



A FOREIGN VISITOR'S ACCOUNT OF THE GREAT FIRE OF 1666: A POSTSCRIPT

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SUMMARY

An extract copied in about 1900 from the autobiography of Francisco de Rapicani, describing his experiences in London at the time of the Great Fire, was published in the Transactions in 1960, in both the original German and an English translation. Following the subsequent discovery of Rapicani's original manuscript, and its publication in Germany, a corrected translation of the relevant section is now printed here.

In 1960 *Transactions* published a note I had prepared under the title 'A foreign visitor's account of the Great Fire of 1666'. Besides a brief introduction it consisted of the German text, with English translation, of an extract from the autobiography of Francisco de Rapicani, who at the time of the Fire happened to be in London in the retinue of Count Jöran Fleming and Peter Julius Coyet, Ambassadors Extraordinary of the king of Sweden. This extract had been copied, probably in about 1900, by Dr Paul Hillmann, whose wife was a descendant of Rapicani; in 1958 the extract was given to the British Museum by Dr H T Güssow of Victoria, British Columbia (Canada), and it remains in the British Library as Additional MS 49977L. The extract states that it is taken from the original autograph manuscript, but we should bear in mind the possibility that these words were taken verbatim from an earlier copy of this part of the text and that it was not Dr Hillmann himself who saw what had been written in Rapicani's hand.

Rapicani did not venture into the burning

City; he witnessed the Fire from the relative safety of Covent Garden and Westminster. However, his account of the turmoil of those days is vivid and detailed, and other sources confirm its accuracy at several points. The transcription of the extract was clearly not perfect – one word entirely defeated the copyist and had to be entered as illegible – but the whereabouts of the original autograph manuscript was not known. As I wrote in 1960,

It is likely ... that the original manuscript, if it survives at all, is still in private ownership in Germany; and since the account of the Fire is of some historical interest it seems worth publishing the extract now, even though the original autobiography may eventually provide a better text and more information about the author's career and his circumstances at the time of the Fire. (Harvey 1960, 76)

Amazingly, this duly came to pass. In preparing the note I had been given kindly assistance by the Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv at Hanover. Dr Elfriede Bachmann knew of my enquiries at the time and saw the resulting article. In 1987 she was shown a typescript copy of the entire autobiography, which had on it a note that the original manuscript belonged to 'die Frau Oberstin Becker', that is, the wife of Colonel Becker. Dr Bachmann succeeded in identifying him as a descendant of Rapicani, Wilhelm Theodor Becker, who died in 1885 but whose



wife survived until 1910. She made enquiries of their descendants, and with success: the manuscript came to light in the possession of Dr Enno Boettcher, who generously made it available for examination and transcription (Bachmann 1995, 151–2).

Meanwhile Dr Bachmann had acquired further familiarity with Rapicani and his family by work on the early 17th-century house at Kirchtimke, a village between Bremen and Hamburg, where Rapicani spent his last years (he died in 1721) and which continued in his family's possession until it was demolished in 1960 (Bachmann 1995, 152). She was thus peculiarly well qualified to edit his autobiography, and in 1995 she published the full text, some 65 printed pages, in *Rotenburger Schriften*, the journal of the Heimatbund Rotenburg/Wümme, the area's cultural society. Dr Bachmann supplied a short, but highly informative, introduction, explaining how the manuscript came to light and giving an account of Rapicani's life (*ibid.*, 151–8), and she also provided many annotations to the text, elucidating the many foreign or obscure words (Latin, French, Low German) and explaining Rapicani's abbreviations and references.

Anyone wishing to see Rapicani's account of the Fire in the context of his full autobiography must refer to Dr Bachmann's detailed and scholarly edition. Dr Hillmann's extract is broadly correct, but it is clear that either he or the possible earlier transcriber did not copy with meticulous accuracy, for the extract differs from the original manuscript in many details of spelling. Dr Bachmann reproduces the first page of Rapicani's manuscript (Bachmann 1995, 160); it is written in a clear, regular hand, but Dr Hillmann or earlier transcriber obviously had difficulty with the late 17th-century script for, besides what could not be read at all, many other words were misread, a few quite seriously. These are noted here, along with notes of obscure or unusual words that Dr Bachmann has elucidated; they all correct the narrative and in some places make better sense of what Rapicani wrote. As I had conjectured, Dr Hillmann's use of Latin instead of German script for many proper nouns corresponds to Rapicani's own usage (Harvey 1960, 78; Bachmann 1995, 152–3).

In its early pages Rapicani explains that he was in his 56th year when he wrote his autobiography. He was thus writing in 1691–2, for he was born in 1636, and passages in the work show that he was writing it for his eldest son, born in 1690. However, the narrative breaks off, suddenly and inexplicably, in 1674 – a pity, for it contains much that is of interest and, as Dr Bachmann discovered, the second half of his life was scarcely less eventful than the first. He was born at Frankenthal, near Mannheim. His father, a Catholic from Naples, was an officer in the Spanish occupation of the town, his mother a Calvinist refugee from the Spanish Netherlands. His education reflected his parents' varied origin: first the Augustinian convent school at Frankenthal, then a Calvinist interlude among his mother's relatives at Leiden and finally Heidelberg University. Clearly I was wrong in implying that he learned German late in life (Harvey 1960, 78). Heidelberg was a residence of the Elector of the Rhenish Palatinate; Rapicani's father had become a cavalry officer (*Rittmeister*) there in the Elector's service, and the young Francisco came to be employed as tutor to the sons of nobles at the court. In 1665 he accepted an invitation to accompany Count Gustav Carlson on his Grand Tour of the Continent; the count was the natural son of the late King Karl X Gustav of Sweden, and it was he who joined the Swedish ambassadors in London in 1666, taking Rapicani with him (Bachmann 1995, 153–4).

They arrived from Ostend in July, having encountered on the crossing the fleets of both the English and the Dutch; England was then at war with both France and Holland, and the immediate purpose of the Swedish embassy was to try to mediate between the adversaries (*SBL* ix, 31–2). The ambassadors had already made their formal entry into London on 27 June (*Lond Gaz* 1666, issue 65, 25–28 June; *Curr Int*, 8), but Rapicani was present at their audience with Charles II and Queen Catherine of Braganza in the Whitehall Banqueting House. He and the count – probably the whole party – toured outside London, visiting houses, towns and castles. In London, however, though he dined with the count, Rapicani clearly had much time to himself. At Heidelberg

he had had a close friend (*Special-Freund*) in Nicholas 'Bauman', who had been English secretary to the Elector; Rapicani succeeded in contacting him in Lincoln's Inn, where he rented a couple of rooms, and much of Rapicani's stay in London was spent in his company. 'Bauman' was in fact Nicholas Bowman, who had been admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1655; the son of another Nicholas Bowman, gentleman, of Westminster, he had spent three years at Christ Church, Oxford, entering as a scholar from Westminster School. He was his father's second son and Rapicani points out that it was the custom in England for the eldest son to inherit all, making what provision he liked for his younger brothers; Bowman thus lived on an annual pension from his brother, without thinking of getting married, and spent his time going around London, freely and cheerfully (*eines recht freyen und lustigen Lebens sich bediente*) (Bachmann 1995, 190–2; *Linc Inn Rec*, 271; Phillimore 1852, 139; Barker & Stenning 1928, i, 112; *Alum Oxon*, i, 161).

Rapicani explains that he was especially glad of Bowman's company, as the English are apt not to talk to foreigners, but with him he was able to meet many people, both men and women. Bowman introduced him to the eating-houses where a great variety of cooked food would be set out on a long table; having chosen what one wanted, it could be taken to a private room where beer and wine could be ordered. Alternatively one could have it taken to a tavern (*Wein-Hauss*) either by one's own servant or by any one of the men who hang around every street corner. If one shouts 'Coach' ('*Gutsch*') from any door or window then at once two or three will turn up; by taking one, one can go wherever one wishes, knowing how much to pay for the journey from one point to another.¹ This was the happy time that the Fire changed to grief, in the opening words of the extract from the autobiography describing the Fire (Bachmann 1995, 192–3).

On leaving England, in the autumn of 1666, Rapicani was entrusted with missions on behalf of Duke Adolf Johann, the Swedish king's brother, first to Paris, then to Sweden. At Hamburg he met Queen Christina, who had abdicated the Swedish throne in 1654 before converting to Catholicism; she

engaged him as secretary and he continued in her household, based in Rome, until 1681. Then, after an exchange of lands with the Swedish king that brought Christina part of the duchy of Bremen, Rapicani held a succession of administrative posts in this area of north Germany. Here he settled down, marrying into a well-placed family with a wife, 30 years younger than himself, who bore him 11 children. His position survived Christina's death in 1689, though only after desperate negotiation and application to King Karl XI, and it was only after the Danish occupation of the duchy in 1712 that Rapicani lost both the position he then held and also the house he had acquired at Kirchtimke. However, he regained the house in 1715 and it was there that he died six years later (Bachmann 1995, 154–6).

The translation that follows is unchanged from that published in 1960, except where the correct text now available demands alteration; these changes have been printed in italics, with a note of the original German. The other cases where German words had been misread are also noted, even though the correction does not affect the translation. However, no note is made of the transcription's many mistakes in spelling. In editing Rapicani's text, Dr Bachmann normalised its punctuation and use of capital initials; this affects some of the words and phrases quoted here. The division into paragraphs has been corrected, following Dr Bachmann's edition.

TRANSLATED TEXT

This happy time was soon changed to grief. One *Saturday night*² in the autumn of the same year, 1666, there broke out in a baker's house, not far from the bridge over the Thames, so terrible a fire that, as everyone knows, this great and splendid city was almost completely laid in ashes. That Saturday I had gone with this friend Bauman and two other acquaintances of his for a walk in Southwark, which lies on the other side of the Thames from the City; I had not crossed the bridge over the Thames before. As we went over, and I looked at the fine great row of houses, I said: 'Those are fine buildings indeed, and it would be a pity if they should ever catch fire' – for they were built with a good deal of woodwork and panelling.³ I

thought no more about it, and we went on with our walk until evening. Coming back in the twilight we were in the middle of the bridge when blood suddenly poured from my nose. I was very alarmed and said that it must signify something; I went aside to the iron rail of the bridge,⁴ and bled for the space of a good two Paternosters. Then we went on to a coffee-house to smoke a pipe of tobacco until about ten o'clock, when there was no carriage to be had. As I was lodging in Covent Garden,⁵ and it was already late, *Mr Bauman*⁶ said I should spend the night with him at Lincolns Inn. We had hardly been in bed for an hour when, about midnight, we heard a great noise of drums;⁷ we jumped out of bed and from the window could see nothing but a great fire beside the Thames, near that same bridge. In the morning I did not know how I should get back to my lodgings, there was such an uproar and great commotion in the whole city; but my friend accompanied me back to Covent Garden, and we spent the Sunday there together. At midday he took me to a meal with some of his friends, where there was a fine company gathered, including some men and women from the City. *We were*⁸ (God forgive us!) quite cheerful for so perilous and sorry a time, but some of those who had come to us from the City suffered great loss, for before they could get back home their houses had gone up in fire and smoke. The fire was spreading with such fury that it was thought that about a hundred houses were being burnt every hour. In the evening we parted company and neither saw nor spoke to each other for the next week; it was not until the following Friday that the fire *reached the moat*⁹ of the Tower and there came to rest.¹⁰ Meanwhile, *the Swedish lord ambassadors*¹¹ were afraid that the fire might reach Covent Garden and requested the king that they and the suite that they maintained might be moved from their present accommodation to that *where they had been lodged for three days by His Majesty*.¹² It was immediately ordered that everyone who was in their suite or under their protection should stay together and follow the ambassadors' coach. The baggage was sent on ahead,¹³ and on the Tuesday afternoon, about fifty strong, we followed *the lord ambassadors*¹⁴ on foot, as well armed as possible. We set out from a building which

stood just opposite Somerset House; and *what confusion*¹⁵ was to be seen, young and old, men and women, all together, running, riding, walking, shouting, cursing and praying – we could scarcely pass through them. The burning of Troy came to my mind, and I fancied *that it must have looked just like this*.¹⁶

When we had come to the house at Westminster, the king gave *the lord ambassadors*¹⁷ a guard at the door and *the lord ambassadors*¹⁸ ordered that, so as to keep out of harm, no one was to stir from the house. My room-mate, however, a Swedish nobleman whose name I will not mention, became so impatient at staying away from a lady-friend that he had, that he risked going out; when he wanted to come back again and was just walking or standing in the street, he was seized by a furious mob, together with the steward who was with him, and was hung up *from the pillar of a house*¹⁹ at a street-corner. The steward, however, proved his salvation, for he made such a commotion with the crowd that they could not decide which of them to hang first. Thus a little time was gained, and they had hardly got the nobleman strung up when a mounted troop of the Duke of York's²⁰ bodyguard came by; they saw what was going on, rode up,²¹ and cut the rope with a sword, threw the crowd's victim onto a horse, and brought him away.²² The next day our good gallant came back home, but he was dreadfully teased about the blue ring which could be seen around his neck.

With this notable example before our eyes, we could see without being told, what atrocities the maddened people were committing against foreigners; however, there was also something in store for the court chaplain. When he heard that the fire was lessening, and from where we were it no longer seemed so terrible, *he wanted to satisfy his curiosity and to see for himself how things were*.²³ But he got short shrift, and some people brought him back home *with injuries over his whole body*,²⁴ his head and face covered in blood, his sleeves and collar all in rags round his neck and hands, and *his cassock desecrated and tattered all over*.²⁵

When *the lord ambassadors*²⁶ heard about it, they wanted to see him in this state and had him come into the long ante-room; when they asked him what had led him to go out among the mob, he replied 'Why, Your

Excellencies,²⁷ the whole time of the fire I prayed God on my knees that he would keep it away from these rogues;²⁸ and now what sort of thanks²⁹ do I get? Oh, may the fires of hell burn them for ever!³⁰

When he began to give vent³¹ to this sort of priestly ardour, *the lord ambassadors*³² turned round and laughed and let him alone. However, I am not surprised³³ that so many inquisitive people go to the wars, who have to get rid of the itch for this sort of thing.

Certainly I found the week long, and a hundred times I wished for my Vergil, for never again would I be able to impress on myself his verses on the exidium Trojae so well as I now could with what lay before my eyes.³⁴ At night it was really terrible to watch, for the whole air above the city seemed to be ablaze. The Thames looked like nothing so much as a sheet of flame;³⁵ in Thames Street all the tar and fat and ships' stores had been thrown bodily into the river, then burning beams had come from the buildings that had been burnt or pulled down, setting it on fire, so that the sight was more awful than anything one could imagine.

When the fire had died down my friend Bauman came to me and offered to walk with me through the burnt-out city, so that we could see and contemplate the distress. We walked and walked and found nothing but heaps of stones, and *cellars still full of coal*³⁶ and smouldering beams. There was great distress among the people, and countless poor persons with nothing but a stick in their hands, who had formerly been prosperous and well-placed, were scattered here and there in the fields where they had built huts for themselves. I spoke to several book-sellers with whom I had often chatted and passed the time of day. They had brought their books into the great crypt of St. Paul's, and there nothing was saved;³⁷ it was all destroyed with the magnificent great church, of which nothing was left standing except a small part of the choir³⁸ and the strong walls, and even these, *as well as the beautiful portico and massive pillars*,³⁹ were all cracked by the heat of the fire. It was indeed a pitiful sight, but the people's courage was so resilient, for the English are by nature not easily daunted, that it was not so much the loss caused by the dreadful fire that they were talking and worrying about, as the war

that they were waging on the sea against the Dutch. Before long a major battle between them took place off the English coast and the English came off the worse. One could distinctly hear the thunder of the guns in London,⁴⁰ and towards evening when I was at Somerset House, *in the back garden with some Capuchin Fathers*,⁴¹ close to the Thames, the earth shook beneath our feet with the thunder of the artillery.

As things now seemed bad, and thoughts of peace were taken up, the fury and hatred grew far stronger yet against foreigners, so that they had to leave the country as best they could.

*The lord ambassadors even recommended to Count Carlson that, as the situation in England was now so bad, he should cross the sea and continue his travels in other countries.*⁴² It was about October when we prepared for the return journey; there came with us many Swedish nobles and others besides, and it was in the evening that, in God's name, we set out down the Thames to Greenwich, where the king's yacht, which he had put at the count's disposal, was awaiting us.

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NOTES

¹ Hackney coaches, which first appeared in London early in the 17th century, were first formally licensed in 1634 and became increasingly numerous (Parkes 1925, 66).

² The text reads 'Sambstags-Nacht'.

³ The buildings on London Bridge were mostly of wood; it seems to have been considered that the bridge would not bear the weight of brick or stone structures (Home 1931, 215–16, pl facing p 352).

⁴ Most of the thoroughfare across London Bridge was a narrow passage between the houses that were built on it, but at the south end there were two gaps between buildings, where the road extended to the edge of the bridge,

and at the north end was a section of six arches where the houses had not been rebuilt since a fire in 1633; as this last was fenced with high wooden palings, the incident must have occurred at one of the southern gaps (Home 1931, 218, pls facing pp 109, 224, 241, 352; Jackson 1971, 24–5, 38–9, 40).

⁵ This seems the most likely interpretation of Rapicani's *Common Garden*. The permanent Swedish resident in England, Johan Lyonbergh, was then living in Covent Garden; on Tuesday, 4 September, he petitioned the king for powers to requisition four wagons to move his goods for fear of the Fire, perhaps as a part of the ambassadors' migration that Rapicani describes (*Cal S P Dom* 1666–7, 99).

⁶ The text reads 'Herr Bauman'.

⁷ Perhaps sounded as an alarm by the officers of the ward. Actually, the Fire did not break out until nearly 2 am (Bell 1920, 22; Tinniswood 2003, 42–5).

⁸ The text reads 'Wir waren'.

⁹ The manuscript's *Grafften* is to be read not as *Kraft* but as *Graften*.

¹⁰ In fact the Fire died down on Wednesday, 5 September, following the fall of the wind on Tuesday evening; although there were some new fierce outbreaks on the night of Wednesday–Thursday, the Fire was over by Thursday morning. The Tower was saved only by blowing up some of the surrounding buildings (Bell 1920, 158–60, 165–71; Tinniswood 2003, 97–8, 113–14, 119, 246).

¹¹ The text reads 'denen schwedischen Herren Ambassadeurs'.

¹² The text reads 'woselbst sie 3 Tage über von Seiner Mayestet waren tractiret worden'. The house must have been Lady Williams's in Palace Yard, Westminster; it was there that the ambassadors had been taken on arrival (*Lond Gaz* 1666, issue 65, 25–8 June; *Curr Int*, 8). Lady Williams was paid £300 a year from the Treasury to keep the house ready to receive any ambassadors and their retinues that the Chamberlain of the Household thought fit to lodge there; her husband, Sir Abraham Williams, clerk of the signet and agent of the Queen of Bohemia, had entered into this arrangement in 1634, and she took it over after his death (*Cal Treas Bk* 1660–7, 57; British Library (BL), Add MS 34326, fol 50).

¹³ The text reads 'vorangeschickt', not 'vorausgeschickt', but this does not affect the translation.

¹⁴ The text reads 'denen Herren Ambassadeurs'.

¹⁵ The text reads 'dass verbaaste Volk' and Dr Bachmann explains *verbaaste* with reference to *vorbaset*, a Middle Low German word meaning *verwirrt, durcheinander*.

¹⁶ The text reads 'dass es ebenso müste angesehen haben'.

¹⁷ The text reads 'den Herren Ambassadeurs'.

¹⁸ The text reads 'die Herren Ambassadeurs'.

¹⁹ The text reads 'an einem Hauss-Stenner' and Dr Bachmann explains this as *Hauspfosten, Ständer*.

²⁰ The text reads 'des Duc d'Yorcks', not 'des Duc of York's', but this does not affect the translation.

²¹ The text reads 'jugen hinzu', not 'jagen hinzu', but this does not affect the translation.

²² The incident is mentioned in a contemporary Dutch pamphlet: 'Niettemin, zijn verscheyde *Hollanders* en *Franschen* op de straten gevat, en vast gestelt, oock eenige, daer onder 2. of 3. personen, van des Sweetschen Ambassadeurs volck, opgehanghen, doch nae een weynigh tijds wederom afghesneden, die men van verraet betichte, en van dese brandt beschuldighde' (Nevertheless, some Dutchmen and Frenchmen were seized in the streets and taken prisoner, and some, among them two or three of the Swedish ambassador's people, were hung up, but after a short time cut down again; they were suspected of treachery and were accused of starting the Fire) (V– 1666, 10). Many similar attacks are recorded (Bell 1920, 33, 73–6, 121–2, 320, 323; Tinniswood 2003, 59–63, 73, 110, 133, 146, 148).

²³ The text reads 'wolte seine curiosité auch büssen und selbst vernehmen, wie es darum were'.

²⁴ The text reads 'den ganzen Leib voller Weh-Tagen' and Dr Bachmann explains *Weh-Tagen* as *Schmerzen*.

²⁵ The text reads 'sein Priester-Rock gantz ungesegnet mit Lappen besämet' and Dr Bachmann tentatively equates *besämet* with *besamet*, in the sense of *impregnated, sown with*.

²⁶ The text reads 'die Herren Ambassadeurs'.

²⁷ The text reads 'O Ihr Herren Excellentzen', not 'O, H.H. Exellentzen', but this does not affect the translation.

²⁸ The text reads 'Gott auff meinen Knien für diese Schelme gebethen', not 'Gott auff den Knieen gebethen für diese Schelme', but this does not affect the translation.

²⁹ The text reads 'Danck', not 'zu danken', but this does not affect the translation.

³⁰ The text reads 'allzumahl', not 'allemahl', but this does not affect the translation.

³¹ The text reads 'wallen', not 'rollen', but this does not affect the translation.

³² The text reads 'die Herren Ambassadeurs'.

³³ The text reads 'verwundere', not 'wundere', but this does not affect the translation.

³⁴ The comparison with the sack of Troy occurred even more readily to contemporary English writers, who were familiar with the fable of Brutus's foundation of London as the New Troy (Aubin 1943, *passim*).

³⁵ The text reads 'als ein lauter Brand', not 'als wie lauter Brand', but this does not affect the translation.

³⁶ The text reads 'Keller noch voller Kohlen'.

³⁷ The text reads 'nichts davon gerettet', not 'nichts davon gerettet worden', but this does not affect the translation.

³⁸ The text reads 'nicht mehr, als ein klein Theil vom Chor', not 'nicht mehr als wie ein klein Teil vom Chor', but this does not affect the translation.

³⁹ The text reads 'mitsambt dem schönen Portal und denen grossen Säulen'.

⁴⁰ It is difficult to see what battle Rapicani is referring to. He may have had a confused recollection of the St James's Fight, from which the noise of guns could be heard in London (*Lond Gaz* 1666, issue 73, 23–6 July), but this occurred on 25 July and was an undoubted English victory.

⁴¹ The text reads 'in dem hinteren Garten, mit einigen Patribus Capucinis'. On the Restoration, Somerset House became the dower house of Charles I's queen, Henrietta Maria, and its chapel became once more a privileged place of Roman Catholic worship, served by French Capuchins. In 1665 Henrietta Maria left England, but the Capuchins continued at Somerset House until her death in 1669 and throughout the decade this was a centre for Roman Catholics in London (Needham & Webster 1905, 139–41, 151–2; Thurley 2009, 60, 69–70).

⁴² This sentence was omitted from the extract. The text reads 'Die Herren Ambassadeurs riethen dem Herrn Graffen Carlson auch, weil jetzo in Engelland ein so schlechter Zustand, er wieder über See ziehen und seine Reise in andere Länder fortsetzen solte'.

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