

Through this web site I would like you to come to know John Florio, which is something more than simply knowing about him. I will be brief in covering his early life and career, for this period is well documented and without controversy. Later on you shall hear more of John's own voice, interacting with his critics and meet a real, three-dimensional personality.

John was born in London in 1553 to an Italian father and an unknown, but probably English mother; he always styled himself 'an Englishman in Italian'. John's father, Michelangelo Florio had come from Tuscany. He had converted to the reformed (Protestant) faith from Catholicism and like many such men was forced to flee Italy to escape the Inquisition. The brief reign of Edward VI in England offered a refuge and Michelangelo was appointed pastor of the Italian Protestant congregation in London in 1550.

An academic, he made a favourable impression and joined the household of William Cecil. Some scandal in the church caused his dismissal from the post but he did not fall from grace and went on to tutor the Herbert family and Lady Jane Grey as well as a very young Princess Elizabeth. Years later he wrote a touching biography of Lady Jane Grey and dedicated another work to Elizabeth after he had left England. The ascension to the throne of 'Bloody' Mary brought a hard-line Catholic revival and Michelangelo left England with his wife and the infant John, never to return.

Once again relying on the patronage of the nobility, Michelangelo met the aristocratic de Salis family of Bregaglia in the Swiss Alps where the Count offered him the post of pastor at Soglio. This post offered Michelangelo a home at the manse, perched on the edge of a dramatic precipice (which still stands and is now a restaurant apparently) and the chance to preach in a Reformist and Italian speaking area of Switzerland just north of Chiavenna (near Lake Como in Italy) under the religious protection of the 'Grey League' after whom the Grisons canton of Switzerland was named.

Here Michelangelo could teach, preach and write in peace alongside several other notable reformists of the day, mostly of Anti-Trinitarian sympathies. John, by the age of ten, having been educated by his father to date, showed promise. So much so that he was sent to live and be schooled by the theologian Pier Paulo Vergerio and attend university at Tübingen in Germany where he was enrolled in 1563.

Already in childhood John could apparently speak Italian, English, French and German. He developed a facility with languages that would serve him all his life. From his father he also inherited a fascination with literary style and modes of expression. Michelangelo's 'Rules of the Tuscan Language' foreshadowed his son's subsequent passion for the quest to modernise grammar and vocabulary.

John Florio grew up at Tübingen in an atmosphere of fairly austere and philosophical debate; he would have matured early in life and never wavered from the Reformed church his father had embraced. As a young man in his early twenties, in possession of an excellent education and good contacts (through his father) he set out for England to carve out a career in the land of his birth.

By now Elizabeth was on the throne and it was once again a safe, indeed a welcoming land, for

European reformists who had something to offer. English merchants were enjoying a period of relative peace and eager to cash in on their trading opportunities. British sheep produced the finest woollen cloth in Europe and there was business to be done.

It is hard to conceive of this in today's world, but in the early 1570s, English was a language barely understood beyond its own shores, as unfamiliar to European ears as Icelandic or Urdu. English merchants had to learn European languages if they wanted to sell their wares abroad, and small schools teaching French, Dutch and Italian thrived throughout the merchant quarters of London.

John Florio would have found paid work fairly swiftly, his first known address was in the wool-dyers' district, but his ambition reached beyond that of a simple language teacher and his application to one of his father's old contacts reaped rewards. Lord Burleigh had been fond of Michelangelo Florio, saw that the son was bright and sent him to Oxford.

A post as a 'poor scholar' meant he could earn his keep while studying for his Masters degree by tutoring others, an opportunity Florio seized eagerly. His primary pupils were the sons of Richard Barnes, Bishop of Durham one of whom, Barnaby, would go on to achieve some fame as a poet. Magdalen College to this day commemorates his time there by annually awarding the Florio Prize for the year's best academic translation.

Now in his element, John Florio flourished at Oxford, making friends for life here including John Lyly, Matthew Gwinne and the Poet Samuel Daniel who became his brother in law when John married Samuel's sister. Through the academic world, and to some extent riding on his father's reputation he was, by 1578, able to publish his 'First Fruits' a manual designed to teach the Italian language to English speakers through a series of dialogues and extracts from famous works of literature and philosophy.

We can see how far Florio had come in society from the fact that the book was dedicated to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, the Queen's favourite, and it is interesting that several famous actors of the day in Dudley's own theatrical company added personal dedications at the front of the book. It suggests Florio had entered Dudley's social circle, discovered an interest in drama and had found his first important patron.

He had also developed an awareness of the potential of the 'New World' and penned a surprisingly impassioned dedication on the virtues of developing a colony in the Americas as early as 1580 while working on translations describing the region with another senior Oxford figure Richard Hakluyt. We should also pay attention to what Florio had to say about the English language in his first book. 'It will do you no good past Dover' he observed and began to speculate as to how this cocktail of Nordic, Germanic and Latinate roots might be developed into something more elegant, with a wider vocabulary capable of more perfect expression and easier translation from the Latin languages of Europe.

This mission became the focus of his work as he matured as a lexicographer. John Florio, it must be understood, did not simply teach foreign languages; he taught Language, as a subject in its own right and in his later years contributed some of the core essentials to the development

of modern English.

It is perfectly proper to claim that the language of Shakespeare is the language of John Florio, but more of that later.

Lord Burleigh had not forgotten his protégé and when the French Ambassador, Michel de Castelneau, was in need of a tutor for his gifted daughter Katherine Marie, John Florio was offered the job. His duties included working as an interpreter, translator and general secretary.

It is commonly believed that he probably acted as a spy for Elizabeth's Court too, but the most interesting aspect of the job was that he and his wife and daughter lived under the Ambassador's roof alongside one of the most interesting and controversial scholars of the day, Giordano Bruno, who had been taken in as a kindness by the broad-minded representative of the French Court.

During the next couple of years Florio began to move in very interesting intellectual circles and carve out a reputation as a man of substance. Bruno never learned English and relied on Florio to interpret for him but during these years he produced some of his most exciting work, discussed his ideas about the expansion of the universe and the possibility of life on other planets.

Sir Philip Sydney was enchanted with Bruno's scholarship and imagination and gave him generous patronage to continue his work. Florio would later draw an affectionate picture of his old friend in one of the dialogues of 'Second Frutes', lounging on a window-seat, leafing through a book and poking fun at his friend Florio for taking too much time over getting dressed in the morning.

The Florio family grew, a second daughter was born but then a wind of change came which would be fateful for all. Ambassador Mauvissier was recalled to France, to make way for a new man with stronger Catholic sympathies for the cause of Mary Queen of Scots. Bruno decided to return to France with Mauvissier, beginning a train of events that would take him across Europe, back into Italy and finally deliver him to the flames of the Inquisition.

For Florio the wind blew more favourably and it is from this point in his life that my research has shed new light on his movements and connections.