

JOHN AUBREY

1626–1697

John Aubrey's *Life* of his friend Thomas Hobbes is far from a proper biography; it is a collection of random jottings on bits and scraps of paper, full of gaps and question marks and "low" details which Aubrey probably never intended to print. A modern editor of Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, Andrew Clark, has painstakingly assembled them in rough chronological or topical order, placing his own headings in italic type between caret-shaped brackets ⟨ ⟩ to distinguish his words from Aubrey's. Occasionally, too, he will fill out Aubrey's initials or incomplete sentences with material which he encloses between the same sort of brackets. Scrappy as it seems to be, the account of Hobbes owes a great deal of what coherence it possesses to the labors of Clark, whose shuffling of the manuscripts bore fruit in two fascinating volumes, published by the Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1898 and 1931), from which the present selection is taken. In order to emphasize the rough, unfinished quality of Aubrey's work, the notes are reproduced here in their original spelling and their original gabble of tongues. Like most learned men of his day, Aubrey used Latin tags almost as if they were English. The most frequent are: *Quaere de hoc*=Look into this; *scilicet* or *scil.*=to wit; *vide*=see; *Quod N.B.*=note this well; and *inter nos*=between ourselves. Aubrey's spelling is about average for his day and circumstances—i.e., he was writing by hand and for himself; in a printed book, he might have been a bit more careful. Thus, one finds in the first few lines two uses of "house" and two of "howse" and throughout there is a very casual attitude toward consistency. Certain details are repeated, occasionally with variations; there are blanks and gaps everywhere. As for the style itself, it is just such speech as one may suppose Aubrey himself talked over a bottle of ale—crotchety, humorous, rambling, and incomparably rich in the sense of life.

From The Life of Thomas Hobbes

⟨*Place and Date of His Birth*⟩

Thomas Hobbes, Malmesburiensis, Philosophus, was borne at his father's house in Westport, being that extreme howse that pointes into, or faces, the Horse-fayre; the farthest howse on the left hand as you goe to Tedbury, leaving the church on your right. To prevent mistakes, and that hereafter may rise no doubt what house was famous for this famous man's birth; I doe here testify that in April, 1659, his brother Edmond went with me into this house, and into the chamber where he was borne. Now things begin to be antiquated, and I have heard some guesse it might be at the howse where his brother Edmond lived and dyed. But this is so, as I here deliver it. This house was given by Thomas, the vicar, to his daughter† whose daughter or granddaughter possessed it, when I was there. It is a firme house, stone-built and tiled, of one roome (besides a buttery,² or the

† Quaere William Aubrey if . . . Potluck.¹

1. Aubrey reminds himself to look up a proper genealogy of Hobbes because he remembers vaguely an aunt who married a man enchantingly

named Potluck.
2. Pantry.

like, within) below, and two chambers above. 'Twas in the innermost where he first drew breath.

The day of his birth was April the fifth, Anno Domini 1588, on a Fryday morning, which that yeare was Good Fryday. His mother fell in labour with him upon the fright of the invasion of the Spaniards—

[Fama ferebat enim, sparsitque per oppida nostra
Extremum genti classe venire diem;
Atque metum concepit tunc mea mater
Ut pareret geminos meque metumque simul.]³

—he told me himself between the houres of four and six: but by rectification his nativity is found to be at . . . †.

His horoscope is Taurus, having in it a *satellitium* of 5 of the 7 planets. It is a maxime in astrologie—vide Ptol. Centil.—

† See my collection of genitures, where I have it more exact from his owne mouth, viz. 5^h.² mane.⁴

that a native that hath a *satellitium* in his ascendent becomes more eminent in his life then ordinary, e.g. divers which see in Origanus, etc., and Oliver Cromwell had so, etc.⁵

anus, etc., and Oliver Cromwell had so, etc.⁵

⟨His School and College Life⟩

At four yeares old he went to schoole in Westport church, till eight; by that time he could read well, and number four figures. Afterwards he went to schoole to Malmesbury, to Mr. Evans, the minister of the towne; and afterwards to Mr. Robert Latimer, a young man of about nineteen or twenty, newly come from the University, who then kept a private schoole in Westport, where the broad place (quaere nomen)⁶ is, next dore north from the smyth's shop, opposite to the Three Cuppes (as I take it). He was a batchelour and delighted in his scholar, T. H.'s company, and used to instruct him, and two or three ingeniose youths more, in the evening till nine a clock. Here T. H. so well profited in his learning, that at fourteen yeares of age, he went away a good schoole-scholar to Magdalen-hall, in Oxford. It is not to be forgotten, that before he went to the University, he had turned Euripidis Medea out of Greeke into Latin Iambiques,⁷ which he presented to his master. Mr. H. told me that he would faine have had them, to have seen how he did grow in Twenty odde yeares agoe I searcht all old Mr. Latimer's papers, but could not find them; the good huswives had sacrificed them.

I have heard his brother Edmund and Mr. Wayte (his schoole fellowe) say that when he was a boy he was playsome enough, but withall he had even then a contemplative melancholinesse; he would gett him into a corner, and learne

3. Hobbes wrote in Latin a metrical autobiography from which Aubrey is here quoting (the square brackets suggest that he left a space for his quote and filled it up later). The verses translate loosely: "For Fame now raised and scattered through the land / News that the day of judgment was at hand, / Which struck so horribly my mother's ear / That she gave birth to twins, myself and fear."

4. As all astrologers know, the exact hour and minute of one's birth are of the greatest impor-

tance: Hobbes was born at 5:02 in the morning. 5. In the finished biography, Hobbes's horoscope would have been filled out at length; here Aubrey simply sketches the outlines.

6. Look up the name.

7. Latin iambic verses. "Mr. H." is Hobbes himself, who was curious to see how his Latin had improved; the "huswives" or housewives tended to sacrifice old paper to line pie-plates or polish brass.

his lesson by heart presently. He haire was black, and his schoolfellows were wont to call him 'Crowe.'

This Mr. Latimer was a good Graecian, and the first that came into our parts hereabout since the Reformation. He was afterwards minister of Malmesbury, and from thence preferred to a better living of 100 *li.*⁸ per annum, or +, at Leigh-de-la-mere within this hundred.

At Oxford Mr. T. H. used, in the summer time especially, to rise very early in the morning, and would tye the leaden-counters (which they used in those dayes at Christmas, at post and payre) with pachtreds,⁹ which he did besmere with birdlime, and bayte them with parings of cheese, and the jack-dawes would spye them a vast distance up in the aire[†], and as far as Osney abbey, and strike at the bayte, and so be harled in the string, which the wayte of the counter would make cling about their wing. He did not much care for logick, yet he learned it, and thought himselfe a good disputant. He tooke great delight there to goe to the booke-binders' shops, and lye gaping on mappes * * *

† This story he happened to tell me, discoursing of the Optiques, to instance such sharpnes of sight in so little an eie.

† He would now and then sweare, by way of emphasis.

† Vide de hoc in his *De corpore*, and also in his 5 Dialogue. Quære Dr. Blackburne.⁵

⟨His Mathematical Studies⟩

He was (vide his life) 40 yeares old before he looked on geometry; which happened accidentally. Being in a gentleman's library in . . . , Euclid's Elements lay open, and 'twas the 47 El. libri I.¹ He read the proposition. 'By† G—,' sayd he, 'this is impossible!' So he reads the demonstration of it, which referred him back to such a proposition; which proposition he read. That referred him back to another, which he also read. Et sic deinceps,² that at last he was demonstratively convinced of that trueth. This made him in love with geometry.

I have heard Sir Jonas Moore (and others) say that 'twas a great pity he had not began the study of the mathematics sooner, for such a working head would have made great advancement in it. So had he donne, he would not have layn so open to his learned mathematicall antagonists.³ But one may say of him, as one (quaere who) sayes of Jos. Scaliger, that where he erres, he erres so ingeniosely, that one had rather erre with him then hitt the mark with Clavius.⁴ I have heard Mr. Hobbes say that he was wont to draw lines on his thigh and on the sheetes, abed, and also multiply and divide. He would often complain that algebra[†] (though of great use) was too much admired, and so followed after, that it made men not contemplate and consider so much the nature and power

8. A hundred pounds; in modern money less than \$250 a year, but worth at least 20 times as much in those days "Hundred": a division of a county.

9. An ancient card game (but Aubrey doesn't explain why it was played at Christmas or how the lead weights were used). "Pachtreds": twine for tying bundles.

1. The 47th proposition of Euclid's first book.

2. And so back to the beginning.

3. Hobbes's greatest folly in mathematics was to announce a triumphant solution to the problem of

squaring the circle; unhappily, he did not know enough mathematics to understand the argument which proves this impossible.

4. Scaliger and Clavius were classical scholars who debated the emendation of texts—an activity in which brilliant error may well be superior to stodgy correctness.

5. Hobbes's book *De corpore* (On Matter) develops his argument against algebra, which was one of the truly great mathematical discoveries of his age.

of lines, which was a great hinderance to the groweth of geometrie; for that though algebra did rarely well and quickly, and easily in right lines, yet 'twould not *bite in solid* (I thinke) geometrie. Quod N.B.

Memorandum—After he began to reflect on the interest of the king of England as touching his affaires between him and the parliament, for ten yeares together his thoughts were much, or almost altogether, unhinged from the mathematiques; but chiefly intent on his *De Cive*, and after that on his *Leviathan*: which was a great putt-back to his mathematicall improvement—quod N.B.—for in ten yeares' (or better) discontinuance of that study (especially) one's mathematiques will become very rusty.

⟨*Acquaintance and Studies*⟩

Amongst other of his acquaintance I must not forget our common friend, Mr. Samuel Cowper, the prince of limners⁶ of this last age, who drew his picture[†] as like as and could afford, and one

† This picture intended to be borrowed of his majesty, for Mr. (David) Loggan to engrave an accurate piece by, which will sell well both at home and abroad. Mr. Loggan is well acquainted.

of the best pieces that ever he did: which his majesty, at his returne bought of him, and conserves as one of his great rarities in his closet⁷ at Whitehall.

1659. In 1659 his lord⁸ was—and some yeares before—at Little Salisbury-house (now turned to the Middle-Exchange), where he wrot, among other things, a poeme, in Latin hexameter and pentameter, of the encroachment of the clergie (both Roman and reformed) on the civil power. I remember I saw then 500 + verses, for he numbered every tenth as he wrote. I remember he did read Cluverius's *Historia Universalis*, and made-up his poeme from thence. His amanuensis remembers this poeme, for he wrote them out, but knows (not what became of it).

His place of meditation was then in the portico in the garden.

* * *

There was a report[†] (and surely true) that in parliament, not long after the king was settled, some of the bishops made a motion to have the good old gentleman burn't for a heretique. Which he hearing, feared that his papers might

† Quaere the bishop of Sarum de hoc, i.e. pro-tempore.

be search't by their order, and he told me he had burn't part of them.—I have received word from his amanuensis and executor that he 'remembers there were

such verses for he wrote them out, but knowes not what became of them, unlesse he presented them to Judge Vaughan, or burned them as I did seeme to intimate.' 📖 But I understand since by W. Crooke, that he can retrieve a good many of them. * * *

⟨*Secures the Protection of Charles II*⟩

1660. The winter-time of 1659 he spent in Derbyshire. In March following was the dawning of the coming in of our gracious soveraigne, and in April the Aurora.⁹

6. Artists.

7. Gallery.

8. During most of his life Hobbes was in service—as tutor-adviser-retainer—to the Cavendish family.

9. Aurora = the dawn. Aubrey has in mind some fancy phrases about the Restoration, but gives up after a gesture at them.

* * *

It happened, about two or three dayes after his majestie's happy returne, that, as he was passing in his coach through the Strand, Mr. Hobbes was standing at Little Salisbury-house gate (where his lord then lived). The king espied him, putt of his hatt very kindly to him, and asked him how he did. About a weeke after he had orall conference with his majesty at Mr. S. Cowper's, where, as he sate for his picture, he was diverted by Mr. Hobbes's pleasant discourse. Here his majestie's favours were redintegrated to him, and order was given that he should have free accesse to his majesty, who was always much delighted in his witt and smart repartees.

† This is *too low* witt to be published.

The witts at Court were wont to bayte him. But he feared none of them, and would make his part good. The king would call him *the beare*[†]: 'Here comes the beare to be bayted!'

⟨*Personal Characteristics*⟩

Describe face, eyes, forehead, nose, mouth, eyebrows, figure of the face, complexion; stature of body; shape (slender, large, neat, or otherwise); figure of head and magnitude of head; shoulders (large, round, etc.) arms, legs, how?—

Mr. Hobbes' person, etc.:—hazel, quick eie, which continued to his last. He was a tall man, higher then I am by about halfe a head (scil. . . . feet), i.e. I could putt my hand between my head and his hatt.—When young he loved musique and practised on the lute. In his old age he used to sing prick-song¹ every night (when all were gonne and sure nobody could heare him) for his health, which he did beleeve would make him live two or three yeares longer.

In his youth unhealthy; of an ill yellowish complexion: wett in his feet, and trod both his shoes the same way.

His complexion. In his youth he was unhealthy, and of an ill complexion (yellowish).

His[†] lord, who was a waster, sent him up and downe to borrow money, and to gett gentlemen to be bound for him, being ashamed to speake him selfe: he tooke colds, being wett in his feet (then were no hackney coaches to stand in the streetes), and trod both his shoes aside the same way. Notwithstanding he was well-beloved: they lov'd his company for his pleasant facetiousness and good-nature.

† This only *inter nos*.

From forty, or better, he grew healthier, and then he had a fresh, ruddy, complexion. He was *sanguineo-melancholicus*;² which the physiologers say is the most ingeniose complexion. He would say that 'there might be good witts of all complexions; but good-natured, impossible.'

Head. In his old age he was very bald (which claymed a veneration); yet within dore, he used to study, and sitt, bare-headed, and sayd he never tooke cold in his head, but that the greatest trouble was to keepe-off the flies from pitching on the baldness. His head was . . . inches in compasse (I have the measure), and of a malletforme (approved by the physiologers).

Skin. His skin was soft and of that kind which my Lord Chancellor Bacon in his *History of Life and Death* calles a goose-skin, i.e. of a wide texture:—

1. A generic term for vocal music with written (pricked-out) notes.

2. Ruddy and melancholy at once, a mixture of two opposed humors.

Crassa cutis, crassum cerebrum, crassum ingenium.³

Face not very great; ample forehead; whiskers yellowish-redish, which naturally turned up—which is a signe of a brisque witt, e.g. James Howell, Henry Jacob of Merton College.

(*Beard.*) Belowe he was shaved close, except a little tip under his lip. Not but that nature could have afforded a venerable beard (Sapientem pascere barbam—Horat. Satyr. lib. 2),⁴ but being naturally of a cheerfull and pleasant humour, he affected not at all austerity and gravity and to looke severe.—‘Gravity and heavinesse of countenance are not so good marks of assurance of God’s favour, as a cheerfull, charitable, and upright behaviour, which are better signes of religion than the zealous maintaining of controverted doctrines.’⁵ He desired not the reputation of his wisdom to be taken from the cutt of his beard, but from his reason—

Barba non facit philosophum. ‘Il consiste tout en la pointe de sa barbe et en ses deux moustaches; et, par consequence, pour le diffaire il ne faut que trois coups de ciseau.’—Balzac, *Letters*, tom. 2, p. 242.⁶

Eie. He had a good eie, and that of a hazell colour, which was full of life and spirit, even to the last. When he was earnest in discourse, there shone (as it were) a bright live-coale within it. He had two kind of looks:—when he laugh’t, was witty, and in a merry humour, one could scarce see his eies; by and by, when he was serious and positive, he open’d his eies round (i.e. his eie-lids). He had midling eies, not very big, nor very little (from Sir W(illiam) P(etty)).

Stature. He was six foote high, and something better (quaere James Wh(eldon)), and went indifferently erect, or rather, considering his great age, very erect.

Sight; witt. His sight and witt continued to the last. He had a curious sharp sight, as he had a sharpe witt, which was also so sure and steady (and contrary to that men call *bro(a)dwittednes*) that I have heard him oftentimes say that in multiplying and dividing he never mistooke a figure: and so in other things.

He thought much and with excellent method and stedinesse, which made him seldome make a false step.

☞ He had very few bookes. I never sawe (nor Sir William Petty) above halfe a dozen about him in his chamber. Homer and Virgil were commonly on his table; sometimes Xenophon, or some probable historie, and Greek Testament, or so.

Reading. He had read much, if one considers his long life; but his contemplation was much more then his reading. He was wont to say that if he had read as much as other men, he should have knowne no more then other men.

*His physique.*⁷ He seldome used any physique (quaere Sir W(illiam) P(etty)). What ’twas I have forgot, but will enquire of Mr. Shelbrooke his apothecary at the Black Spread-eagle in the Strand.

Memorandum—Mr. Hobbes was very sick and like to dye at Bristoll-house in Queene Street, about 1668.

He had a sickness, anno . . . ⁸

3. “Fat skin, fat brain, fat wit.”

4. “Raise a learned beard” (Horace, *Satires*, Book II).

5. The Puritans were particularly hostile to Hobbes, seeing his materialism as the very antithesis of their spiritual faith; Aubrey is quoting from a book written in rebuttal of their charges.

6. The beard doesn’t make the philosopher. The French quotation is from Jean-Louis Balzac

(1597–1654): “He consists entirely of a pointy beard and two moustaches; consequently, all one needs to wipe him from the face of the earth is three snips of a scissor.”

7. Not his physical constitution, but his medications.

8. *Anno* (in the year) indicates that Aubrey meant to look up the date, but forgot.

He was wont to say that he had rather have the advice, or take physiqe from an experienced old woman, that had been at many sick people's bed-sides, then from the learnedst but unexperienced physitian.

'Tis not consistent with an harmonick soule to be a woman-hater, neither had he an abhorrescence to good wine but . . . —this only *inter nos*.

Temperance and diet. He was, even in his youth, (generally) temperate, both as to wine and women, (et tamen haec omnia mediocriter)—

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.⁹

I have heard him say that he did beleve he had been in excesse¹ in his life, a hundred times; which, considering his great age, did not amount to above once a yeare. When he did drinke, he would drinke to excesse to have the benefit of vomiting, which he did easily; by which benefit neither his witt was disturbt longer then he was spuing nor his stomach oppressed; but he never was, nor could not endure to be, habitually a good fellow, i.e. to drinke every day wine with company, which, though not to drunkennesse, spoiles the braine.

For his last 30+ yeares, his dyet, etc., was very moderate and regular. After sixty he dranke no wine, his stomach grew weak, and he did eate most fish, especially whittings, for he sayd he digested fish better then flesh. He rose about seven, had his breakfast of bread and butter; and tooke his walke, meditating till ten; then he did putt downe the minutes of his thoughts, which he penned in the afternoon.

He had an inch thick board about 16 inches square, whereon paper was pasted. On this board he drew his lines (schemes). When a line came into his head, he would, as he was walking, take a rude memorandum of it, to preserve it in his memory till he came to his chamber. 📖 He was never idle; his thoughts were always working.

His dinner was provided for him exactly by eleaven, for he could not now stay till his lord's howre—scil. about two: that his stomach could not beare.

After dinner he tooke a pipe of tobacco, and then threw himselfe immediately on his bed, with his band² off, and slept (tooke a nap of about halfe an howre).

In the afternoon he penned his morning thoughts.

Exercises. Besides his dayly walking, he did twice or thrice a yeare play at tennis[†] (at about 75 he did it); then went to bed there and was well rubbed.[‡] This he did believe would make him live two or three yeares the longer.

In the countrey, for want of a tennis-court, he would walke up-hill and downe-hill in the parke, till he was in a great sweat, and then give the servant some money to rubbe him.

† Quaere James Wheldon *de hoc*—how often, and to what age?

‡ Memorandum there was no bagnio³ in his time. That in Newgate Street was built about the time of his death.

* * *

1898

9. The tag is from Terence: "I am a man and consider nothing human beyond my sympathy." "*Et tamen haec omnia mediocriter*": all these things too in moderation.

1. Overtaken in liquor, that is to say, drunk.
2. Collar.
3. Public bath.