of every book they registered.

FE: Which is still in place today – though many of the copies are now given as ebooks.

STB: Ebooks again! Well, like every library, we were soon running out of space, so I had to pay for an extension. A proud moment in the library was when King James visited – I’d been knighted for my services the year before. But towards the end of the project and before the next, much bigger extension could be built, I knew that my time was near and I passed over on 29th January 1613. And here I am.

FE: And here you are indeed. And very much still here in Oxford is your library for which the whole world thanks you. Sir Thomas Bodley – library legend!

STB: Thank you for inviting me! It’s been a pleasure. Now, when we get to the green room you must tell me about these ebooks...

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Principal sources

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