

SUMMARY: In this letter to Lord Burghley dated 30 April 1573, Roger, Lord North, recounts a tale of intrigue involving a servant of Oxford's named Booth who he says had fled Oxford's service before Easter, disguised himself, and taken up temporary residence in an alehouse in Chesterton near Cambridge. On Easter day another servant of Oxford's named Thimbleby came to Booth, and they travelled together to Cambridge, where Lord North claims that Booth met with Master Bird of Benet College, Cambridge, and told Bird that he was in hiding because Lord Burghley sought to have him arrested, and that he had left Oxford's service because unnamed persons were planning to poison him. Lord North states that on 14 April Booth fled elsewhere, assisted by Thimbleby, who Lord North claims was acting at Oxford's direction. Lord North had no certain information of Booth's present whereabouts, although he suspected he was either at Colne Park or with a brother-in-law in Norfolk. In the absence of further information, the background to Booth's story remains obscure, but the fact that Lord Burghley was apparently attempting to have Oxford's servant Booth arrested while Oxford was attempting to assist Booth to escape suggests friction between the two men at this time. It is also worth keeping in mind, when considering the background to this tale of poison and intrigue, that Lord North's letter makes it clear that his intervention was entirely unsolicited. As a close ally of Oxford's enemy, Leicester, Lord North may have been trying to exacerbate friction between Oxford and Lord Burghley by claiming that Oxford was trying to help Booth escape to Spain. Lord North's letter is also of interest for his tale-bearing hearsay report of Booth's alleged comments that Oxford's young wife, Anne Cecil, Lord Burghley's daughter, was 'a child', and that Oxford 'could not like' her, and for his malicious insinuation that the poison mentioned by Booth had been purchased, not to poison Booth, but to poison Anne Cecil.

My singular good Lord, I am more ready than able to do you pleasure, but when I may hear of anything that concerneth you, my ears shall be yours. Sir, I have heard how you do seek to have one Booth, sometime servant to my Lord of Oxford, for what purpose I know not. What I have learned, your Lordship shall hear. This Booth did lie at an alehouse in Chesterton by Cambridge before Easter [=22 March] and after, disguised in a shepherd's cloak, an old hat, and an ill pair of hose. He called himself Sturdy. This Booth repaired to one Bird, a Master of Art in Benet College, with whom I have spoken, and what I have learned of him followeth:

Speeches passed by Booth to Master Bird of Benet College

1. Booth, being asked why he went so disguised, and lay in such an alehouse, saith, My Lord Treasurer doth lay wait for me in every place, and I dare not be seen.
2. It was time for me to go from my Lord of Oxford for, saith he, there was poison bought to poison me withal.

3. He told Bird that my Lord could not like my Lady, adding words rather of his lewdness than dishonourable to my Lady, saying she was a child.

Bird is able to say more, but he feareth my Lord of Oxford and some displeasure to follow.

Sir, this man went away the 14 of April from our shire, and where he is I know not, but you may learn. My Lord of Oxford hath a man called Thimbleby, who came to Chesterton by Cambridge on Easter day unto Booth. From thence they went to Cambridge. If your Lordship can speak with Thimbleby, he can tell your Lordship what is become of him, for he hath conveyed him away. When Thimbleby came to him he said, Booth, be of good cheer; my Lord, our master, will convey thee over into Spain presently.

My good Lord, I know not whether I trouble you, which if I do, let my love procure my pardon. But if there be any matter in it, I will assure your Lordship, upon knowledge from you, if ever he put foot in his old haunt I will have him. Or if you will have him, it is certain that he is gone either to Colne Park in Essex, where he lurketh, or into Norfolk to a brother-in-law's house that he hath whom I know not. All the service that I can do your Lordship in anything command me, and if there be any matter in this letter to serve any turn, it shall be abidden by. I like not that poison that was bought. I pray God it was not for a better creature than for himself, once he hath confessed it. Thus I commit your Lordship to God and myself to your Lordship's devotion, remaining ready to all the service you can employ me, beseeching your good Lordship to let Bird to as little seen in it as may be, but he shall not go from anything, and perhap your Lordship may learn more than I. I humbly commend me.

Kirtling, 30 April

Your Lordship's most bound,

R. North

Addressed:

To the right honourable my singular good Lord, the Lord Burghley, Lord Treasurer of England.

Endorsed:

30 April 1573

Lord North/ Booth

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