The Happiest Man:
Sir Thomas Browne
(1605-1682)
An exhibition at the Library of the Royal Society of Medicine
Admission free
Open to all

OPENING TIMES
Monday – Thursday: 9.00 – 21.00
Friday: 9.00 – 17.30
Saturday: 10.00 – 16.30
The Library, Royal Society of Medicine, 1 Wimpole Street, London, W1G OAE
Tube: Oxford Circus or Bond Street
“I am the happiest man alive. I have that in me that can convert poverty to riches, adversity to prosperity, and I am more invulnerable than Achilles; Fortune hath not one place to hit me.”

So wrote the physician and author Sir Thomas Browne in his *Religio Medici*, first published in 1642. Admired by Johnson, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Osler and, more recently, by authors such as W.G. Sebald and Javier Marias, Browne was described by his bibliographer, the surgeon and literary scholar Geoffrey Keynes, as “one of the greatest of English prose writers.”

Sir Thomas Browne was born in London in 1605. Following studies at Oxford, he travelled to Ireland, and thence to medical school at Montpellier. He continued his studies at Padua, and graduated MD at Leiden in December 1633.

On his return to England, Browne commenced his medical apprenticeship in Oxfordshire. It is probable that he wrote the first version of his *Religio Medici* at around this time (1635-6). In 1636 Browne settled in Norwich, and in 1641 he married Dorothy Mileham. At home Browne worked in his “elaboratory” carrying out chemical experiments and studies in natural history.

It was here that he kept his library of over 2000 books, and a large collection of birds’ eggs, medals, and maps.
Two unauthorised editions of *Religio Medici* appeared in 1642, the year of the first English Civil War. In this work, Browne attempts to reconcile Christian belief and natural philosophy. Written “with no intention for the press,” one of the manuscript versions, of which there were several (and all of them different), came into the possession of Andrew Crooke who, in 1642, made a print-run of it without Browne’s knowledge.

Perhaps accepting the inevitable dissemination of his work, Browne later prepared a “full and intended copy of that piece which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously published before” and allowed Crooke to publish a corrected and authorised edition. This first authorised edition appeared the following year and derives from a partially corrected copy of the unauthorised 1642 edition.

Browne’s most substantial work is his *Pseudodoxia epidemica, or, Enquiries into very many received tenents, and commonly presumed truths*, first published in 1646. Here Browne scrutinises the popular misconceptions and superstitions of his time. His motive was to help restore the true knowledge of creation lost since the fall of Man, and “to enforce the wonder of its Maker.” In the course of debunking a host of misconceptions concerning scripture, physiology, geography, history, zoology, Browne describes experiments he carried out, cites hundreds of authors, and displays a deep and varied erudition. *Pseudodoxia epidemica* supplied many new words to the English language and is cited 2,513 times in the Oxford English Dictionary.
Hydriotaphia, Urn-Burial, or, A Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns

*Lately Found in Norfolk* was published in 1658 and may be the first English work on archaeology. Browne discusses the discovery near Norfolk of funeral urns thought to be Roman but which more recent research has shown to be of Saxon origin. Browne goes on to describe a history of burial and funerary rituals from ancient to contemporary times.

Letter to a Friend upon Occasion of the Death of his Intimate Friend

Sir Thomas Browne's *Letter to a Friend upon Occasion of the Death of his Intimate Friend* concerns the death from consumption of a patient of his. Sir William Osler described it as “a splendid dissertation on death and modes of dying… a unique study of the slow progress to the grave of a consumptive. It is written in his most picturesque and characteristic vein, with such a charm of diction that some critics have given it the place of honour among his works.”
Browne died at his house in Norwich on 19 October 1682, just one month before his seventy-seventh birthday. He was buried in the chancel of St Peter Mancroft.

Browne’s skull was removed from its resting place when, in 1840, his coffin became exposed and suffered damage during the preparations for another grave.

The Norwich surgeon Charles Williams, in a paper written in 1894 for *Notes and Queries*, describes how “workmen were making a grave for the incumbent when, it is asserted, they accidentally fractured with a blow of the pick-axe the lid of the coffin and thus exposed the skeleton. They then sent for a well-known antiquary living near the church, and still living near the city, who generally displays a certain reticence whenever questioned on this particular subject.”

The skull later came into the possession of Edward Lubbock, physician to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. In 1847 Lubbock presented the skull to the hospital’s pathology museum where it was placed under a glass bell jar and put on display.

Sir William Osler first visited the museum in 1872 to view the skull, and in 1901 he commissioned a glass and silver casket to be made for it. In an address delivered at Guy’s Hospital in 1905 Osler lamented that the “tender sympathy with the poor relics of humanity which Browne expresses so beautifully…has not been meted to his own.”
Osler remembers his first sight of Browne’s skull and how “there was on it a printed slip with these lines from the ‘Hydriotaphia’: ‘To be knaved out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking bowls, and our bones turned into pipes, to delight and sport our enemies, are tragical abominations escaped in burning burials.’”

In 1893 the Vicar of St Peter Mancroft applied to the museum to have the skull returned. Williams recounts how the Hospital Board resisted this request on the grounds that “there is no legal title to, or property in, any such relic, so there can be no question that this and all other specimens in the Hospital Museum belong inalienably to the Governors. That no instance is known of such a claim for restitution having been made after nearly half a century on any museum, and were the Governors to yield to this request they might be unable to resist similar claims.”

Despite this robust defence of the hospital’s continued possession of the skull, Williams perhaps shows some embarrassment regarding the means by which it was acquired and writes: “For obvious reasons no minute of the gift was entered in the hospital books, so that the exact date of its acceptance is unknown.”

In 1921, following an examination to confirm that it truly was that of Sir Thomas Browne, the skull was eventually returned to the church of St Peter Mancroft for re-interment.

Five casts were made of Browne’s skull. The first to be made was presented in 1841 to the Norwich Castle Museum by Charles Muskett, and the second was made by Charles Williams using Muskett’s original cast and presented in 1907 to the Royal Society of Medicine. It is now displayed on the second floor of the Library.
The Society’s archive includes a letter dated September 2nd 1907 from Miss Agatha Williams, the daughter of Charles Williams. She writes:

“I am sending you the cast of the skull of Sir Thomas Browne for the Royal Society of Medicine. It was the wish of my father that this should be done and which we found explained in a codicil to his will. You have heard no doubt of his sad death. I hope the skull will arrive safely.”

Three more casts were made in 1922. They are housed in the church of St Peter Mancroft, the Sir Thomas Browne Library at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, and at the Royal College of Surgeons. In 1966 all five casts were displayed together at a meeting of the RSM Section of the History of Medicine held at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital.
Dear Madam,

I have now had an opportunity of presenting to the council on your behalf the cast of Sir Thomas Browne’s skull, which you so kindly sent as a gift to the Society, and I am instructed to convey to you the best thanks of the President and Council for your kind thought, and generous gift. You may be sure it will be greatly appreciated here.

Believe me,

Faithfully yours,

Secretary

Miss Williams.
Quotations from
Thomas Browne

*Christian Morals (1716)*
“Man is a noble animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave.”

*Hydriotaphia (1658)*

“Diurnity is a dream and folly of expectation.”

*Hydriotaphia (1658)*

“The long habit of living indisposeth us for dying.”

*Hydriotaphia (1658)*

“Many from an inconsiderate zeal unto truth, have too rashly charged the troops of error, and remain as trophies unto the enemies of truth.”

*Religio Medici (1643)*

“We carry within us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.” *Religio Medici (1643)*

“All things are artificial, for nature is the art of God.” *Religio Medici (1643)*

“I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an O altitudo!”

*Religio Medici (1643)*

“Obstinacy in a bad cause, is but constancy in a good.”

*Religio Medici (1643)*
“Persecution is a bad and indirect way to plant religion.”
Religio Medici (1643)

“All places, all airs make unto me one country: I am in England, everywhere, and under any meridian.”
Religio Medici (1643)

“Were the happiness of the next world as closely apprehended as the felicities of this, it were a martyrdom to live.”
Hydriotaphia (1658)

“Generations pass while some trees stand, and old families last not three oaks.”
Hydriotaphia (1658)

“The night of time far surpasseth the day, and who knows when was the equinox?”
Hydriotaphia (1658)

“What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture.”
Hydriotaphia (1658)

“To be nameless in worthy deeds exceeds an infamous history.”
Hydriotaphia (1658)

“Certainly there is no happiness within this circle of flesh, nor is it in the optics of these eyes to behold felicity; the first day of our Jubilee is death.”
Religio Medici (1643)
Works by Sir Thomas Browne in the RSM Library

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Added author: Merryweather, John, b. 1618?
Religio Medici.
Keynes: 62

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Added author: Keck, Thomas. Annotations upon Religio medici.
Added author: DIGBY Kenelm, Sir [1603-1665]
Keynes: 9

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Added author: Keck, Thomas.
Added author: DIGBY Kenelm, Sir [1603-1665]

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Editor/Add. Author: DIGBY Kenelm, Sir [1603-1665]
BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Keck, Thomas. Annotations upon Religio medici.
Added author: DIGBY Kenelm, Sir [1603-1665]
Religio medici. 8th ed., corr. and amended / with Annotations never before published, upon all the obscure passages therein. London, Printed for R. Scot [and others], 1682.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Religio medici. The 8th ed. corr. and amended. / With Annotations never before published ... Also Observations by Sir Kenelm Digby, now newly added. London : Printed for R. Scot, T. Basset, J. Wright, R. Chiswell, 1682.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Religio medici ; Letter to a friend ; Christian morals / Thomas Browne ; ed. by W.A. Greenhill.
Keynes: 36

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Religio medici ; Urn burial ; and Christian morals by Sir Thomas Browne ; with an illustrated memoir.
London : Printed for Andrew Crooke in the year 1643, and republished Canterbury, by G. Moreton, 1894.
Keynes: 41
BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Religio medici, and other essays. / Edited with an introduction by D. Lloyd Roberts.
Keynes: 44

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Religio medici / ed. from the manuscript copies and the early editions, by Jean-Jacques Denonain.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Religio medici together with a letter to a friend on the death of his intimate friend and Christian morals. Edited by Henry Gardiner. London, William Pickering, 1845
1981 Facsimile of the 1845 edition. Privately printed for the members of The Classics of Medicine Library

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Pseudodoxia epidemica, or, Enquiries into very many received tenents, and commonly presumed truths / by Thomas Brovvne, dr. of physick. London : Printed by T.H. for Edward Dod, and are to be sold [by Dod and N. Ekins] in Ivie Lane, 1646.
Keynes: 73

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Keynes: 79
BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Sir Thomas Browne's Hydriotaphia and the Garden of Cyrus. / Ed. by the late W.A. Greenhill.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Sir Thomas Browne's letter to a friend : 1690 / Sir Thomas Browne.
London : Etchells and Macdonald, 1924, c1690.
Keynes: 135

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Posthumous works of the learned Sir Thomas Browne, KS, M.D. : late of Norwich : printed from his original manuscripts. viz. I, Repertorium, or, The antiquities of the Cathedral of Norwich. II, An account of some Urns etc. found at Brampton. III, Letters between Sir Wm. Dugdale and Sir T. Browne. IV, Miscellaneies : to which is prefux'd his life.
London, 1723.
BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
The works of the learned Sir Thomas Browne, kt., doctor of physick, late of Norwich. Containing I., Enquiries into vulgar and common errors. II., Religio medici, with annotations and observations upon it. III., Hydriotaphia; or, Urn-burial, together with The garden of Cyrus. IV., Certain miscellany tracts. With alphabetical tables.
4 pts. in 1 v. : illus. ; 33 cm.
First collected edition. Each part has special t.p. and separate paging. The Religio medici has imprint date 1685.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
The works of Sir Thomas Browne edited by Geoffrey Keynes.
6 v. : fronts. (v. 1, 4-6: ports.) illus., pl., facsim. ; 20 cm.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
The works of Sir Thomas Browne / edited by Charles Sayle.
Edinburgh : J. Grant, 1912.
3 v. : fronts. (v. 1-2) 2 plates. ; 20 cm.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Works : including his life and correspondence / edited by Simon Wilkin.
London, 1835-1836.

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682

BROWNE Thomas, Sir, 1605-1682
Editor/Add. Author: WILLIAMS Charles
The will of Thomas Browne, Mercer Cheapside, London, Father of Sir Thomas Browne of Norwich. Remarks on the early life of Sir Thomas Browne together with the oration delivered by him at the inauguration of Pembroke College, Oxford, 1624; also the Will of Sir Thomas Browne 1679. Norwich, Goose and Sons,[n.d.]

Sir Geoffrey Langdon KEYNES, 1887 - 1982

Sir Geoffrey Langdon KEYNES, 1887 - 1982

Sir William OSLER, 1849 – 1919
Illustration to Browne’s work on Urn Burial
Sir Thomas Browne extended the vocabulary of the English language to a very large extent. With a total of 4140 quotations, he is 69th most frequently quoted source in the Oxford English Dictionary. No less than 785 quotations from Browne contain the first printed evidence of a word. Among them are: additionally, ambidextrous, amphibious, analogously, anatomically, anomalous, antediluvian, biped, bisect, botanical, bump, cadaverous, candidly, capillary, carnal, causation, circumference, clicking, coagulum, coma, commiserator, compactness, compensate, complicated, confinement, cynicism, deleterious, dependently, depreciate, dilution, disproportionately, dissemination, effluvium, electricity, elevator, emaciate, equable, equivalence, executive, fallaciously, farinaceous, ferocious, fictitiously, follicle, glaciation, gradually, greenback, gustatory, gypsum, hallucination, hatch, herbaceous, horizontally, illustrative, immoderacy, inactivity, incisor, inconsistent, incontrovertible, inflammability, jocosity, jocularity, lachrymatory, locomotion, magnifiable, medallion, medical, medically, migrant, misconception, narwhal, needled, non-existence, operable, osseous, oviparous, participating, parturition, patois, periodically, perspire, pictorial, polarity, postulated, precariously, precocious, prim, protrusion, pubescent, quadrilateral, refuted, rhomboidal, ruminating, secretion, selection, septuagesimal, simple, striated, subsidence, temperamental, therapeutic, topically, traditionally, transcriptive, transferable, transgressive, typographer ulterior, uncultivated, undeniably, undulation, uroscopy, variegation, vertically, veterinarian, vitreous, viviparous, zodiographer, zoographer.

Source:
http://www.oed.com/view/source/a635?rskey=jzu1ax&result=69
Statue of Sir Thomas Browne in Norwich city centre

Photograph by Nicola Imrie