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EDMUND CASTELL (1606-86) AND HIS
LEXICON HEPTAGLOTTON (1669)

The Reverend Edmund Castell was the second holder of the Sir Thomas Adams Professorship in Arabic at the University of Cambridge. He occupied this status between 1667 and 1685. That he ever attained the office was in part due to his father’s inheritance, in part due to his friends and in part due to favour which he received from King Charles II, to whose chaplaincy he was appointed in 1666. It is, however, one work, his one and only masterpiece, that brought him some fame, though hardly success, and gave him a permanent mention within the annals of British Orientalism, namely his Lexicon Heptaglotton.

Edmund Castell was baptized in East Hatley church, Cambridgeshire, on 4th January 1606. From his father he inherited a fair estate which was to be the mainstay of his life of academic labours. In 1621 he entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and he took the successive degrees of Bachelor (1624-5), Master of Arts (1628), Bachelor (1635) and Doctor (by mandate 1661) of Divinity. He next moved to St John’s College, mainly on account of its library. Whenever he came to Cambridge from his incumbencies, he would often stay in lodgings at Catherine Hall at the invitation of his friend the Rev John Lightfoot, its Master, with whom he regularly corresponded. He was esteemed by some for his efforts in assisting Bryan Walton to complete his Polyglot Bible. This was matched by the admiration of others for Castell’s own labours to complete his Lexicon Heptaglotton which was begun in 1651 and finally published in 1669. This labour had already cost him £12,000 by 1667, and the maintenance of seven English and seven foreign assistants who eventually forsook him. He wrote in despair ‘I am now, therefore, left alone, without amanuensis or corrector; my bodily and mental strength impaired, my eyesight almost gone’. Initially the Lexicon met with a cold reception in England, as the London Gazette (no 429, December 23-27, 1669) shows in its sales advertisement. It had detractors as well as admirers. Walton’s Polyglot (in 6 volumes and published at a cost of £8,400) had been stigmatized as ‘affording a foundation for Mohammedanism; as a chief and principal prop
of Popery; as the root of much hidden Atheism in the world’. Castell’s *Lexicon* was also criticised. Castell’s writing at times was eccentric. His embellishment, in a number of Semitic languages and in Persian, of the customary odes to Charles II, on the latter’s succession, called ‘The Sun rising on England, under the auspices of Charles the Second, most glorious of Kings’, make this abundantly plain.

The *Lexicon* became Castell’s obsession, taking precedence over all other tasks and other duties. It remained the sole consolation of his life, whether as the holder of a chair at the University of Cambridge, or else as an incumbent in his parishes in Essex, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. He put up his own monument in Latin and in Arabic, in Higham Gobion church, which stands on the edge of the Chilterns near Hitchin and where he ended his days. It is to be noted that in the Latin inscription, amidst his titles, only the *Lexicon Heptaglotton* receives a mention. In his will, dated 24th October 1685, it is again the *Lexicon* which figures in the bequests left to his near relatives and friends.

What motives lay behind this eccentric single-mindedness? ‘It is one of the striking characteristics of Dr Castell’, wrote the Bedfordshire historian, Ivan O’Dell, ‘this astonishing persistency and determination. His great work, the *Lexicon Heptaglotton*, that should have brought him recognition, cost him untold labour and anxiety.’1 Near the end of his *Oratio ... in secundum Canonis Avicennae Librum* (1667), Castell remarks sadly to his audience of young scholars:

So that literature flourishes and more every day, which people here have until now held to be very exotic. Through you, let this Arabic of ours, which abounds with such great and rich treasures, not remain a desert. Look at me, the image of a faithful [promiconi?], how readily, willingly and happily I have brought forth those things which I have accumulated through a long career of many years, tireless labours, unremitting vigils and expenditure scarcely to be believed.

**Orientalists Of The Cambridge Region And The Background To Castell’s Studies**

In order to assess Castell’s labours it is of some relevance to bear the following in mind:

(a) There was a substantial number of Orientalists in the Cambridge region who were personal friends and colleagues, both within the University itself and in parishes outside it. They were in close contact with each other as well as with their Oxford colleagues. An amusing feature of the Arabists was the