The British Library’s Sloane collection includes a series of thirty-four notebooks, predominantly concerned with alchemical and medical topics, compiled by an anonymous diarist sometime around the end of the sixteenth century. The notebook manuscripts in question have been most comprehensively studied by Anke Timmermann and David Evett. Evett’s contribution focuses especially on six of the notebooks that include a series of programs for the execution of allegorical paintings more concerned with social and political themes than iatrochemistry. The only direct clue to the compiler’s identity is the initials “C. S.” inscribed on a page pertaining to one of the aforementioned allegories. However, copious circumstantial evidence points to a strong possibility that C. S. is, in fact, Charles Sledd, apothecary, anti-Catholic spy and informer for Francis Walsingham at home and abroad, and sometime acquaintance of John Dee. In what follows, I will lay out some evidence for this identification.

The man variously identified as Charles Sledd, Sled, or Slade appears to have lived, consecutively, two starkly contrasting lives. Based on his familiarity with one Robert Barrett, a fellow spy and runaway merchant’s apprentice, late of London, whom he engaged during his undercover reconnaissance in Rome, it has been speculated that Sledd may have been similarly indentured to a mercantile guild in London in the early 1570s. In 1579–80 he was in Rome at the behest of Francis Walsingham, spying on English Catholics and reporting on their various activities and machinations, including their instigation of the Pope to send Spanish troops to join the Second Desmond Rebellion in Ireland. Sledd’s account of this sojourn is recorded in British Library, MS Additional 48029. The French provenance of the manuscript paper suggests that this may in fact be Sledd’s autograph copy, compiled shortly before or soon after his return to England; however, as Stephen Alford has observed, there is no confirmed sample of his handwriting against which to compare it. Unfortunately, the text in MS Add. 48029 is also in an affected secretary hand, complicating attempts to match it with the handwriting of the Sloane notebooks of C. S.
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The Mercurial Spy, cont’d
Perhaps as something of a benefice in recognition of his work abroad, Sledd appears to have been given free rein to scour London for Catholic priests in the years immediately following his return, apparently plundering their goods. One priest, Robert Persons, wrote frantically to the rector of the English College in Rome that Sledd “...has authority from the royal council to break into all men’s houses as he will and to search all places...wherever there is a gleam of hope of booty.” 9 As Alford notes, the agents operating under Thomas Phelippes, Walsingham’s spymaster, were not terribly well remunerated directly, 10 so incentives must have taken other forms. Besides seized assets, we know that Sledd was also granted some real estate in order to support himself once his notoriety had made it impracticable to continue his career as a spy and informant:

On a particular [for a lease in reversion] drawn up in 1582, [Francis] Walsingham wrote to [Chancellor of the Exchequer, Walter] Mildmay: “The bearer, Charles Sledd, is one who hathe by his payne and travell aswell beyond sea as at home byn a principall meane to discover the practices of most of the lewde Jesuites and seminaries, for their better apprehention, wherebie he hathe incurred such hatred of that sorte, as he can not without danger of his lief continew his vacacen and trade of marchandiz as heretofore he hathe imploied him self.” 11

Although Walsingham may well be speaking euphemistically of Sledd’s “trade of marchandiz” here, it is not implausible, in light of the circumstantial evidence for his apprenticeship with a mercantile guild, that he had once been publicly associated with such a profession.

Material rewards notwithstanding, Sledd appears never to have been wealthy, and Alford questions the possible motives of a man he describes as “so passionately driven” in his work of espionage. 12 Indeed, Sledd’s own report of his “work” in Rome is peppered with stereotypical but strident anti-Papist rhetoric. He accounts himself "As a traviler...desyerous to l...

Sledd was still being called upon to testify against English priests whom he had formerly convinced of his Catholic sympathies as late as February of 1584, 15 but he seems to exit the public record soon thereafter. However, it is in 1582, around the time that he was availing himself of Walsingham’s largess in one form or another, that we first find documentary evidence of Sledd’s acquaintance with Dr. John Dee of Mortlake. On 10 September of that year, Dee writes in his diary that he “requested Mr. Charles Sled [sic] to help [John Leonard Haller] to make his money over to Paris and Nuremberg, and to help him with the searcher of Rye to pass his horse: and to help him with Mr. Osborn the Alderman with his letters to Constantinople.” 16 It is unknown precisely how Dee may have come to know Sledd, aside from the fact that both men were well and truly caught in the orbit of Walsingham’s government, but facilitating the navigation of checkpoints, as well as the dispatch of funds and documents, between England and the Continent would have been a task well within the competence of someone with Sledd’s background.

The relationship was not without its turbulent patches. In Dee’s Mysteriorum Libri Quinque—that is, his transcript of some of the prophetic communications received by Edward Kelley and himself during their crystal scrying experiments—he records the...
following for 5 April, 1583 “A Voyce:—Serue God and take hede
of Nettels. Δ: This was spoken to
EK in respect of a great anger he
was-in yesternight, by reason that
one had done him inurie in speche
at my table. [Charles Sled.]”17
Tensions were evidently still high
a couple of months later, as Dee
inquired of another spiritual
interlocutor, “Concerning Charles
Sled, his nose gushing out with
blood twice (yesternight and this
morning) upon my charitable
instructions giving him to virtue
and godliness: meaneth he well
toward me?” The reply of the
angel Galvah, “The evil spirit that
possesseth him was cast out of
him, even at his nose. Trouble me
no more with him,”18 if perhaps
tersely reassuring, unfortunately
did not signal a final end to
hostilities, as on 24 August, 1584,
Dee, now in Prague, writes: “At
noon this day I received letters
from the Lord Laski, from my
wife, and from my brother
Nicholas Fromonds in England:
how Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Sled, and
Mr. Andreas Fremonsheim my
bookseller used me very ill in
divers sorts.”19 This is
almost certainly at least partly
in reference to the named
parties’ pillaging of Dee’s
library in his absence, and, as
we shall see, it is Dee’s
library that forms one of the
signal links between the
identities of Charles Sled the
spy, and C. S., the author of
the Sloane notebooks.

The content of the notebooks
consists overwhelmingly of
excerpts from medical and
alchemical texts, arranged in
a manner to facilitate
practical reference.20 The
compiler was assembling a
reference library of diseases,
diagnostics, and treatments,
drawn from specialized
treatises by a wide array of
medical authorities, and
intended for use; his work is
not to be confused with the
quotidian commonplace of
the typical householder.21 The
strictly alchemical citations
are no less extensive or
practically-oriented, with
notes on minerals, metals,
transmutatory processes, and
the manufacture of gold.22
Copying all of these sources,
many of them still only
available in manuscript form at
the time, would have entailed
gaining access to numerous
private collections.23 The
compiler must surely have been
a person of stature within the
English intellectual milieu of
his day—or one possessing
social gravitas by virtue of
some other ascribed authority—
in order to manage this.

Timmermann has observed that
“the most likely candidate
owning all the alchemica our
physician’s heart could desire
was the polymath John Dee;
however, there is no evidence
that these two men exchanged
books or ideas.”24 Of course, if
the C. S. of the notebooks is
Dee’s occasional visitor Charles
Sled[d], who may have even
liberated a number of Dee’s
volumes for his own use at
some point circa 1583–4, this
evidentiary gap disappears.

Cont’d on page 5

Call for essays for future newsletters

We invite proposals for essays to run in future issues of the
newsletter. We are looking for short essays (1500–2500 words)
announcing new developments deriving from research in the
study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We are
interested in relevant articles dealing with all regions
and time periods.

We are also looking for smaller pieces, such as interviews or
announcements for our notes and queries column. News about
dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries,
or other such items are welcomed.

Send your proposals to the editors at
newsletters@societasmagica.org
The Mercurial Spy, cont’d

An obstacle for historians in identifying the Sloane notebooks’ author has been the absence of a name corresponding to “C. S.” in any of the relevant rosters of medical practitioners for the period correlated with the notebooks’ probable composition, or in the rolls of Cambridge University, to which school the author obliquely implies belonging. Evett’s proposed candidates, Christopher Shute, Clement Smith, Christopher Saxton, and Carles Seckford, are all more or less unsatisfying, not only for the various reasons which Evett himself adduces, but because there is no evidence to suggest they might have been meticulously collecting alchemical and medical lore. Timmermann, however, has suggested that C. S. may have been an “irregular medical practitioner.” Such unlicensed practitioners were not uncommon in sixteenth-century London: both apothecaries and other purveyors of medical treatments were known to operate without the sanction of either the College of Physicians or their own professions’ governing bodies, especially those who favored the alchemy-adjacent chemical treatments of Paracelsian medicine, which the College rejected.

One such London apothecary appears to have been our Charles Sled. In the astrologer William Lilly’s autobiography, he mentions “Doctor Ardee, but his true name was Richard Delahay...; hee was of moderate judgment both in Astrology and Phisick; hee had been formerly well acquainted with Charles Sled, an Apothecary, who used the Christall, and had a very perfect sight.” Lilly’s mention of Ardee/Delahay is in the context of recollections from circa 1633, placing the Doctor’s acquaintance with Sled some time before that. If Charles Sled the spy had indeed been of age to be apprenticed in the early 1570s, he would have been approaching eighty by 1633, but could certainly have been active well into the decades preceding. Moreover, in a marginal note to his manuscript copy, Lilly directly identifies Sled the apothecary with the Sled of Dee’s journals. The allusion to his skill at crystallogomancy further supports a likely collaboration with Dee, who employed several such adepts over the years. Further biographical details in the Sloane notebooks also point towards the author’s residence in London, with multiple references to locations and individuals in the city’s environs. There are also allusions that further correlate with what we know of Charles Sled’s life and times on the periphery of Elizabeth’s court, particularly in the allegorical programs sketched in several of the manuscripts. In addition to numerous prominent personages and events in Tudor society with whom a man of Sled’s background would have been familiar, Evett discerns signs of “a protracted and frustrating lawsuit so clearly reflected in the Justitia allegory of Harleian 6857,” and returning to Dee’s diaries, on 25 October, 1595, he writes that “Sled was a suitor to me for help in law against his father.”

Cont’d on page 7
CALL FOR PAPERS

Keynote Panel, “the Satanic Renaissance”

Joseph Laycock, Texas State University
Ross Blotcher, co-host of “Oh No, Ross and Carrie”
Julie Exline, Case Western University
Michelle Brock, Washington and Lee University

“The Devil 2024” explores the nature, significance, and operation of demonism and demonization across the western tradition. The conference will bring together scholars interested in the social and cultural construction of the devil and the impact of demonism across different chronological periods and from diverse methodological backgrounds. It aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue that addresses challenging questions about how notions of the demonic are shaped by cultural priorities and anxieties, by professional discerners and the media, and by discourses of fear and safety.

The Devil 2024 will investigate why these images repeat through the ages and why they continue to still have resonance in the modern world.

The Programme Committee welcomes proposals for 20-minute papers, for panels (generally consisting of three papers), and workshops or round-tables dealing with any aspect of demonism and its manifestation in the western tradition.

Themes may include but are not limited to:

- Demons and the environment
- Colonialism and demonism
- Constructions and reconstructions of the demonic
- Demonic and authority
- Demonization and its application
- Demonism and the pursuit of knowledge
- Demon possession
- Demons and panics

- Devil, exclusion and social cohesion
- Devil, perception and cognition
- Devil in the media and popular culture
- Diagnosing, engaging and challenging the demonic
- Gender, power and social order
- Inversions and subversions
- Representations of the devil

Halifax (pop. 500,000) is the largest city in Atlantic Canada and is the capital of the province of Nova Scotia. It is serviced by direct flights from Boston, New York, London, Montreal, and a number of other major North American and European cities. It has a range of services and attractions and has become a leading regional centre for dining and entertainment. The temperature in May generally ranges from 7C (44F) to 15C (59F).

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For more information, please visit us at https://devil2024.co/ or contact us at devil2024conference@gmail.com

Abstracts of no more than 250 words should be submitted through our online submission portal at https://devil2024.co/ by 15 October 2023.
**The Mercurial Spy, cont’d**

It is not clear how Sledd and Dee may have been reconciled after the fiasco of the library, but they could evidently at least extend one another a degree of professional courtesy once again; earlier in October of 1595 Sledd joined Dee in lending money to one Edmond Hilton, and in March of 1599 Dee appears to be acting as his intermediary in one or more credit transactions.

And that a laconic note in John Dee’s daybook is virtually the last we hear of Charles Sled/Sledd/C.S., but we are left with a web of clues tying together with three personages. An apothecary by the name of Charles Sledd, whom William Lilly identifies as the Charles Sled mentioned in John Dee’s published diary, was practicing medicine (perhaps with a sideline in crystal scrying) in London by the early 1600s. An independent student of that profession would have had a practical motive for compiling extensive reference and working notebooks of the kind ascribed to one C. S. in the Sloane collection, and would have also required access to the personal collections of learned individuals in order to procure the scarce scientific texts with which to do so Dee’s own notes confirm that he and Sled were acquainted for almost two decades, with the latter visiting his residence on at least a few occasions, and in 1584 evidently involving himself in the theft of Dee’s books. Dee had social and professional connections within the government of Queen Elizabeth I, and particularly with the diplomatic and espionage activities of her secretary Francis Walsingham, who employed a man called Charles Sledd to spy on Catholic enemies of the state in the early 1580s; this background would provide a pretext for Sled[d]’s initial acquaintance with Dee, as well as context for some of the political vitriol found in the Sloane notebooks.

*Cont’d on page 8*

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**Societas Magica call for papers**

To inquire about a session, please contact the person listed after the title; to submit abstracts go to [https://wmich.edu/medievalcongress](https://wmich.edu/medievalcongress)

**Deadline: September 15, 2023**

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Organizer: Matthew Melvin-Koushki melvinko@mailbox.sc.edu

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**Co-sponsoring Organization:** Research Group on Manuscript Evidence
Organizer: Rochelle Rojas Rochelle.Rojas@kzoo.edu

**Alchemical Manuscripts, Early Printed Books, and Other Materials** *(in person)*
Organizer: David Porreca dporreca@uwaterloo.ca

** Conjuring Wombs: Magic for Female Reproductive Disorders** *(in person)*
Organizer: Claire Fanger cfanger@rice.edu

**Magic and Power in Elite and Popular Culture** *(in person)*
Organizer: Vajra Regan vajra.regan@mail.utoronto.ca

**Magic, Nature, and the Environment** *(in person)*
Organizer: Samuel P. Gillis Hogan spg140@mail.usask.ca
The Mercurial Spy, cont’d

In the absence of any more probable candidate with the same initials, the circumstantial evidence presented here suggests that the author of the Sloane alchemical notebooks is the same Charles Sledd known to both John Dee and Francis Walsingham. Our cast of characters appears to have come full circle, yet definitive proof remains elusive: was Charles Sledd C. S.? Was the spy of ‘79 considering a new profession in pharmacy by ‘83, buoyed by what he had learned in (and perhaps pilfered from) the library of England’s most learned alchemist and astrologer? I am optimistic that the foregoing will inspire other scholars to pursue this question for themselves, if only to disprove my, perhaps fanciful, reconstruction.

Endnotes
1 BL MSS Sloane 1041, 1042, 1043, 1060, 1061, 1062, 1063, 1082, 1092, 1093, 1095, 1096, 1097, 1098, 1099, 1105, 1113, 1114, 1127, 1136, 1146, 1147, 1148, 1149, 1150, 1151, 1152, 1153, 1158, 1169, 1170, 1171, 1181, 1186. BL MS Harleian 6857 includes annotations in the same hand as the Sloane manuscripts, and allegorical content congruous with that of Sloane 1041, 1062, 1063, 1082, 1096, and 1169.


3 MS Sloane 1041, f. 12v.


5 Clare Talbot (ed.), Miscellanea Recusant Records (Catholic Record Society, 1961), 214–45.

6 British Library, MS Additional 48029, ff. 121r–42v.


8 My own comparisons, based on two arbitrary sample pages (MS 1097, ff. 42r and 44r), have been inconclusive. A more thorough examination of the corpus may yield better results.

9 Alford The Watchers, 100.


12 Alford The Watchers, 87–8.

13 Talbot (ed.), Miscellanea, 214.


18 Fenton (ed.), Diaries, 93.

19 Fenton (ed.), Diaries, 139. The Gilbert in question is most probably Adrian, with whom Dee and John Davis had previously mooted a business venture to colonize the New World. Davis himself would later be identified by Dee, in annotations to his library catalog, as another book thief (Benjamin Woolley, The Queen’s Conjuror [Henry Holt and Company 2001], 277).

20 Timmermann, Verse and Transmutation, 175–6.


22 Timmermann, “Doctor’s Order,” 35.

23 Timmermann, “Doctor’s Order,” 34.


31 Evett, “Allegorical Paintings,” 151 (n. 28). As noted above, Harleian MS 6857 is associated with the Sloane notebooks because its Justitia allegory bears annotations in the same hand as those manuscripts.

32 Fenton (ed.), Diaries, 276.

33 Fenton (ed.), Diaries, 286.
John Dee performing an experiment before Queen Elizabeth I. Oil painting by Henry Gillard Glindon. Welcome Collection, completed before 1913.

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