

Richard Willes: Sixteenth-Century Religious Renegade and Concrete Poet

One of the quirkier figures in the literary history not only of the college but of the Elizabethan period as a whole is the poet, geographer, and religious renegade Richard Willes (1546-1579?). Willes was a Wykehamist who, like so many others of his generation, fled the country at the Reformation, and set about re-establishing himself as a continental writer and academic. But the remarkable fact about Willes is that, having gone as far as entering the Jesuit novitiate, he apostasized, fled back to England, conformed to the Elizabethan regime, published a book of poems, and settled down to the private study of geography under the patronage of a firmly protestant family, that of the Earl of Bedford. His is an extraordinary trajectory—and his poems are no less unusual, including the first extensive examples in England (although written mainly in Latin) of what would today be called concrete poetry.

Richard Willes (often 'Wills') was born in 1546, 'one of several sons of a yeoman, possibly Catholic, family of Pulham, Dorset'.¹

containing his own (chiefly Latin, but with some macaronic, vernacular, and even hieroglyphic) pattern-poems and other types of verbal ingenuity; his *De re poetica*, addressed to the Warden, Fellows, and schoolboys of Winchester College; extensive critical 'scholia' on his intentionally difficult pattern-poems; and finally his schoolmaster Johnson's verses on Wykeham, as well on the various wardens and schoolmasters of New College. The whole assemblage, published 'Ex Bibliotheca Totelliana' (i.e. from the atelier of the major literary publisher Richard Tottell) was dedicated to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, as was Dethick's *Oratio in laudem poëseos* of the following year. Willes was obviously trying to make his peace with the Elizabethan regime, and hoped that such a gesture would prove an adequate statement of rediscovered loyalty. It must have been successful, for Willes was reaccepted into the English church, incorporated at both universities, and in later life became a significant geographical writer, the role for which he is most commonly remembered. His publications in this field were *The History of Travayle* (1577), and material from this collection, itself an expanded version of Richard Eden's *Decades of the Newe Worlde* (1555), fed into the greatest of all Elizabethan travel compendia, Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589; 1598-1600). It is not known for sure when Willes died, but he may have been a man of this name who married in 1575 and/or another of the same name who was buried in 1579. He was mentioned with respect by several of the foremost literary writers of the age, both for his poetry and for his work as a geographer.

Willes's *Poematum liber* is not especially common. New College alas does not own a copy.⁸ Wood's copy in the Bodleian shows how the book might be 'placed' by a contemporary reader:

forms which have survived in the *Greek Anthology*, and four of these five have Greek subtitles. If we turn to Willis' scholia which conclude his volume, we may learn both that Willis was a scholar who valued method and diligence, and that his knowledge of the shaped verses came, for the most part, from editions of Greek authors by Joseph Scaliger and Jean Crispin.¹²

He produced both 'altar' and 'wings' poems, and may be considered a potential prompt for the two most famous pattern poems in English, George Herbert's 'Altar' and 'Easter Wings', if Herbert and Willes did not simply encounter them directly in the same source, be it in Scaliger or in the Greek Anthology itself.