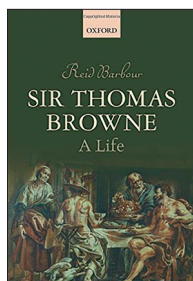


Sir Thomas Browne: A Life
Reid Barbour

Oxford University Press 2016, PB, 552pp,
£30.00, 978-0198778356



THE EMERGENCE OF CRITICAL THOUGHT

This biography establishes Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682) as a unique subject. Browne was an English author with extensive knowledge in many fields. His book *Religio Medici* (The Religion of a Doctor) was published in 1643 and became a best-seller in Europe.

Browne's days at Winchester are a sojourn into the halcyon realms of grammar education secure in the pastoral, educational, and demanding mentoring of his teachers. The curriculum is a pastiche of inkwells and polished desk lids banging thought into shape. Immersed in the logic, philosophy, and religion of his Oxford tutors' tautology we see him turning to medicine. To luxuriate in Barbour's exposition of the emergence of critical thought, and the sheer joy for Browne of his growing mindfulness, is to bathe again in the sunshine of youth.

His early footsteps into medical learning were as multi-dimensional (apothecary, the anatomy room, and religious philosophy of the disease process) as today's evidence-based medicine is to modern medical students.

After Oxford he journeyed in 1631 to 1634 to Montpellier in France, Padua in Italy, and Leiden in the Netherlands for a broader conceptualisation of medical study coloured by the all-pervasive religious thought of the times. The lineage of medical and philosophical thought is the golden thread running through his medical training and clinical sabbaticals on the continent.

Back in the UK he lived first in Halifax to work on converting his Leiden qualifications into a doctorate to enable him to practise. He then settled in Norwich where he married, had children, and established his medical practice. This biography is a gargantuan medical biopic of *War and Peace* dimensions, where the phrase 'to travel is more enjoyable than arriving' rings true.

Browne was knighted in 1671 as an acknowledgement of his rare intellect. When Barbour ends his biography with the death of Sir Thomas Browne we are uplifted by a *sang-froid* that many a physician would wish to emulate. When he self-diagnosed the cause of the symptoms of his own mortal affliction, he refused all medication from the attending physicians and passed away with 'all quietness'.

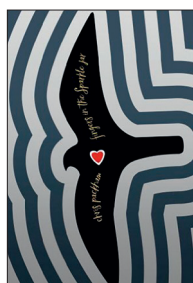
All in all, a handsome biography of a handsome mind.

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Fingers in the Sparkle Jar: A Memoir
Chris Packham

Ebury Press, 2016, HB, 288pp, £10.00, 978-1785033483



THROUGH THE AUTISTIC LENS

Publicity around this book includes a piece in the *Guardian*¹ informing us that Chris Packham (TV presenter, photographer, and conservationist) was diagnosed in his early 20s with Asperger's syndrome. As a memoir this is not essential information for the book because it stands alone as a magnificent boy's own story demanding the reader consider what may have drove him to seek suicide as an escape from his difficult life. As a practitioner I read certain literature in order to better understand what it might be like to live daily with an autistic spectrum disorder. Chris does an excellent job providing us with a snapshot of his struggles and difficulties in not understanding the social world that we all live in.

Chris recounts episodes in his early life

as short, brilliant vignettes. Back and forth we learn about his 'Empire of Beauty', 'The Neighbours', and 'The Naturalist'. With parental support and encouragement he just about survives the bullying, torment, and ridicule received from his peers for being 'weird'. However, physically and mentally beaten he learns to 'shut down' to the point of trying to disappear and become 'extinct', thus making survival tenuous.

This is not a misery memoir full of self-pity: his descriptions and adventures into the world of nature soar as high as his love for his kestrel. His emotional pain is tangible, he is unable to cope, and so he begins to 'separate' from a world he perceives as confusing, unintelligible, and untrustworthy:

'Humans can't be trusted with expectations. Or completely trusted full stop. Animals can.'

When his kestrel becomes ill and dies, the world loses meaning and the loss without perspective is magnified: *'I didn't fit in so I didn't mix in.'*

To make sense of this there are chapters that appear to be sessions with his therapist. In what must have taken years, Chris eloquently describes how he has learned how to self-manage and address his anxiety, and although he hasn't got over the 'classroom cannibals' he is now in a long-term relationship with someone he thanks for the '*management of my personality traits*'.

This illuminating book contains a great deal of insight into Asperger's syndrome and is definitely worth reading.

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1. Anonymous. Wildlife presenter Chris Packham tells of struggle with depression. *Guardian* 2016; **30 Apr**: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/apr/30/wildlife-presenter-chris-packham-struggle-depression> (accessed 9 Jan 2017).