

Elias Ashmole

The Quartercentenary Biography

Vittoria Feola

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

Storia della medicina

Collana fondata da Roberto Marcucci e Fabio Zampieri

– 2 –



Incisione di William Faithorne, riprodotta in *England as seen by Foreigners*, Londra, 1865, collezione privata.

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It is with great pleasure that I introduce the second issue of the *Monographic Series on the History of Medicine* published by L'Erma di Bretschneider. Vittoria Feola is an excellent historian who combines intellectual history with the history of science and medicine in the early modern period. Her work on Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) represents a perfect example of the broad understanding of the nature of the history of medicine which our Scientific Committee supports. The Scientific Revolution in medicine was carried out during the Renaissance and the early modern period not only through new scientific investigations on the human body, but also thanks to antiquarian and philological approaches stemming from the rediscovery of ancient science.

In this sense, manuscripts and books in ancient and modern languages were as much determinant as the book and the language of the nature themselves. Elias Ashmole represents a significant example of how the former factors continued to be crucial in the development of modern science. Vittoria Feola's deep and wide analysis represents the best way to mark the quartercentenary of his birth (1617-2017), as well as to continue the works of our Monographic Series.

Fabio Zampieri
Director, Monographic Series on the History of Medicine

Preface

I wish to state my debt to previous scholarship while clarifying my own contribution to our understanding of Elias Ashmole's personality. I have seen all the manuscripts cited in this book as in all my previous works about Ashmole. Anyone asking for my Bodleian Library attendance records and call slips since 2000 can check it out. I am, to date, the single author who has published most about Ashmole since Robert Theodore Gunther in the 1930s, with twelve items including this book. A list of my works on Ashmole is in the bibliography. I first encountered Ashmole while researching Freemasonry as an undergraduate in 1997. There is so little evidence about Ashmole and Freemasonry, that when I discussed my future MPhil in History at Cambridge University with my supervisor, Scott Mandelbrote, we agreed I should drop Freemasonry as a subject altogether and focus on Ashmole's extensive collections of manuscripts instead. I went on doing my PhD thesis on Ashmole, also at Cambridge, under the supervision of both Scott Mandelbrote and John Morrill. Despite several other research projects which have occupied my time since 2003, I have never stopped looking at Ashmole's collections of books and manuscripts. It is, therefore, Ashmole's Quartercentenrary anniversary since his birth, and ventennial anniversary since I began to study him.

For this book I have often relied on the monumental and magisterial work by Carl Hermann Josten, the so-called 'Ashmole's Diary', for easy, quick references. I have written the first draft of this book partly in Oxford, partly on the Island of Oléron, in France. This explains my reliance on Josten at places where I could have cited the manuscripts, consulted many times over, yet not at hand at the time of writing. Subsequent drafts have been checked against manuscripts once again, though I have avoided substituting all Josten references, because it would have

been a tedious and rather pointless job. I wish to acknowledge the quite extraordinary labours of the young W. H. Black, who catalogued all the Ashmole MSS in the early Victorian period. R. T. Gunther, the first keeper of the Museum for the History of Science at Oxford, made the printed collections there one of his life's pursuits, and knew every single volume. While I have read and consulted his multi-volume *Early Science in Oxford*, and I am aware of his early work on Ashmole's own collections of printed books, I have claimed elsewhere that at least since the Tercentenary celebrations of the foundation of the Ashmolean Museum, in 1983, no-one has stressed the existence, and, therefore, the importance of Ashmole's own books, preferring to focus on his minor collections of rarities. Perhaps involuntarily, this fact has demeaned Ashmole to an almost insignificant collector. In decades of experience of Oxford libraries I have not met with any Oxford librarian who was unaware of Ashmole's books, naturally.[1] Michael Hunter, Richard Ovenden, Arthur MacGregor, to cite but the most strikingly important authors, have all published hugely useful works on Ashmole, on which my own works have built, and which I acknowledge. Yet, I do maintain that a certain past insistence on Ashmole's relation to Tradescant's rarities rather than with his own book and manuscript collections may be usefully balanced by reading my complementary views about him.[2]

I wish to thank Giovanni Silvano for believing in me. I thank Fabio Zampieri for suggesting this book series as a suitable fit for my Quartercentenary Biography. I thank all my Paduan colleagues for so many stimulating conversations, and for providing a brilliant academic environment in which to continue to write about Ashmole while venturing into new ground. I wish to thank all the librarians in the Bodleian, now

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[1] GUNTHER 1930, pp. 193-195, 201-203, 230-236. HUNT 1952, pp. 161-170. ROBERTS 1979, pp. 112-127. HUNTER 1983, p. 21 only has one passing reference to Ashmole's books since Gunther's work in the 1930s.

ROBERTS, B. F., 'Edward Lhuyd's collection of printed books', BLR 10(1979), pp. 112-27.

HUNTER, M. & AL. (1983), Elias Ashmole 1617-1692...and his world, a tercentenary exhibition, 1983, Oxford, p. 21 (only one passing reference to Ashmole's books in one page since Gunther's work in the 1930s).

Oxford, Bodleian Library, Index to the English almanacs in the Ashmole collection (with) Ashmole almanacs (handlist). (MS. Bodleian shelfmark R.6.220).

[2] The *Directory of Rare Book and Special Collections in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland*, Third Edition, has already taken this approach: ATTAR 2016, p. 315.

Weston Library, for their help and unfailing support, particularly Colin Harris at the Special Collections Reading Room. I equally thank the UL staff in Cambridge for being so helpful, competent, polite, and funny. I thank the numerous Oxford Colleges which have let me stay when my sister College, St. Anne's, could not. I thank Arthur MacGregor for a most enjoyable Ashmole chat over coffee in the BL. I thank Michael Hunter for his first encouragement to study Ashmole, a rainy afternoon at Birkbeck many years ago. I thank Howard Hotson and the Cultures of Knowledge team, with Miranda Lewis first and foremost, for hosting me, giving me excellent tea and biscuits, and giving me the opportunity to teach 'the Ashmole class' over and over in the SS13 at Oxford. I thank all previous readers and commentators of my Ashmole work, including my anonymous readers - they are too many to cite! John Morrill and Scott Mandelbrote have influenced my way of thinking about Ashmole, seventeenth-century collections, and the realtionship between texts and objects probably more than anybody else. My numerous students have been asking clever questions, thus stimulating my Ashmole reflections. Anthony Brown, Ariel Hessayon, Gabriel Glickmann, Rory Rapple, have made useful comments on my initial ideas about Ashmole's religiosity. I thank Samuel Fanous of the Bodleian Library Publishing for pushing me to write a new biography of Ashmole. I thank my husband, my children, my parents, Alain, Marie-Thérèse, Katia, for their help especially while I was away in Oxford, allowing me time 'with my manuscripts'. I thank Emma, Michelle, and Neda, for being my life-long friends. This book was truly first conceived in Cambridge while living all together in the Mad House, and it is fittingly dedicated to them.

Padova - Oxford - Le Château d'Oléron, 13 October 2017

This book is dedicated to
Emma Butler, Michelle Lee, and Neda Farahi

Introduction

The Quartercentenary Biography of Elias Ashmole aims to complement previous scholarship about him both by eminent past historians and by myself, while telling an incredible rags-to-riches story.[3]

Having spent most of the last twenty years on Elias Ashmole's collection of manuscripts and books, I felt I owed it to Ashmole that I should write his Quartercentenary Biography. The year 2017 marks 400 years since Elias Ashmole's birth, in Lichfield. The son of a modest saddler, Ashmole died as the founder of the first public museum in the British Isles. His successful life against all the odds is a great tale. Tercentenary celebrations for the foundation of the Ashmolean Museum, in Oxford, focussed more on the worth of that institution than on the merits of its founder. It belongs to the very nature of celebrations the tendency to overemphasise some positive aspects over other, less positive ones. Historians, moreover, sometimes prefer winning arguments rhetorically rather than balancing facts, thereby coming up with a less powerful, far more nuanced argument. They fear appearing weak, as if historians were lawyers in imaginary academic courts. We are not. When historians feel the urge to win arguments by omitting crucial evidence, they behave like propagandists. Take the importance of book collecting for Ashmole and his Museum, for example. Ever since the magisterial studies of Robert Theodore Gunther, back in the 1930s, theoretically we should all have been aware of the extent, composition, and value of Ashmole's collection of printed works. Instead, Ashmole has received some bad publicity, his own collected books having often been omitted from the picture. He has been treated as almost a thief of Tradescant's collections, as if those curiosities were the only founding nucleus of Ashmole's Museum. Readers

[3] Please refer to the Bibliography for full references.

of the Quartercentenary Biography will find here a friendlier tale, deeply anchored in documented facts.

This biography is not naive, however. While a Quartercentenary Biography ought to tell a sympathetic story, apt at encouraging a better understanding of an important figure in seventeenth-century British and European history, it ought not fall in the fondness trap. I respect certain aspects of Ashmole's thinking and behaviour while I recognise he did not always had the most modern mindset of his times. Ashmole deserves posterity's respect for several reasons. First, he was an honest man. He never stole; at least, he never stole in times of peace: it is impossible to state so in relation to his Royalist service, when his belly ached in hunger. It would not be fair to consider his marriages to rich older women as forms of stealth, either, given that he loved his first wife deeply, and his second one seems to have been a pain in the neck. What matters is that he did not accept bribes, so common among fellow heralds at the Restoration. Indeed, while the Restoration court was a place of debauchery (I pass no moral judgement on the sexual moeurs of the Stuart court, only, I describe the kind of environment in which Ashmole operated), there is no evidence of Ashmole blending in. Rather on the contrary, what I regard as the most interesting evidence of Ashmole's behaviour within the Restoration court, is his honest criticism of Charles II's friendly policies towards France and English Catholics. At a time when Charles II was about to let French troops invade England to restore Catholicism, Ashmole, ignoring the extent of his King's readiness for treason, advised against such potentially calamitous conduct. I find this all the more remarkable, and the second reason for respecting him, because I think there is enough cirumstantial evidence to suggest that Ashmole flirted at least with some aspects of Roman Catholicism. Lest I am accused of distorting the evidence, possibly for personal reasons due to my dual nationalities which might doom me a devout, let me clarify the following.

I firmly believe in the French principle of the *laïcité de l'Etat*. I believe that the State should not allow any religion to encroach onto its sovereignty. I despise all religions which aim at subverting the secular State in order to establish a semi- or full theocracy. The State, in my view, should tolerate all religions (or lack thereof) provided they should not threat the peaceful living together of equal citizens before the law. My political principles do not allow me to sympathise with a Crypto-Catholic in

Restoration England. I find Charles II's signature of the secret treaty of Dover (of which Ashmole was unaware) a disgrace. In this biography I have written for the first time about a number of instances which may be interpreted as signs of Ashmole's interest in some aspects of Roman Catholicism. I have not meant to argue that he left the Church of England. I have meant to throw all cards on the table to the risk of not being able to have an argument at all. I am not Ashmole's posthumous lawyer, I am his biographer. He was an orderly man, who often used a rhetoric from antiquity in order to argue about current issues. Such way of arguing might have implied a respect for the notion of tradition which is also a crucial asset in the Roman Church. He liked order, hierarchy, and rituals. Like some of his contemporaries, Ashmole may well have felt drawn to Roman Catholic ceremonial. Moreover, Ashmole collected and studied alchemical manuscripts which dated from pre-Reformation times and which used the notion of transubstantiation of substances to justify the possibility of the physical transmutation of metals. Both ceremonial and the Aristotelian matter theories underpinning transubstantiation/transmutation were subjects close to Ashmole's heart. He may have thought that the Roman Church was right as far as those points were concerned, while being wrong about other theological questions. Nowadays some Catholics openly state their wish that priests be allowed to marry. Their disagreeing with the official position of the Church of Rome does not make them Protestant, or, at least, they would not call themselves as such. Likewise, four hunder years ago, we can recognise that a Church of England man such as Elias Ashmole might have been appreciative of some aspects of Roman Catholicism without actively seeking conversion. Things are complicated to elucidate, because there is not enough definitive evidence. It is not entirely impossible that Ashmole might have converted in his heart, as his decision to keep some disturbing devotional pictures has made me wonder a thousand times. We do not know. What is sure, however, is his allegiance to England, his respect of national sovereignty. The main reason for which we should celebrate and respect Ashmole is that he was always a loyal servant of his State. Whether he thought Papists were right about transubstantiation or not, he clearly never betrayed his country because of his religious ideas. In this sense, he should be seen as an exemplary figure then and now.

Ashmole's astrological fixation, on the other hand, does not single him out as a man who was ready to throw the past behind and build

a new science from the scratch. I wonder who and how many seventeenth-century British men were like this, actually. But there were surely many among Ashmole's contemporaries who considered astrology as a form of intellectual fraud, or moral fraud, or both, and who strongly disagreed with him. Ashmole cast thousands of horoscopes throughout his life, because he was confident that the physical position of the 'stars' - that is, planets, stars, satellites… - directly influenced human events. Ashmole and his friends in the Society of Astrologers set out to reform astrology along a mathematical model which took into account the new Keplerian, sun-centred cosmos, thus making astrology a mathematically-based subject which could continue to be relevant in modern societies. Of course, Ashmole and his astrologers friends were entirely wrong, and we may laugh at their absurd efforts. Elias Ashmole was a rather typical seventeenth century Englishman, with his foreword-looking ideas about sovereignty and backward-looking ideas about astrology.

Finally, a few words are in order about Ashmole's Museum project in the light of current trends towards a re-orientation of university teaching. When Ashmole left his collections to Oxford University, he had several things in mind. First of all, he knew that he would die without a child of his own. At the time, private eclectic collections of books, manuscripts, natural and artificial rarities, paintings, coins, and what not, were mushrooming in Europe. Ashmole's collections were a sort of physical extension of himself, a means to perpetuate his name. By giving them to Oxford University, he made sure that posterity would acknowledge what a great collector and benefactor he had been in his life. This Quartercentenary Biography is a recognition of Ashmole's worth as Ashmole saw it himself, I should hope. Secondly, the Ashmolean Museum equipped Oxford University with its first official anatomical table. It is only appropriate that an historian from the University of Padova should write about it, in a nice twist of history. I thank my Oxford colleagues for letting me do it. More to the point, the publication of the Quartercentenary Biography within this new book series dedicated mainly to the intellectual history of medicine in the early modern worlds is an appropriate editorial choice, because it allows us to situate the Ashmolean within the vagaries of a Janus-like century. Ashmole collected hundreds of medical manuscripts and printed books; he recorded having dissected a body himself, and kept a life-long interest in medicine. As a man of his time, and an avid reader of Francis Bacon, he recognised that advancements in medicine would

only occur if seats of learning - Oxford, in his case - were equipped with both good medical libraries as well as practical teaching instruments, such as anatomical tables. Ashmole surely believed that the stars would influence health; at the same time, he wanted real medical practitioners, as opposed to amateurs such as himself, to do what we would call today 'proper research'. His idea of a research and teaching institution which held on its premises both books, instruments, and an anatomical table, as well as a (al)chemical laboratory, was just what Oxford needed to take over in medical research for good. As I explain in the book, the Victorian reorganisation of museums along the French Imperial model spoliated museums of their libraries on the basis of a different taxonomy. The Bodleian acquired the Ashmolean Museum books; visitors began to ignore the original paedagogy behind it. Nowadays, new lecture courses are popping up, in Oxford, Padua, and elsewhere, about 'Teaching with Collections', thus showing the relevance of Elias Ashmole's original vision for today's universities. Not that we are dismembering collections once again; only, we are more acutely aware of the importance of integrating objects with texts into teaching and research. I am not claiming Ashmole's *antelitteram* modernity, rather, I am pointing out the fluctuations of methodology in university teaching. I am pleased to be myself teaching at a time when we are inclined towards multidisciplinarity and integrated approaches to research. The Digital Humanities can help a great deal in developing new generation tools which encourage students to contextualise texts with the help of objects from the past from within their university collections and beyond. Both the University of Padova and the University of Oxford, for example, are running lecture courses which integrate DH with early modern intellectual history, history of collections, history of the book, history of medicine - expanding further the spectrum of such possibilities by the day.

Elias Ashmole's life was long, adventurous, and successful. He climbed up the social ladder through hard work, clever marriages, and networking. These three elements combined helped him acquire his collections. He hoped to be remembered for all the things that he gave the University of Oxford, for which he felt always a proud attachment, even though at the time Oxford was not yet among the best in the world. This Quartercentenary Biography comes out in 2017, when the University of Oxford can boast a supreme academic reputation also thanks to its world-class collections. It is fair to say that Elias Ashmole has indeed contributed

to Oxford's greatness. The Quartercentenary of Elias Ashmole's birth should celebrate him among the English Worthies.

Elias Ashmole collected all sorts of manuscripts and books. A commonplace book dating from the beginning of the seventeenth century contains several poems, including one, 'On a Watch', which has a particular resonance here; he would have relied on watches to work, cast horoscopes and, most importantly, to keep his biographical notes:

> Thou mans best creature that so long hast lyve,/
> conceiued & formed in the wombe of time
> so hinged towards perfection to appeare
> the wellcome yssue of fire thousand yeare
> As if reserv'd for these last times to bee
> the uttmost Reach of witt and Industrye

MS.Ashm.38, f. 224r.

ABBREVIATIONS

FC	Ashmole, E., *Fasciculus Chemicus: Or, Chymical Collections. Expressing The Ingress, Progress, and Egress, of the Secret Hermetick Science, out of the choicest and most Famous Authors. Collected and digested in such an order, that it may prove to the advantage , not onely of the Beginners, but Proficiens of this high Art, by none hitherto disposed in this Method. Whereunto is added, The Arcanum or Grand Secret of Hermetick Philosophy. Both made English by James Hasolle, Esquire, Qui est Meruriophilus Anglicus* (London, 1650)
TCB	Ashmole, E., *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum. Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of our Famous English Philosophers, who have written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language. Faithfully Collected into one Volume, with Annotations thereon, By Elias Ashmole, Esq. Qui est Mercuriophilus Anglicus. The First Part.* (London, 1652)
WTB	Ashmole, E., *The Way to Bliss. In Three Volumes* (London, 1658)
IOG	*The Institution, Laws & Ceremonies Of the most Noble Order of the Garter. Collected and digested into one Body By Elias Ashmole of the Middle-Temple Esq; Windesor Herald at Arms. A Work furnished with variety of matter, relating to Honor and Noblesse* (London, 1672)
Adv.	Montagu, B. (ed.), *Of the proficience and advancement of learning by Francis Lord Verulam* (London, 1840).
Instructions	Evelyn, J., *Instructions Concerning Erecting of a Library: Presented to My Lord The President De Mesme. By Gabriel Naudeus. And now Interpreted By Jo. Evelyn, Esquire* (London, 1661). Hereafter referred to as *Instructions*
ODNB	Leslie, S., Lee, S. (eds.), *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1885-1900) as well as the new ODNB, http://global.oup.com/oxforddnb/info/online/
DSB	Gilliespie, C. C. (ed.), *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (New York, 1970-1980)
DBF	*Dictionnaire de Biographie Française* (Paris, 1933)
Leviathan	Hobbes, T., *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (London, 1651)
Defense	Sidney, Sir P., *An Apologie for Poetrie, Written by the right noble, vertuous, and learned, Sir Philip Sidney, Knight* (London, 1595)

Chapter 1

HARD TIMES IN LICHFIELD

Among the hundreds of paintings displayed in the Ashmolean Museum is a rather grand seventeenth-century portrait of a man. He is dressed in rich velvet and fine lace, he is confident, perhaps a little self-satisfied. This is a triumphant man, radiating success, but his portrait also symbolizes the principle that such achievement represents: the advancement of knowledge as a virtuous source of social honour. Even before reading the identifying label, it is possible to deduce a certain amount about the sitter. He has achieved standing in his world and been acknowledged for his achievements: the caption in the bottom corner of the painting describes the chains and medal on display as 'praemia honoraria', rewards of honour. He is obviously a man of learning: his hand rests proprietorially on a lavishly bound book; he is, indeed, its author. The painting's ornate frame (the work of Grinling Gibbons) holds further clues. It figures not only a multitude of symbolically significant entwined plants but a personal coat of arms supported by Gemini, the astrological twins, in place of the more usual heraldic beasts, and it is surmounted by Mercury, the winged messenger. This is a portrait of Mercuriophilus Anglicus, better known to the world as Elias Ashmole.

Ashmole's name has been immortalized through the world-famous museum that bears his name, the Ashmolean in Oxford, and in his lifetime visitors to it – the first public museum in the British Isles – could not only be amazed by the vast collections of books and natural objects, rare manuscripts and curiosities he had collected, but also admire both Ashmole's prizes and his scholarship, since the medals so proudly included in the portrait were on display, and copies of his three volumes on the Order of the Garter, commissioned by the monarch, were in the museum library.