

Historical Note

Vincent Ketelaer did *not* describe tropical or non-tropical sprue or coeliac disease in his book *De Aphthis Nostratibus seu Belgarum sprouw*

J S Logan

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It has been said repeatedly^{1, 2, 3} but erroneously that Vincent Ketelaer described tropical or non-tropical sprue in his book *De Aphthis Nostratibus*.⁴ The error arises because it has not been understood that the Dutch word *sprouw*, as Ketelaer used it, meant and meant only stomatitis. In particular, as can be seen from Ketelaer's description, it meant mainly thrush, the common monilial infection of the mouth. Although for the most part his description is that of thrush, he may also have included some exudative inflammations of the fauces, perhaps diphtheria, glandular fever or Vincent's angina. Ketelaer expressly says that his aphthae are not the same as those of Hippocrates which were ulcerated and inflamed and occurred elsewhere as well as in the mouth. That thrush was one kind of aphthae is confirmed by the entry under that term in the Medical Lexicon of S Blancardius⁵ (Blankaart) which describes "the whiteness as if the whole mouth had been sprinkled with white flour". In English, sprue continued with some authors to mean oral thrush, until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Doctor John McCaw,⁶ the Belfast paediatrician, in his book *Aids to the Diseases of Children*, published in 1899, gives sprue as a synonym for oral thrush. This usage has died out in the English language and sprue is now only used of the tropical or non-tropical malabsorbtive disease.

The Belfast Medical Library possesses a copy of the 1715 edition of Ketelaer's book, and also a typescript copy of Doctor Hugh Calwell's translation of it into English. Scrutiny of these two texts makes it clear that in this edition there is no description of tropical or non-tropical malabsorbtion, nor any of coeliac disease. Sheehy's¹ reference is to the 1672 edition. Bartholomew's² is to the 1715 edition. Manson-Bahr³ correctly says that "an aphthous stomatitis, which is frequently seen in badly nourished children and women, and which was popularly known in Holland as *sprouw*, has no apparent relation to tropical sprue". Curiously, inconsistently, and wrongly, on the same page he asserts that "the first accurate description (of tropical sprue) is undoubtedly that given by Vincent Ketelaer in 1669". Curiously again the reference he gives is to the edition of 1672. Ketelaer was born in Vlissingen in 1627 and died in Zierikzee in 1679.⁷ He began his medical studies at Utrecht and Leiden in 1647. His studies included literary subjects and he had some reputation in Latin poetry. He began practice as town

Dr John Logan, Honorary Archivist, King Edward Building, Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast BT12 6BA.

doctor in Zierikzee, and in 1664, presumably because of his classical accomplishments, he became rector of the Latin school in that place. But one must say that the Latin of his book is neo-Latin of the 17th century and is not Ciceronian. He published his book *De Aphthis Nostratibus* in 1669, and there was a reprint, possibly a new edition, in 1672. These were the only editions published in Ketelaer's lifetime. I have not been able to consult them because the British Library will not lend books dated earlier than 1801. It is a presumption, but perhaps a reasonable one, that the printers of the 1715 edition, the first of the Latin text after Ketelaer's death, did not excise a description of tropical or other malabsorption. A list of all known editions of *De Aphthis* is included in Doctor Hugh Calwell's translation. His biographical details⁷ do not record his ever having travelled outside Holland. Moreover "*nostratibus*" means specifically "of our country". He married in 1657 and had four children.

It is beyond the purpose of this note to trace in detail the transfer of the popular Dutch name for stomatitis, sprouw, to the tropical malabsorptive disease now known as sprue. The sore mouth of tropical malnutrition is sometimes so very sore as to be the most distressing symptom. It would not be difficult for Dutch physicians in their East Indies to transfer their popular name for a sore mouth to a disease they eventually recognised as a major cause of it. That one old name for sprue was *aphthae tropicae* seems to show an evolution of thought and nomenclature from 17th century Holland through the practice of the Dutch East Indies to modern tropical medicine.

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