

BOOK REVIEW

REID BARBOUR. **Sir Thomas Browne: A Life.** Pp. 552. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Hardback, \$125 (£70).

Thomas Browne has always occupied a secure, if not necessarily prominent, place in literary studies, but the last decade has seen his star in the ascendant. Claire Preston's 2005 *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science* and Kevin Killeen's 2009 *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England* decisively sited Browne in the midst of cutting-edge interdisciplinary studies of early modern literature and its relations to both scientific and humanistic learning, progress which was reinforced by the appearance in 2008 of two substantial edited volumes addressing a wide variety of Browne's writings, from *Religio Medici* to the *Garden of Cyrus* to previously neglected works such as his antiquarian study of the tombs in Norwich Cathedral.¹ Now, with a major new *Selected Works* edited by Kevin Killeen due to be published by Oxford University Press in early 2014 and the prospect of a monumental eight-volume *Complete Works*, edited by Claire Preston and a team of distinguished Browne scholars, commissioned by the same press and anticipated by 2017, Reid Barbour's landmark biography of the physician from Norwich seems all the more timely.²

Just as the opening up of literary studies to include greater awareness of traditionally non-literary subjects of learning has benefitted Browne, whose luminous prose addresses everything from archaeology to zoology, so has it led to a raft of new biographies which situate literary figures in their broader intellectual contexts. Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns's *Milton*, Ian Donaldson's *Jonson*, and, of course, Nigel Smith's *Marvell*, represent an emerging tradition of high profile, erudite but accessible biographies of canonical early modern literary figures.³ As in the case of Browne, they have all happily coincided with major new editions and have played an important role in shifting the purpose of early modern literary biography from consolidation to reinterpretation: putting the biographer in the front lines of criticism and using the wide-ranging nature of the genre to investigate important aspects of their subjects' intellectual lives which have been neglected by the older critical literature.

Reid Barbour's *Sir Thomas Browne* is an outstanding addition to this tradition. Although Browne's Life has been written before, beginning shortly after his death and continuing well into the last century, this is the first comprehensive modern biography to be attempted and it is hardly surprising that Barbour records his work's ten-year gestation in his acknowledgements; the vast majority of it has been forged from the raw material of innumerable print and manuscript primary sources.

At first glance, Thomas Browne's life might not appear to be a promising field for the biographer's talents. After a childhood spent in London, he was educated at Winchester and Oxford, before pursuing his medical studies on the continent for three years in Montpellier, Padua, and Leiden. While waiting until the statutory time had elapsed and he could incorporate his Leiden medical degree at Oxford, he practiced in the northern mercantile town of Halifax, but the remaining forty-five years of his life were spent in Norwich, where he pursued a successful but uneventful life as physician, husband, father, and friend. Barbour has responded to this in part by devoting a third of the biography to Browne's years on the continent,

but has also meticulously unearthed a wide variety of local sources from Norwich and the surrounding region which give colour and texture to Browne's medical career and, more than most literary biographies, restore him to his family circle, where he corresponded with his sons, read with his daughters, and worshipped and studied with his wife.

It is in this use of fragmentary, oblique, and recalcitrant sources that Barbour excels. He echoes Campbell and Corns in his avoidance of even a hint of over-interpretation or unjustified speculation, but still maintains a richness of description which balances our lack of specific knowledge about much of Browne's career (as in the case of his sojourn in Padua) with an expansive study of the contexts within which Browne found himself and the ways in which those contexts can be discovered in his later writings. In the first half of the biography, the *Religio Medici* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* are always present, and the known, probable, and possible influences of Browne's life upon their texts are deftly woven into the narrative of his life itself. In contrast, the summaries and explanations of Browne's work which punctuate the biographical narrative can seem dense in comparison, but these are reasonably well-integrated into the work as a whole and are necessary to fully make sense of the unfolding picture of Browne's thought.

A work so indebted to research in the archive inevitably sheds light on more than its subject, and *Browne* is no exception. In the course of discussing Browne's education, Barbour carefully unpacks a mixture of remarkably scanty evidence and obscure, if not rebarbative, texts to make sense of humanist medical education as it was practiced in early seventeenth-century Europe. He does so admirably and that in itself would make the biography of lasting value. But Barbour has also taken the considerable time and effort to familiarise himself with the contexts of Browne's many fields of study and as a result even almost off-hand discussions, stemming from a letter or a passage in the *Pseudodoxia* or the *Miscellany Tracts*, can shed valuable new light on neglected corners of early modern scholarship. In a lengthy examination of the correspondence between Browne and William Dugdale, Barbour draws out the significance of the two men's fascination with the East Anglian fens, demonstrating how engineering of the landscape, antiquarianism, and an early fascination with environmental history interacted in ways which have yet to be fully explored. Likewise, the later chapters paint a vivid and complex picture of the social currents that bound together physicians, patients, and members of the wider community in dialogues about the roles of health and disease in society, highlighting how the intensely local—collections of correspondence in country houses and county record offices—can be interrogated to reveal surprising new views on topics of international significance.

Ultimately, however, Barbour's biography is most impressive for what it does for the study of Browne himself. Not only does it recover the various specificities of Browne's life in far greater detail than has been done before, it makes a sustained argument that Browne was not just a provincial virtuoso with an unusually good prose style. Drawing upon a wide variety of contemporary evidence, including references to Browne in both English and continental texts, the bibliography of his works' translations into Latin and other European vernaculars, and letters to and about Browne, Barbour makes a convincing argument that *Religio Medici* and, to a lesser but still notable extent, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, made Browne a major figure in the Republic of Letters. He demonstrates that the legacy of Browne's ideas was felt in England and elsewhere in Europe throughout his life and that "the author of *Religio Medici*" was recognised as an important node in intellectual networks that stretched outwards from Norwich to Vienna, Iceland, and even European settlements in India. Although Barbour refrains from making this point explicit, the inescapable conclusion is that Browne *must* be seen as an important figure in the intellectual and literary history of his time; his place at the centre of the canon is no

longer contestable. While his influence was different from that exerted by the superstars of the Republic of Letters, like Joseph Justus Scaliger or Isaac Casaubon, it was equally important in its own way; in reconstructing both Browne's scholarship and the networks that disseminated it, Barbour's biography is outstanding in its sensitive treatment of the early modern history of ideas.

In the midst of his acknowledgements, Barbour thanks his undergraduates who "have demonstrated quite brilliantly ... that the future of Browne studies has never been brighter" (viii). Barbour himself has demonstrated this, both in the biography itself and in the groundwork it lays—together with the forthcoming new editions—for future studies of Browne and his works. More than that, though, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Life* is an example of how fresh, interdisciplinary study of even major canonical figures has the potential to revitalise and expand the horizons of our field.

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Notes

¹ Claire Preston, *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kevin Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009); Reid Barbour and Claire Preston, eds., *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kathryn Murphy and Richard Todd, eds., *'A man very well studyed': New Contexts for Thomas Browne* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

² Kevin Killeen, ed., *Thomas Browne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Details of the new *Complete Works* can be found at <http://www.york.ac.uk/english/news-events/browne/oup-complete-works/>.

³ Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Nigel Smith, *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).