



“To be esteemed and go with them as and in the manner of Heir looms”: a preliminary introduction to the Browne Collection.

Most readers of the *Record* will have been dimly aware of the old books on the shelves of the dining room of the Master’s Lodgings, and some of them may have spotted the notice above them that they were the bequest of John Browne, former Master of the College. Some may even have examined some of the titles on the books’ spines. But they will have had little chance to know more about the collection or its donor until now.

John Browne’s will is arguably the high point of his time as Master of University College. Browne’s mastership, ranging from 1745 until his death in 1764, has been aptly described as the calm following the storm¹. The storm began in 1722 with the death of the then Master, Arthur Charlett (more on whom later), leaving the Fellowship divided and in dispute over the election of his successor. Throughout the seven years from 1722 Univ effectively had two Masters (Thomas Cockman and William Denison), fostering bitter division within college and making normal administration problematic. When the Commissioners of a Visitation of University College eventually named Thomas Cockman Master in 1729, he quietly set about putting College affairs back in order. One of his immediate tasks was to revise the College Statutes, the deficiencies of which were in part responsible for the upheavals of the early 1720’s.

When Cockman died in 1745 with the new statutes in place, John Browne was unanimously elected the new Master. He was the obvious choice on this occasion, having first come up to Univ in 1704, being elected a Fellow in 1711, then moving on to a career in the Church. His appointment as Archdeacon of Northampton in 1738 prompted the resignation of his Fellowship in 1739 and in 1743 he became a Canon of Peterborough Cathedral. By the time he returned to Univ as Master, Browne was a reasonably wealthy and well-connected man.

John Browne as Master of Univ is a fairly elusive figure. As Robin Darwall-Smith notes in his *History of University College Oxford*: ‘No collection of his papers exists; no diarist or writer of memoirs is known to have alluded to him; and no portrait survives.’² Browne does not appear to have been one of the leading political figures of his day, either within the University or in the United Kingdom more widely, despite having served as Vice-Chancellor from 1750 to 1753. He seems to have been only peripherally involved in the notable tussles of the mid 18th century. There is no evidence to suggest that Browne was anything but even-handed in his handling of College affairs, although given the distinct lack of evidence, this should not be overly relied upon.

¹ Robin Darwall-Smith, *A history of University College Oxford* (Oxford, 2008), p. 247.

² Ibid p. 267.



When he died in August 1764, Browne bequeathed to College an estate in Marlow, Buckinghamshire, and a house on the east side of Logic Lane, Oxford. The income from these properties was to be used to create two new College Scholarships and to augment a number of existing awards which were, by this time, worth almost nothing. As well as these two properties, Browne bequeathed a collection of books for the use of the subsequent Masters of the College. Having had no apparent aspirations as an antiquary or book collector, it seems an unusual legacy. The part of the will relating to the library reads as follows:

“Also I give and bequeath to the Master and Fellows of University College aforesaid All my Library of Books now in my Lodgings in the said College to be used and enjoyed by the Master of the said College for the time being and to be kept in his Lodgings and to be esteemed and go with them as and in the manner of Heir looms. And it is my Will and desire that a Catalogue be taken of my said Books and Signed by the Master of the said College for the time being as soon after my decease as Conveniently may be and that the Catalogue when made and signed as aforesaid be kept in the Publick Library of the said College to the end that every Succeeding Master of the said College may see that the said Books are kept in the said Lodgings and may also sign the Catalogue as a Testimony that he has received the same.”

The Catalogue mentioned above in Browne’s will is something of a mystery. In the library office we have a volume bound in parchment, probably dating from the 18th century, consisting of a catalogue of books in the Browne Collection. However, the required list of names of the subsequent Masters does not appear, although there is evidence that a number of leaves have been removed from the volume. The following note, part of which is difficult to decipher, appears in ink on the upper cover: 'A catalogue of Dr. John Browne's books late Master of Univ. College now in the present Master's custody (?) in his lodgings'. In this catalogue the books are listed alphabetically by author, including the shelf-mark, the format of the book, and the place and date of publication.

In total, five different catalogues and hand-lists of the Browne Collection have survived. The parchment volume mentioned above as well as a slightly later copy of the original catalogue, with borrowing records to the rear dating from the 1790's. Following chronologically is a single volume hand-list which seems to date from the late 19th century or the early 20th century. Next in line are two copies of a hand-list, dated 1923, which are the working copies in use today. The fifth is a hand-list appearing to date from the first quarter of the 18th century which will be discussed below. So far no detailed inspection of the various hand-lists has been undertaken, so it is difficult to tell their relationship to one another, as well as how different the collection as it stands today is from the original bequest. We do know, however, that a number of books have been added to the collection since 1764, mostly by later Masters of the College.

The Browne Collection (as it shall be known for the moment) is currently housed in the dining room of the Master’s Lodgings to the west of Logic Lane, facing the new Buttery



building. The present Lodgings, however, are a Victorian addition to the College, and before this time the Master was housed in the range of buildings along the east side of the Radcliffe Quadrangle where the Academic office is today. When space became an issue during the undergraduate increases of the 1870's, a new building was proposed, and the existing Lodgings were converted into rooms for undergraduates, thus dividing the existing library into two smaller rooms, with Staircase XII in the middle.

The College Bursar at that time, Charles Faulkner, appointed architects Bodley & Garner to design the new Lodgings, having had previous contact with them when they produced a design which would extend the range of buildings to the south of the main quadrangle (a project which was later aborted). The only stipulation of their brief was that the new lodgings should, as indicated by Browne's will, include a room to house the Browne Library.³ In that sense, Bodley & Garner designed and built the new Masters' Lodgings around the existing book-shelves of the Browne Library, transferring the collection intact (Fig.1-2). Unlike Univ's new library building of 1861, the lodgings designed by Bodley & Garner were not in the previously fashionable Victorian Gothic architectural style, but were a rather more progressive design harking back to the eclecticism of the 16th century.⁴ Thus, after more than one hundred years, the Browne Collection had a new home.

In 2002, having remained in the Masters' Lodgings, mostly untouched, for almost one hundred and thirty years, the Browne Collection once again became the focus of attention within College. The growing interest in historical bibliography reached Univ in the form of the Early Printed Books Project, administered by the Bodleian Library. The aim was to catalogue the College's historic collections to the new bibliographic standards, recording not only textual information, but also details about the specific copy in hand (ie. binding and provenance). It was during this process that the Browne Library started to reveal a little more of its history.

As mentioned before, John Browne was not noted as an antiquarian, nor even as a particularly scholarly man, which begs the question of how he acquired his collection of books, and for what purpose. Since he never published anything himself, and did not, apparently, move in social circles in which he was likely to be gifted large numbers of books, it is an intriguing conundrum.

One of the interesting aspects of working on a collection put together by an individual rather than an institution is the feeling of getting to know someone through their books. Be it marginal notes and drawings, or even the change in hand-writing from a school-boy's neatness to an old-man's scrawl, there is usually some evidence which emerges as belonging specifically to the owner. The Browne collection is marked for the most part by the absence of tell-tale signs such as these. Browne, having taken the trouble to

³Lepine, Ayla, *Sacred Beauty: G. F. Bodley's Designs for Oxford and Cambridge, 1858-1907*, PhD Thesis (Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2011), chapter 5, p. 7.

⁴Ibid chapter 5.



amass the collection and bequeath it in its entirety to College, does not appear to have had a particularly personal relationship with his books.

The books in the Browne Collection are shelved not in the order in which an individual might arrange them for ease of use, but rather in a logical order according to size. The vertical tiers of shelves cater alternately for folios or large quartos and octavos or anything smaller. The shelf-marks for the collection consist of a letter followed by two numbers; ie. D.3.13. This format is a standard one, which works as a finding aid in that this particular book is in tier D on the third shelf from the top, and is the thirteenth book on the shelf.

In a similar way, the subject matter of the collection does not give a clear picture of its creator or his scholarly interests. The books cover a range of subjects including modern and ancient history, classics, theology, philosophy, and titles relating to Oxford, without any obvious bias. For example, a 16th century edition of Spenser's *Faerie Queen* resides on the same shelf as an 18th century edition of Thomas's *Survey of Worcester Cathedral*. We have Selden's *Laws and government of England*, published in 1689, on the same shelf as the *Historie of Philip de Commynes* dated 1596. The books range in date from 1502 to the middle of the 19th century, with the majority dating from about 1660 to 1740.

Although it is hard to come up with a top-five list, the books which most spark my interest are often those that are very rare. There are quite a number of texts of which the Browne Collection holds the only known copy, as well as more than a few which have not been identified in any of the usual bibliographic sources. One such is the volume at shelf-mark F.6.15, in which seven separate items have been bound. Of the seven, three items are apparently not held anywhere else in the world and two are known to be housed in only two other locations. The subject of these rare texts varies, but includes a proposal for the production of a map of Oxfordshire, an engraved map (which may or may not be the aforementioned) and *A letter from a person of honour at London, in answer to his friend in Oxford-shire. Concerning the ensuing election of knights of the shire for that county* ([London], 1690).

Another fascinating volume, D.1.9, contains more than fifty engraved maps, which contains the title in manuscript: *Veteris geographiae tabulae complures atque selectiores*. The maps date from the second half of the 17th century, and many of them were unrecorded before the Browne Library was catalogued. One map stands out as being rather an anomaly; the thirty-ninth map in the volume is a representation of Utopia. The engraving is one of a series of fantasy maps popular in Germany in the 17th century, and includes such geographical entities as 'The Empire of Fat Stomachs', 'The Republic of Lust', and 'The Sea of Drunkenness.' It would certainly be interesting to know more about the person who compiled the volume, sneaking Utopia in amongst the more conventional maps.



If Browne was not engaged with his books as a reader, the question of the purpose of the collection arises. One possible reason for Browne's slightly ostentatious bequest of books was his desire to show himself in a positive light in comparison to another College figure, Arthur Charlett. Charlett was Master from 1692 to 1722, and it was following his death that Univ struggled under two Masters for a number of years. Charlett was a fickle character, known for his favouritism and the ability to breed division within the college community.⁵ In the Mastership dispute that followed Charlett's death, William Denison and his supporters had enjoyed Charlett's favour, while Thomas Cockman and his party were outside the Master's inner circle. John Browne was one of Cockman's leading supporters within College,⁶ and although Cockman was eventually named the rightful Master, it is likely that Browne developed a dislike for Charlett during the struggle.

Charlett, unlike Browne, was very much an antiquarian, and a known collector of books. He moved in bookish circles, counting Anthony Wood and Samuel Pepys amongst his friends. It was always assumed, and indeed expected, that Charlett would bequeath his collection to College, but when he died intestate, his collection was dispersed⁷. Perhaps Browne saw in this situation an obvious route by which to point out his superiority over Charlett and his commitment to College. There is further evidence, however, to suggest that Charlett had more to do with the Browne Collection than was initially believed, and indeed it is possible that Charlett's books formed the beginnings of Browne's collection. Once again, further research will be needed to establish anything with certainty.

Given the disputes following Charlett's death, and the fact that he died intestate, it seems natural that little evidence regarding the fate of his collection survives. It has been supposed that the books were dispersed following his death and that the proceeds went to his remaining family. James St Amand and Thomas Hearne are known to have acquired a number of Charlett's books. Hearne describes his forays into Charlett's library in several diary entries made between December 1723 and March 1724.⁸ During the Mastership dispute which followed Charlett's demise, Thomas Cockman's supporters occupied the Master's lodgings, presumably giving John Browne access to the library.

This last point is significant. During the cataloguing of the Browne Collection, it became apparent that John Browne's bookplate was often pasted over the top of an earlier plate. It then became evident that the obscured plate was that designed for Arthur Charlett by his friend Samuel Pepys in 1698 (Fig. 3). Many of the books with Charlett plates also have his inscription, and there seems to have been little attempt to obscure the earlier provenance (Fig. 4). We know that Browne's bookplate was only printed after his death

⁵Robin Darwall-Smith, *A history of University College Oxford* (Oxford, 2008), p. 228-236.

⁶*Ibid.* p. 251.

⁷DNB entry <<http://oxforddnb.com/>>

⁸*Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne Vol. VIII 1722-5*, ed. Committee of the Oxford Historical Society (OHS l. 1907), pp. 142, 158, 164, 172, 175-6, 178, 185-6 and 188.

in 1764, so the job of pasting in his plates was presumably given to someone who did not see any reason to hide the Charlett provenance. Further research will bring to light the exact proportion of Browne books which were originally in Charlett's possession, but the evidence so far does pose some interesting questions.

Without wanting to question Browne's integrity, one does wonder how he came into possession of at least eighty five of Charlett's books. In addition to the books, there is the hand-list mentioned briefly above. This hand-list consists of three volumes bound in calf, dating from the first quarter of the 18th century. Browne's plates have been pasted into each book, partially obscuring the Charlett plates which appear in only two of the volumes. Once again, further research will hopefully reveal that these volumes are the hand-lists to Arthur Charlett's lost library.

Writing this article has made it clear that, while the Browne Collection is an important and interesting part of Univ's history, there is a great deal of painstaking research which needs to be undertaken before any definitive work could be produced. The Oxford Bibliographical Society have expressed an interest in publishing Browne's catalogue, in a similar vein to that of Anthony Wood which appeared in 2002, including a comprehensive introduction to Wood as a man and a collector. The project will be a fascinating one, I'm sure, but may be a number of years in the making.



Fig. 1. General view of the Browne Library in the Master's Lodgings (photograph by Christine Ritchie).



Fig.2. Plaque in the Browne Library recording the bequest.

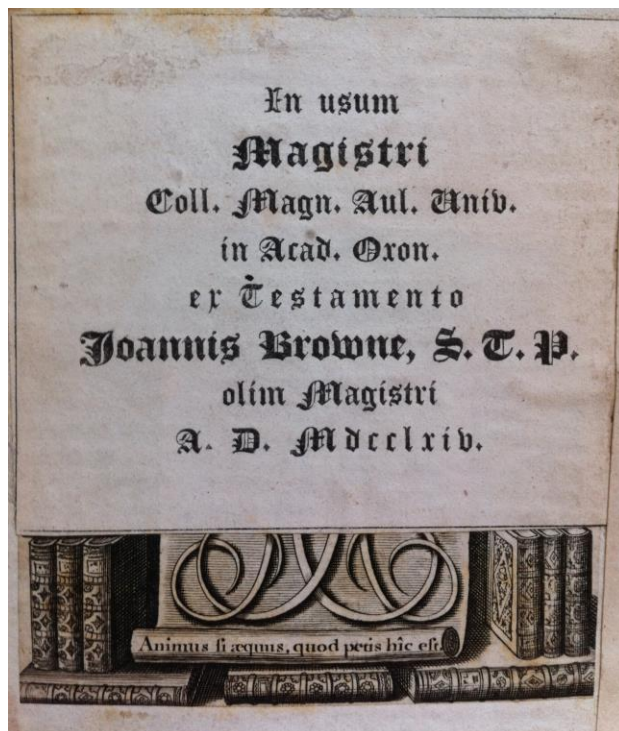


Fig.3. Browne's bookplate pasted over that of Arthur Charlett.

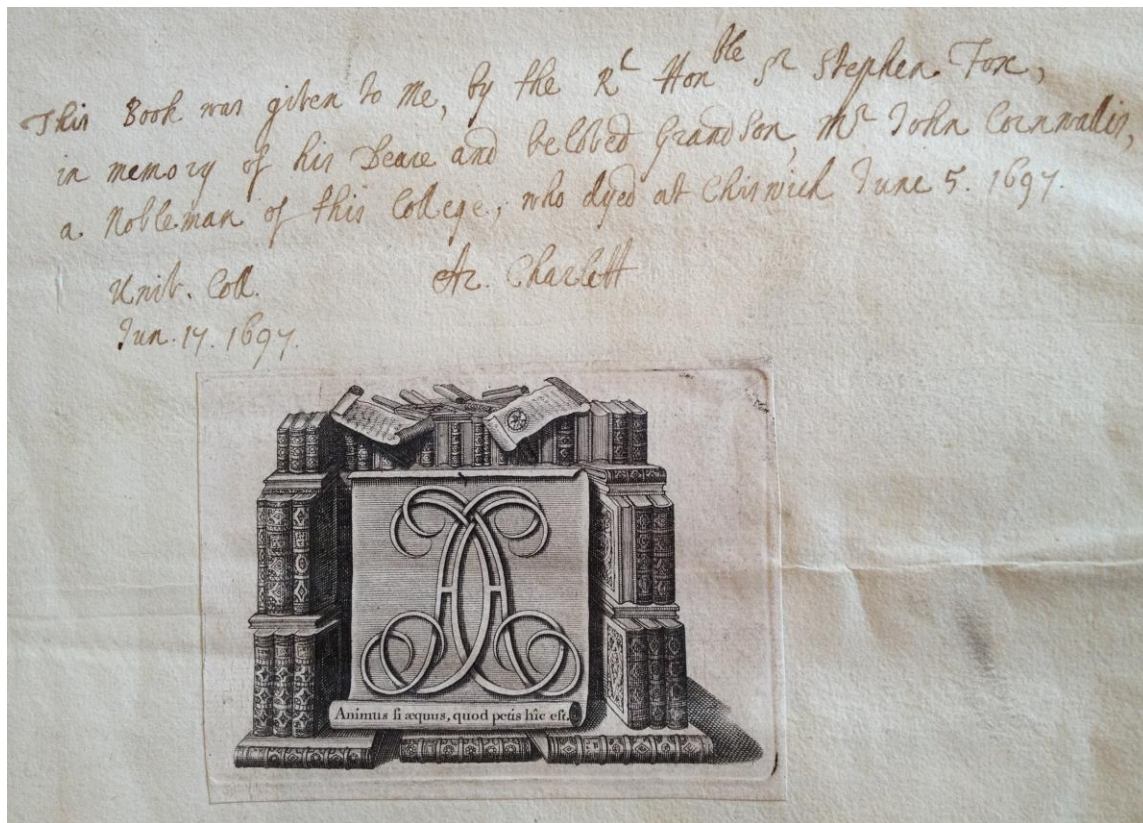


Fig.4. Charlett's inscription and bookplate in a *Book of Common Prayer* (P.1.1.)