

THE STUDY OF BOOKS

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Have you ever gone into someone's home and wandered over to their bookcases to see what books they have collected – which books they have read – which books reveal their personality, their interests? The books we read, the books we collect, and the books we return to tell a great deal about not only what we think but who we are. Obviously, the same must have been true for George Herbert. We know he was born into a world of privilege and there would have been no greater riches for a young man who prepared himself for the world of the court, politics or polite society than access to the stored riches of a great library.

And what libraries were the settings for George Herbert's long hours of study at Westminster School – perhaps even the old monastic library of Westminster Abbey since the Dean was the family friend Lancelot Andrews - at Trinity College, Cambridge where he read Classics and Divinity, and finally at his cousin's country house library a short distance away at Wilton House. George Herbert obviously spent a good deal of his time in study in these libraries which were not only places of quiet and reflection but – as anyone who has had the privilege of visiting any of them knows – places of great beauty.

But we must be careful, I think, when reflecting on George Herbert's hours of study in these libraries. The word "study" has come to mean very different things for us than it did for him. When I ask my students to describe this experience they speak of effort, will power, discipline - and to put it plainly – hard work. But the word and the experience would have meant something very different for him.

The scholar Ivan Illich went to the Oxford English Dictionary to find the meaning for the word "study" and this is what he found as the first and second meanings for the term:

“(Chiefly in translations from Latin): Affection, friendliness, devotion to another's welfare; partisan sympathy; desire; inclination; pleasure or interest felt in something - NB – all these meanings are obsolete since 1697.”

In other words George Herbert would have experienced study in those libraries as something much more akin to prayer than our contemporary students usually do.

And those wonderful words describing the experience of prayer sound rather like the way the Oxford English Dictionary speaks of study in its pre 1697 guise:

*Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood.*

Perhaps the experience spoken of there comes as much from the 17th century library as the 17th century chapel.

And which books might have had an influence on a young man reading classics at Westminster, Cambridge and Wilton? Undoubtedly Herbert read the translation of the psalms into English lyrics begun by Sir Philip Sidney and completed at Wilton House by his sister Mary Pembroke. Adam Nicolson spoke of these translations “as the most ingenious and mostly rich poetic of any made in English. Donne – friend of the Herbert Family – certainly drew from them as would George Herbert for the great religious poems he would write here in the early 1630s when vicar of Bemerton”. (p. 125)

But it was at Wilton House that Sir Philip Sydney wrote for his sister Mary *The Countesse of Pembroke’s Arcadia*. George Herbert’s education in the classics at Westminster and Cambridge would have meant that he was well aware of the mythical land of Arcadia created by Virgil and Horace and transposed later to this location by Sir Philip Sydney. Arcadia is the fabled land where peace and contentment are possible – where the human beings finally come into harmony with themselves their neighbors and the land. This ideal would be invoked by Charles I as he quoted from the lost Arcadia as he knelt for the axe of the executioner in January, 1649.

But the real Arcadia – not the place for shepherds and farmers in ancient Greece or musical shepherds in the elaborate theatrical masques at the Court of Charles I or even the Wilton House of Sir Philip Sidney’s poem created for his sister Mary – the real Arcadia was created for and available to the shepherds and farmers of this parish of Bemerton and Fugglestone. All that classical learning George Herbert studied those hours in the libraries came into focus in this place.

Last Sunday either in this church or on the radio we heard Ronald Blythe speak of George Herbert. In another context he wrote the following: “Herbert insisted that holiness was much more a normal, rational requirement than a rare achievement”. To find the ideal one need not go to the court or to the country house. Herbert was able to translate the harmony and contentment of Arcadia to the shepherds and farmers of this church. And not only to them but to us also. Because it was in this place that he discovered the true Arcadia.

*I muse, which shows more love,
The day or night: that is the gale, this th’ harbour;
That is the walk, and this the arbour;
Or that the garden, this the grove.
My God, thou are all love.
Not one poore minute scapes thy breast,
But brings a favour from above;
And in this love, more then in bed, I rest.*

Although George Herbert found his Arcadia in this place, perhaps he glimpsed it first in those beautiful libraries in which he loved to study.