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Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), ‘Will of George Smith, merchant of Bristol, 1490’ (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2011)¹

The will of George Smith is that of a rising Bristol merchant whose life was cut prematurely short. His career trajectory can be determined to some extent from the surviving Bristol ‘particular’ customs accounts of the late 1470s and 1480s, which detail the movements of ships and the goods owned by individual merchants. These details were recorded both by the ‘customers’ of the port, to register collection of the revenues due to the Crown, and by the controller, whose record was, in theory, an independent check on the veracity of the customers. George Smith (usually spelled Smethe) is not listed in the 1475 Bristol particulars, the surviving portions of which cover 30 March – 20 September, or the very brief fragment which is all that remains of the 1476 account (12–22 March). Nor is he mentioned in the 1477/8 accounts (29 September 1477 – 18 March 1478), the controlment of 1479 (17 April – 22 July), the 1479/80 account (29 September 1479 – 3 July 1480), or the 1483/4 account (23 July – 23 September 1484).² The last of these accounts covers too short a period to be good evidence; but the absence of reference in the nearly complete accounting year 1479–1480, following on from the silence of the earlier accounts, suggests that he was either still serving his apprenticeship in the 1470s, or that he was working as a merchant’s factor / agent, possibly abroad.³ From the mid-1480s, however, his name appears with increasing frequency, suggesting that he was trading and becoming established as a merchant in his own right. Nearly all his trade was with Biscay, with Smith typically exporting cloth to ‘Hispania’, which is how the north coast of Spain is normally entered in the accounts.⁴ His imports consisted primarily of woad from Spain and wine from Bordeaux.

The customers’ account for 1485/6 is in good condition, and covers the full accounting year, commencing Michaelmas (29 September) 1485.⁵ This ledger, the first in a short block of three consecutive years of extant ‘particular’ accounts, shows that, on 21 November 1485 George Smith imported 1 tun wine from Bordeaux on the *Michael* of Pasajes.⁶ Then, on 2 March 1486, he imported 5 tuns Bordeaux wine on the *Marie Petet*, and, on the same day, he imported 6.5 tuns of

¹ The National Archives (TNA:PRO), PROB11/8, fo. 292v. The following conventions were employed when transcribing the document: the line spacing, spelling, capitalization, underlining, emphasis, deletions and punctuation follow the manuscript; reconstructions of suspensions are in italics; ‘u’ and ‘v’ have been rendered according to the document rather than to modern usage. ‘ff’ and ‘ss’ have been rendered as capitals where it seems clear that this was the writer’s intention. ‘Thorn’ has been transliterated conventionally as ‘th’, but all occurrences have been footnoted. This transcription was undertaken as part of the ‘Cabot Project’ (University of Bristol, 2009-) funded by the British Academy (SG100194) and Gretchen Bauta, a private Canadian benefactor. We would like to thank Heather Dalton, Jeff Reed and Susan Snelgrove for their comments on an earlier draft of this transcription.

² TNA:PRO, E122/19/11, E122/18/39, E122/19/12, E122/19/13, E122/176/23, E122/19/15; E. M. Carus-Wilson (ed.), *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages* (Bristol Record Society Publications, Vol. VII, Bristol, 1937), pp. 218-89; TNA:PRO, E122/20/1. Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade*, pp. 203-9, published the second part of the 1475 account, E122/18/39, but twice misdates it (as 1437 and 1476). E122/176/23 is an unsorted bundle of fragmentary and undated accounts from various ports, but including several bifolia from the 1477/8 ledger, identified by Margaret Condon. A stray membrane of the 1479 controlment is mistakenly filed as TNA:PRO, E122/19/13 m. 3.

³ For discussions of the activities of factors, see: G.K. Connell-Smith, *Forerunners of Drake: A Study of English Trade with Spain in the Early Tudor period* (London, 1954), pp. 12-14, 20-24, 27-30; I[John] [B]rown, *THE MERCHANTS AVIZO very necessary for their sonnes and seruants, when they first send them beyond the seas, as to Spaine and Portingale or other countreyes* [London, 1589], ed. P. V. McGrath (Harvard, 1957); J. Vanes, (ed.), *The Ledger of John Smythe 1538-1550*, (London, 1974), pp. 12-14. For an apprentice, six to seven years would be a usual term.

⁴ The main ports of northern Spain in this period were the Basque ones, such as San Sebastian, Fuentarrabia and Bilbao. Ships sailing to southern Spain were typically listed in the Bristol particular accounts as being bound for ‘Andalusia’.

⁵ For 1485-6, the surviving record is that of the two customers, Richard Ameryk and Arthur Kemys, TNA:PRO, E122/20/5.

⁶ TNA:PRO, E122/20/5, fo. 4r.

Bordeaux wine on the *Kateryn* of San Sebastian, whose master was named as Antonio de la Tour.⁷ On 20 March 1486 Smith exported 6 woollen ‘short cloths’ and 20 Welsh strait ‘dozen’ cloths to northern Spain, again on the *Kateryn* of San Sebastian.⁸ The final reference to Smith in the 1485/6 accounts relates to the export of 16 woollen short cloths on the *Marie* of Fuenterrabia to northern Spain on 9 May 1486.⁹ The references to the *Kateryn* of San Sebastian are of particular interest, because this is the vessel that Smith mentions in his 1490 will. At the time of his death, he owned a quarter part of the ship, the rest of the vessel belonging to the master, Antonio de la Tour. Since Smith used the *Kateryn* on both the inbound and outbound journey in 1486, and went on to use her again the following year, it seems likely that his formal relationship with the ship / master pre-dated Smith’s death by some years.

The 1486/7 and 1487/8 ‘particular’ customs accounts contain a number of references to George Smith’s consignments. Although the accounts cover full years, they are both in poor condition. As a result, only about two-thirds of the merchant names can be read in the 1486/7 account, while rather less than half the names are legible in the badly damaged 1487/8 account. Entries that relate to George Smith have thus almost certainly been lost and, even when his name can be discerned; it is not always possible to determine the name of the ship, or its date of sailing. Despite this, the surviving entries suggest that Smith was maintaining, or even building up, his overseas trade during these years. On 11 November 1486 Smith imported 1 pipe woad from northern Spain, again on the *Marie de Petite*, and 6 pipes woad on the ‘*Kattelina*’, ‘Antonio de la Towre’ master, from the same region.¹⁰ On 15 December Smith imported 1.5 tuns wine on the *Myghel* (Michael) of Bristol from Bordeaux and, on 20 February 1487, 3 tuns wine and 4 cwt. fruit on the *Trenete* (Trinity) of Erreterria, coming from the Algarve.¹¹ On 21 August he exported 33 cloths on the *Marie* of Fuenterrabia to Spain.¹² Four days later, on 25 August, he dispatched 16 cloths on the *Marye Birde* (Mary Bird, also recorded in the customs accounts as ‘*Mare Bridde*’) to Spain.¹³ Details of his trade for the following customs year are preserved in two newly identified accounts, the ledger of the customers for the full year 1487/8, and its controlment by Walter Dolyng. The damage to both is severe, and the two accounts need to be read against each other.¹⁴ The accounts show a continuity in the patterns of Smith’s trade. He imported 4.25 tuns wine on the *Anne* of Chepstow, coming from Bordeaux around 8 November 1487.¹⁵ On 12 February 1488 he imported 1 tun wine from Bordeaux on the *Mare Bridde*.¹⁶ On 3 April he imported 12 tuns wine and 4 pipes woad from Bordeaux on the *Trinity* of London, which at the mid 1480s sailed regularly into port under the Bristol shipmaster Thomas Sutton.¹⁷ On 12 May he imported 7.25 tuns of wine,

⁷ TNA:PRO, E122/20/5, fos. 11r, 11v. The ledger records the ‘*Marie Petet*’ as ‘*Mare Pete*’: she is ‘*Marie Petie*’ on her exit 20 March, E122/20/5, fo. 15. Her home port was Fuenterrabia, in northern Spain: cf. TNA:PRO, E122/19/10A, fo. 6v.

⁸ TNA:PRO, E122/20/5, fos. 15r., v.

⁹ TNA:PRO, E122 20/5, 21r.

¹⁰ Given the name of the master, this is clearly the *Kateryn*, albeit here recorded by a more distinctively Spanish, or indeed Basque, form of the name: TNA:PRO, E122/20/7, ms. 3d, 4r. The account for 1486/7 is that of the controller rather than the customers, whose ledger does not survive for this year.

¹¹ TNA:PRO, E122/20/7, ms. 6r, 10r, d.

¹² TNA:PRO, E122/20/7, m. 21r.

¹³ TNA:PRO, E122/20/7, m. 22r. For the variants in the name of both the ship and her erstwhile owner, William Bird/Bridde (d.1484), see particularly Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade*, pp. 155-6, 227, 245, 274.

¹⁴ The identification of these two accounts, TNA:PRO, E122/161/27 and E122/21/16, is an outcome of the Cabot Project 2009-. The controlment consists of loose fragments only, in some disorder, and including strays from an unrelated account. We are grateful to Stephen Harwood (TNA) for making the customers’ ledger available for consultation.

¹⁵ TNA:PRO, E122/161/27, fo. 5v; E122/21/16, m.3, E101/83/2, fo. 12. Recorded as four tuns and a hogshead.

¹⁶ TNA:PRO, E122/161/27, fo. 16v.

¹⁷ TNA:PRO, E122/161/27, fo. 27r; E122/21/16, m. 12 (fragment), m. 14.

and 1 ton of rosin, on the *Margaret*, coming from Bordeaux.¹⁸ Around late May he imported 10 pipes woad on an unidentifiable ship, probably coming from Bordeaux.¹⁹ In the latter part of June he exported 44 woollen 'short cloths' to northern Spain, again on an unidentifiable ship.²⁰ Smith was thus regularly trading in three of the main commodities (woollen cloth, woad and wine) characterising Bristol's import/export trades with Biscay. No more 'particular' accounts survive until 1492, by which time Smith was dead.²¹

As with a number of other wills of Bristol's merchant class, George Smith's provides evidence of ship ownership. In his case, however, the vessel was from San Sebastian in Spain with three-quarters of the *Kateryn* belonging to her Spanish master, Antonio de la Tour.²² For a Bristol merchant to own a ship, or part of a ship, that was registered to a foreign port was unusual. There is a parallel, however, in the case of the *Sezar* (or Caesar) of San Sebastian, which was owned outright by Robert Tyndall of Bristol in 1558.²³ This had almost certainly come about because Robert had a long and close association with San Sebastian, having been a 'resident apprentice' in the town as early as 1539 and still being listed as a 'vezino' (resident) of the port in a Spanish notarial document of 1558.²⁴ The most likely explanation for George Smith's part-ownership of a San Sebastian ship is that he too had a close association with the port. As with Robert Tyndall, it may well be that Smith had lived in San Sebastian for some years, acting as an agent for one or more Bristol merchants, buying and selling goods on their behalf. An intimate knowledge of San Sebastian and the Biscayan trade, which was the principal locus of Smith's activities, would certainly have facilitated his business once he returned to Bristol, as would his possession of part of a substantial ship. For the *Kateryn* of San Sebastian was a ship of at least 130 tons burden, which would have made her one of the larger vessels plying the shipping lanes between England and Biscay.²⁵

While Smyth does not seem to have joined the upper echelons of Bristol's merchant establishment by the time of his death, he had clearly developed close connections to it. The most obvious sign of this is his betrothal, discussed below, to the daughter of John Foster, who was a former mayor of Bristol (1482) and one of its richest merchants.²⁶ Beyond this, Smith's will indicates that his widowed mother, 'Jonet', had married a 'Vaughan'. This is significant because the 'Vaughan's were Bristol's leading merchant family during the 1480s-90s, with at least five of

¹⁸ TNA:PRO, E122/21/16, unnumbered fragment: for the date cf. E122/161/27, fo. 31v (*Katherine* of Waterford). All evidence of the *Margaret's* entry has been lost from the ledger.

¹⁹ TNA:PRO, E122/161/27, fo. 34v.

²⁰ TNA:PRO, E122/161/27, fos. 38r. The names of several of the large ships entering or leaving the port in the latter part of the accounting year have been lost in the damage of the document.

²¹ The only surviving Bristol account for the period 1488-1503 is a complete ledger, which covers the year 1492/3: TNA:PRO, E122/20/9.

²² While Antonio de la Tour is indicated in the customs accounts to be from 'Hispania' (Spain), he is also indicated to have status in England as if he were a denizen for customs purposes, which meant that he would have paid lower customs duties than an 'alien' merchant. This differential privilege applied generally to merchants of Castile and Guipúscoa under trading agreements made by Edward IV and honoured by Henry VII: W. R. Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade in the later Middle Ages* (Manchester, 1978), pp. 53-61; TNA:PRO, E159/262, Brevia Directa, Eas. 1 Hen. VII, rot. 2.

²³ J. Vanes, (ed.), *Documents Illustrating the Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Sixteenth Century* (Bristol Record Society Publications, Vol. XXXI, Kendal, 1979), pp. 122-5.

²⁴ J. Vanes, (ed.), *The Ledger of John Smythe 1538-1550* (London, 1974), pp. 12-14.

²⁵ The '*Kateryn* of Seynt Sebastian', Antonio de la Tour, master, entered Bristol from Bordeaux on 2 March 1486 carrying 94 tuns wine, 40 pipes (20 tons) woad, 5 tons iron, 1.35 tons rosin, 1 tun honey and 16,000 combs: TNA:PRO, E122/20/5, fos. 11-11v. The total lading was thus 121.35 tons (excluding the combs). If allowance is made for the loss of about ten per cent of the wine cargo to ullage (leakage) and for the two tuns that were taken to prise before customs were taken, the ship was likely to have been of at least 130 tons burden. For the prise taken from the *Kateryn*, TNA:PRO, E101/83/2 fo. 2.

²⁶ Bristol Record Office, (BRO), 04720, under date; E. T. Jones (ed.), 'Will of John Foster, merchant of Bristol, 6 August 1492' (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2009) <<http://hdl.handle.net/1983/1182>>.

them (Henry, Richard, Thomas and two Johns), serving as mayor, sheriff or bailiff in the period 1484-1501.²⁷ It seems likely that George's widowed mother had married Henry Vaughan (d.1499), who served as sheriff in 1478 and mayor in 1484 and 1494. This seems probable because Henry Vaughan's will indicates that his wife was called 'Johanne' which would be the Latin form of Janet/Jonet.²⁸

That Smith's family connections had increased his influence in Bristol, is, finally, suggested by a list of names found in the first two pages of the rough notebook that records proceedings in Bristol's Tolzey and Staple Courts 1489-c.1495.²⁹ The early pages of this book are a morass of jottings and memoranda, some written in palimpsest. But the second page includes a list of names of some of the prominent merchants of the city, including William Spenser, Henry, John and Richard Vaughan, David Leyson and John Esterfeld. Among these names is George Smith. The most likely explanation for the list is that it was a draft panel for a jury. Smith's inclusion, however, suggests that by the late 1480s or early 1490s he was being employed in an official capacity alongside Bristol's leading men.

The most interesting bequest in George Smith's will is that to Agnes Foster, the woman 'that should have been my wife'. To her, George left his best bed, with coverlet and hangings, some napery and four pipes (two tons) of woad. The gift of the woad confirms that Smith was still engaged in Biscayan trade in 1490, with the consignment in question being one that had been purchased by him, presumably via a factor, but which had yet to arrive in Bristol. Agnes was to pay the freight and customs, but even at customs valuations, which tended to be conservative, the woad would have been worth £20. From the highly time-specific nature of this bequest, it can be inferred that Smith was dying when he wrote his will; probate being granted two months later. The bequest of the bed implies that George and Agnes were formally betrothed, since a gift of a bed to an unrelated single woman would have been scandalous in any other context. Agnes Foster has proved to be a person of interest to those engaged in the task of contextualising John Cabot and his voyages within the commercial environment of Bristol. She was the only daughter of the wealthy Bristol merchant, John Foster. Within twenty months of George Smith's death, Agnes had married the Bristol merchant William Weston, who was an employee, or former employee, of her father.³⁰ William Weston appears to have been associated with the Venetian explorer John Cabot (Zuan Chabotto) by at least January 1498, and probably earlier, with Weston then going on to lead his own expedition to North America in c.1499. As has been already discussed in Jones' 2010 article and will be discussed further in a forthcoming article by Condon and Jones, the marriage of Agnes Foster to William Weston, coupled with John Foster's evident dissatisfaction with his son-in-law, were to influence the course of the events surrounding the Bristol discovery voyages.³¹ George Smith's untimely death in the winter of 1490/1 thus had consequences that none could have envisaged at the time.

²⁷ These were Henry Vaughan (sheriff, 1478, mayor 1484, 1494), John Vaughan 1, d.1492 (bailiff 1484), John Vaughan 2 (bailiff 1499, mayor 1508), Richard Vaughan (bailiff, 1491, sheriff, 1498, mayor 1501), and Thomas Vaughan (bailiff 1497): BRO, 04720, under date.

²⁸ TNA:PRO, PROB11/11 fos. 308r, v. The other common contemporary English variants of 'Johanna' would be 'Joan'. The wife of John Vaughan 1, d. 1492, was Katherine: TNA:PRO, PROB11/9 fo. 65. Richard Vaughan's (d.1506) two wives, who had pre-deceased him, were called Margery and Cecily: TNA:PRO, PROB11/15 fos. 225-6. Thomas Vaughan (d. 1508) was married but his wife's name is not recorded in his will. It seems unlikely, however, that Jonet could have been Thomas' wife, given that Jonet must have been in her late forties or fifties in 1490, while Thomas' wife had borne him a son who was still a minor in 1508: TNA:PRO, PROB11/16 fo. 99. The marital status and wife, if any, of Henry's other brother, Maurice, is unknown.

²⁹ BRO, 01854, p. 2.

³⁰ Jones, 'Will of John Foster'.

³¹ Evan T. Jones, 'Henry VII and the Bristol expeditions to North America: the Condon documents', *Historical Research*, 83 (2010), pp. 447-52; Evan T. Jones and Margaret M. Condon, 'William Weston and the discovery of North America' (forthcoming, 2012).

Transcription of the Will

In dei nomine. Amen³² the vth day of the moneth of Novembre and the yere of our lord m^lcccc xcth³³ I Joorge Smeth of the town of Bristow marchaunt being in hole and *perfith*³⁴ mynde thanke be unto god make and ordeigne this my testament in this wise First I bequeth my soule to allmyghty god to his blissid moder oure Lady saint Mary and to all the holy company in hevine And my body to be buriede in the *parissh* church of saint Stephyn in Bristow Item I bequeth to the Cathedrall church of Worcestre xijd³⁵ Item I bequeth to the vicar of saint leonardes my goostly fader³⁶ for thithes³⁷ forgotten vj s viijd Item I bequeth to Agnes Foster that shuld haue ben my wif³⁸ my best Fetherbedde my best Coverlitt with all the hanging to the same belonging³⁹ Also iiij of my best Bordclothes⁴⁰ a dosen of my best napkins and iiij pipes of woode⁴¹ when god shall sende it in suertee⁴² from be yonde the See⁴³ And the said Agnes Foster to be chargid at the receyving of the said iiij pipes woode · with frette custome and all *other*⁴⁴ Dewtees⁴⁵ to the said woode belonging here at Bristow Also where as I am owner of a quarter of a shipe I callede the kateryn of saint Sebastians⁴⁶ Antongo delatour⁴⁷ under god *master* and owner of the *other*⁴⁸ iij quarters The which said quarter to me belonging of that said shippe I geue and bequeth unto my Cousyn Gibon Cogan with takeling and all *other*⁴⁹ aparell to the same belonging⁵⁰ The Residue of all my goodes nott bequeth my dettes and funerall expenses therof deductede⁵¹ I geue and bequeth unto my sustre⁵² Agnes Brown whom I ordeigne and make my sole executrice And my moder Jonet Vaughan to be as ouerseer Wittenesses herof maister William Crosse my gostly fader Nicholas Daske Thomas Calmady and diuerse other yevon⁵³ the day and yere aboue writen ~

[*Probate (in Latin) in common form, granted 10 February 1491, Agnes Brown being admitted as executrix*]

³² *In dei nomine. Amen*: In the name of God. Amen.

³³ 5 November 1490.

³⁴ *perfith*: perfect.

³⁵ Mother church of the diocese, which included the whole of Bristol north of the river Avon.

³⁶ ‘goostly fader’: ghostly father – i.e. confessor.

³⁷ ‘thithes’: the tithes.

³⁸ ‘shuld haue ben my wif’: should have been my wife. In this sense the meaning is presumably ‘was to have been my wife’, or ‘would have been my wife’, had the testator lived.

³⁹ The bequest thus includes Smith’s best feather bed, the coverlet and the hangings surrounding the bed.

⁴⁰ ‘bordclothes’: board-cloths – i.e. table cloths.

⁴¹ ‘woode’: woad. An important dye-stuff. A pipe is a cask, holding 0.5 tuns.

⁴² ‘suertee’: surety – i.e. safety.

⁴³ Written ‘ssee’.

⁴⁴ the ‘th’ written as a thorn, followed by the ‘er’ abbreviation.

⁴⁵ That is, Agnes was to pay the freight and the customs dues. The latter, on four pipes of woad, would have been 20s (with the woad valued at £20): cf. by way of comparison for valuations TNA:PRO, E122/20/5, fos. 3v, 4, 11, 11v (etc) for woad bought into Bristol from Bordeaux 1485-1486. The entry at fos 11-11v includes woad brought in on the *Kateryn*, the ship mentioned in Smith’s will: she carried six tuns and a pipe of wine for Smith himself.

⁴⁶ ‘saint Sebastians’: San Sebastian in Spain, 43°19’04" N 1°58’55" W. The Basque region of northern Spain was one of Bristol’s principal trading destinations. It also possessed a significant marine.

⁴⁷ ‘Antongo delatour’: Antonio de la tour – indicated here to be both shipmaster and the owner of the rest of the ship.

⁴⁸ the ‘th’ written as a thorn, followed by the ‘er’ abbreviation.

⁴⁹ the ‘th’ written as a thorn, followed by the ‘er’ abbreviation.

⁵⁰ ‘takeling and all other aparell to the same belonging’ – i.e. to include all tackle and equipment.

⁵¹ ‘deductede’: deducted. In other words, Smith’s sister was to pay his debts and funeral expenses from the residue of the estate left to her.

⁵² ‘sustre’: sister.

⁵³ ‘yevon’: given.

Photograph of the will: reproduced by permission of The National Archives

In dei nomine Amen the 1th day of the month of November and the year of our lord 1555
 George Smith of the town of Heston in the county of Middlesex being in hole and sound memory
 be unto god make and ordaine that my testament in that behalf first I bequeeth my soule to
 allmyghty god to his blessed moder our Lady saint Mary and to all the holy company in
 heven and my body to be buried in the churche of saint Eustace in the paroch of Heston
 I bequeeth to the Cathedral church of Worcester my house I bequeeth to the vicar of saint
 Leonard my costly fader for what forgotten by a benefactor I bequeeth to a good offer
 that shalbe done by my wyf my best ffetherbedde my best Coultitt with all the hangings
 to the same belonging also my of my best ffetherbedde a dosen of my best mynter and my
 pyper of wood when god shall sende it in further fauour he sende the see and the said agnes
 offer be charged at the receipt of the said my pyper wood with full custome and all o^r
 duties to the said wood belonging here at Heston also where at. A cow owner of a quart
 of a shope I collate the buttry of saint Sebastian. Amonge relation under god or and
 and of the of a quartet The which said quartet to me belonging of that said shope I give
 and bequeeth unto my Cousyn Sibon Coyne with tabling and all o^r apperell to the same
 belonging The residue of all my goodes nott bequeeth my dett and small expens therof do
 ducted I give and bequeeth unto my suster agnes. Whom I ordaine and make
 my sole executour and my moder Janet Vynghing to be at ouer writtress hereof master
 William Cross my costly fader Nicholus Dastle Thomas Calhedy and divers other
 upon the day and year above written

Probitum fuit super scriptum testamentum coram domino apud Lambeth in die
 mensis februarii Anno domini millesimo quingentesimo quinto Johanne Whitbyall procuratore
 per de approbatione per Et commissa fuit administratio omni bonorum et debitorum dicti defuncti per
 sententiam de In personam de procuratoribus per de bene per de de pleno iuramento per et festum
 Pasche proximo per Vernon de pleno iuramento per et de sancta dei evangelica iuramentum per