

Reid Barbour. *Sir Thomas Browne: A Life*.

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This is the first biography of Thomas Browne for fifty years, a work that eclipses its predecessors by the range and depth of its scholarship, and by its skill in placing Browne's life and writings in the social and intellectual settings of seventeenth-century England and Europe. The desiderata for a modern biography of this paragon of learning and Christian charity are an understanding of his formative years at Winchester and Oxford and on the Continent, a knowledge of the contemporary state of medicine, and a familiarity with the friendship circles that sustained Browne throughout his career. Reid Barbour possesses all these qualifications in abundance.

Barbour makes it clear that the stimulus Browne received from his tutors during seven years at Oxford gave a decisive impetus to his career. Thomas Clayton, who presided over Pembroke College, applied himself to harmonizing medicine with divinity. Thomas Lushington extended the boundaries of speculative divinity to a degree considered heretical by some conservatives, while the Platonizing Thomas Jackson may have made Browne aware of the invisible commerce between the physical world and the ideas of things, a commerce where the currency was in symbols, hieroglyphics, and harmonics. Between them they attuned his mind to a higher temper that resonated to the rituals and ceremonies of the Laudian church. Hitherto, the years (1631–34) that Browne spent in the medical faculties at Montpellier, Padua, and Leiden have been the least well-documented of his life, but Barbour has scoured the archives of these cities, read the relevant travel narratives, and reviewed the particular religious and political conditions of each place. Adapting himself to diverse communities, encountering different customs and religious practices, receiving the shock of new ideas, the student-doctor learned toleration and developed an ardent curiosity about the enigmas of the natural and spiritual worlds. These were years of rich and disturbing impressions. For example, how must Browne's sensibility have been exalted by the ceremonies attendant on an anatomy lesson at Padua. The doorways were crowned with laurels, the theater hung with garlands, and solemn music played. After the demonstration, the corpse, accompanied by a priest and a procession of gowned academics, was borne to a church where a funeral oration was pronounced. Small wonder he later became the chronicler of the funereal vanities of mankind in *Urn-Buriall*.

Memories of incidents in his European years recur in his later writings, as Barbour is quick to recognize. After conservative Catholic Montpellier, the liberal mindedness of Padua was disconcerting. Here Browne was exposed to skepticism, even to intimations of atheism and the mortality of the soul. Such arguments had special force among doctors, who were unable even to locate a seat for the soul in their dissections. On his return to England, Browne would begin to compose *Religio Medici*, where he revealed his unique personality made up of paradoxes and contradictions, skepticism and faith, which was the result of his motley education. He, a doctor, could be a Christian of a new kind, one who transcended conventional distinctions by the power of charitable faith, a Christian of a kind that the warring societies of England and Europe desperately needed.

*Religio Medici* made Browne's reputation, which he consolidated with *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, his vast inquiry into the common errors of knowledge that impeded the search for truth concerning the natural world and clouded our intellectual understanding of the spiritual. Baconian in intention, in actuality it was an expression of uncircumscribed curiosity. Its seven editions brought Browne fame as the most learned man in England. Barbour's evaluation of the volume draws attention to those subjects that exercised Browne's mind throughout his career: the generation of all forms of life, the properties of plants, and all manner of natural phenomena.

Barbour treats the forty-five years that Browne spent as an honored physician in Norwich as a study in intellectual and domestic contentment. Sustained by a network of county gentry who shared an interest in medical, antiquarian, and natural history studies, and maintaining a large correspondence with scholars around the country, he embodied the intellectual vitality of provincial life that was such a notable feature of seventeenth-century England.

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