

Rebecca Bullard

Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 8460

Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 8460 is a quarto notebook some 174 pages in length. Around 100 pages of the volume contain entries made by Elizabeth Lyttelton (c.1648-after 1728), a daughter of the well-known Norwich author and physician, Sir Thomas Browne. Lyttelton began writing in the book in the 1670s and continued into the first decades of the eighteenth century. The remaining entries – covering 66 pages – were made earlier than those of Lyttelton. The author of these earlier entries has not previously been identified but, by cross-referring the hand in which they are written with that of Browne family letters held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, it is possible to ascertain they were made by Elizabeth Lyttelton's mother and Thomas Browne's wife, Lady Dorothy Browne (1621-85).¹ Dorothy Browne's entries date from the late 1650s. This short article explores the ways in which the identification of Dorothy Browne's hand might result in revised interpretations of MS Add. 8460. It begins by outlining two very different, previous approaches towards the manuscript, which, taken together, act as something of an index of changing scholarly attitudes towards early modern manuscripts over the course of the past century.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the surgeon and literary scholar Geoffrey Keynes bought the manuscript notebook – which he later donated to the Cambridge University Library – and gave it the title, *The Commonplace Book of Elizabeth Lyttelton*. Keynes chiefly valued the volume for its connection with Thomas Browne, whose complete works Keynes would later come to edit.² In 1919 he published a short pamphlet in which he gives a brief description of the manuscript and outlines for his readers what he considers to be its most significant characteristics:

The special interest of this book lies in its having undoubtedly been made by a daughter of Sir Thomas Browne [...] and the fact that it contains, among several personal extracts, an indifferent poem and an excellent piece of prose, both from the pen of Sir Thomas himself and both new, I believe, to present-day readers.³

Geoffrey Keynes plumbed the manuscript for information about and works by Thomas Browne. Elizabeth Lyttelton transcribes fragments of poetry and prose from her father's commonplace books and printed works (ff. 4r, 39r, 38v) as well as short texts by him not found in other sources: a passage of prose entitled 'On Consumptions' (f. 22r); a poem, 'On a Tempest at Sea' (f.

¹ See Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson D. 391.

² *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 6 vols (London: Faber and Gwyer, New York: W. E. Rudge, 1928-31).

³ Geoffrey Keynes, *The Commonplace Book of Elizabeth Lyttelton, Daughter of Sir Thomas Browne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919), pp. 5-6.

47v); and a list of titles with the heading, 'The books which my daughter Elizabeth hath read unto me at nights till she read y^m all out' (ff. 22v-23r). The fact that this heading appears to represent Thomas Browne's 'voice' (even though it is written in Elizabeth Lyttelton's hand) encapsulates the commonplace book's particular appeal for Keynes. As a document created within Thomas Browne's family, by a daughter whose companionship Browne clearly valued highly, it provides a unique perspective upon the private and intellectual life of a major author.

A more recent study of MS Add. 8460 by Victoria E. Burke makes Elizabeth Lyttelton – rather than her more famous father – the primary object of focus. In 'Contexts for Women's Manuscript Miscellanies: The Case of Elizabeth Lyttelton and Sir Thomas Browne', Burke uses Lyttelton's manuscript notes and the Browne family's correspondence to construct a picture of the intellectual world of an otherwise obscure mid-seventeenth-century woman.⁴ Burke's article reveals the range of Elizabeth Lyttelton's reading. It identifies the printed and manuscript sources of many of Lyttelton's entries, showing that she transcribed religious and secular poetry and prose extracts by a wide variety of contemporary authors; English translations from classical texts; and a number of items connected with her family including the verse inscribed on her mother's funeral monument; extracts from her father's writings and some acrostic poems apparently written on the occasion of her own marriage in 1680. Burke concludes that Lyttelton 'was in contact with a circle of like-minded people, that she had access to some of the most popular literature of the day, and that she was interested in playing an active role in the preservation of her father's literary reputation after his death'.⁵ Rather than regarding MS Add. 8460 principally as a site of new discoveries about a canonical male author, Burke treats it as a valuable source of information about the uses to which women put manuscript miscellanies during the early modern period.

Although both Geoffrey Keynes and Victoria Burke note the presence of a second hand that does not belong to Elizabeth Lyttelton in this volume, neither of them identifies it as that of Dorothy Browne. Burke mentions it because Elizabeth Lyttelton made entries in this volume from both ends, so that one set of entries always appears upside-down if the volume is read through. Burke notes that 'the original owner (who compiled mainly sermon notes) reversed the book so that poetry and prose has been written from both ends of the volume, a hundred pages of which are in Lyttelton's hand'.⁶ The suggestion that it was the original owner, rather than Lyttelton, who 'reversed' the volume is a strange one, since presumably it was Lyttelton who reversed the book in order to begin writing from the opposite end to that in which Dorothy Browne made her notes. It reflects the fact that Burke's primary focus is Elizabeth Lyttelton, rather than the manuscript volume as a whole. The 'original owner' receives no further attention in Victoria Burke's article.

⁴ Victoria E. Burke, 'Contexts for Women's Manuscript Miscellanies: The Case of Elizabeth Lyttelton and Sir Thomas Browne', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (2003), 316-328.

⁵ Burke, 'Contexts', p. 316.

⁶ Burke, 'Contexts', pp. 317-8.

Geoffrey Keynes also notes that at one end of this volume '66 pages are filled with texts and parts of sermons which are all written in an earlier hand than is the rest of the book', although he speculates that these entries in the notebook were made 'many years before it came to be used by the Browne family'. He goes on:

It was tempting to conjecture that Sir Thomas had written these in the religious fervour of his youth, and later handed the book to Elizabeth to be filled up with such poems and prose fragments as caught her fancy. But a comparison of the MS with an authentic specimen of Sir Thomas's handwriting finally disposed of this theory, and so the actual writer must remain unknown.⁷

Ironically, Keynes's references to this unidentifiable writer follow his observation that Dorothy Browne's funeral monument in the church of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, is 'the only tangible relic of her life that now remains, except for the illiterate postscripts which she was in the habit of adding to Sir Thomas's letters to his children, and which may be read in Wilkin's edition of the Browne correspondence'.⁸ Had Keynes identified the author of the sermon notes that fill one end of this notebook as Dorothy Browne, he may perhaps have modified not only his belief that few traces of her life remain, but also his slighting opinion of her intellectual abilities.

Dorothy Browne's entries in MS Add. 8460 include: nine transcriptions (between a few hundred and several thousand words in length) of sermons that Dorothy appears to have attended; just over 100 copied verses of scripture, mostly identified by book, chapter and verse; and transcriptions of passages from devotional works published, for the most part, between the 1630s and the 1650s.⁹ Although Dorothy does not record the titles or authors of the printed works that she transcribes, she does frequently insert the names of the preachers that she heard, including John Boatman and George Cock, ministers of St Peter Mancroft from 1654 until the 1670s. These names, combined with the publication dates of those works that I have been able to identify, suggest that Dorothy Browne made the bulk of her transcriptions during the mid-1650s and that she may have continued into the 1660s or even 1670s. These dates make Dorothy Browne's entries in MS Add. 8460 not only

⁷ Keynes, *Commonplace Book*, p. 23.

⁸ Keynes, *Commonplace Book*, p. 23. The edition of Browne's correspondence to which Keynes is referring is Simon Wilkin, ed., *Sir Thomas Browne's Works Including his Life and Correspondence*, 4 vols (London: William Pickering, 1836).

⁹ The point at which Dorothy Browne begins transcribing from printed works is not marked in the MS, since she does not give the titles or authors of these works (the extracts from printed works occupy ff. 71r-68v in the MS). I have not been able to identify all of Dorothy Browne's sources. Those that I have identified are: Edward Reynolds, *Meditations on the Holy Sacrament of the Lords Last Supper* (1638), which was much reprinted throughout the seventeenth century and included in Reynolds's *Collected Works* of 1658; Brian Duppa, *The Soules Soliloquie: and, A Conference with Conscience* (1648); Jeremy Taylor, *The Great Exemplar of Sanctity and Holy Life According to the Christian Institution* (1649); and John Spencer, *Kaina kai palaia. Things New and Old* (1658).

the most copious but also the earliest of her extant writings, since the notes that she appends to her husband's letters to their children (to which Keynes refers in his description of MS Add. 8460) begin in the year 1660. The fact that MS Add. 8460 dates from the Interregnum means that it illuminates a period in the Browne family's history about which little is known.

Dorothy Browne's transcriptions in MS Add. 8460 bear testimony to her 'bright Coelestiall mind' – a description of Dorothy found on the epitaph on her funeral monument, which was transcribed by Elizabeth Lyttelton into MS Add. 8460 at f. 52r.¹⁰ She transcribes sermons in great detail, her longest entry totalling some 2600 words. Evidence of eyeskip throughout her longer sermon notes suggests that she made entries into this volume from rough notes. She is careful not only to capture the contents of sermons, however, but also the style in which they were preached. She notes carefully the different ways in which preachers introduced scriptural texts into their sermons (some, for instance, give long lists of references to verses of the bible, while others quote more freely, weaving the language of scripture into their own spoken prose). She also transcribes their use of stylistic devices such as rhetorical questions and even colloquialisms, creating for the reader a vivid impression of the experience of listening to these sermons. Dorothy uses both sermons and printed texts as starting points for her own spiritual and intellectual meditations. Personal prayers and other interpolations into her transcriptions are scattered throughout this volume. She also uses the manuscript to record, albeit with a degree of subtlety, her conservative religious opinions. For instance, she notes that she attended a sermon by one Mr Holliburton on Christmas day (f. 68r) in a transcription that was almost certainly made during the late 1650s, when Christmas was still a proscribed festival. Scholars working on Thomas Browne have experienced difficulty in finding direct evidence of religious and political conservatism in the works that he published during the later 1650s, and few of his manuscripts from this period are extant. In her own surviving manuscript writings, Dorothy Browne proves rather more outspoken than her husband in this respect. MS Add. 8460 clearly represents a space in which Dorothy was able to express her own political, as well as spiritual, ideas.

How might the discovery of Dorothy Browne's involvement in the production of MS Add. 8460 alter our perception of this manuscript volume? It certainly raises interesting questions about the dynamics of the Browne family, at least some of which will prove difficult to answer. For instance, it seems likely that Dorothy Browne passed her manuscript notebook on to her daughter, Elizabeth, before she died, since the first batch of Elizabeth's entries into the volume appear to date from the 1670s. It is difficult, however, to know when and why Dorothy Browne ceased to write in the notebook and gave it to her daughter. Elizabeth Lyttelton's entries were made during two distinct periods, the later of which appears to have begun after 1687 (since she makes transcriptions from poems by John Norris which were published in this year).¹¹ It may be that her return to the notebook was inspired, in part, by

¹⁰ I have prepared a much fuller account of Dorothy Browne's transcriptions for separate publication. For more on any aspect of the following paragraphs, please refer to this forthcoming article.

¹¹ Burke, 'Contexts', p. 318.

her mother's death in 1685. Elizabeth's transcription of the epitaph on her mother's funeral monument is embedded in amongst Dorothy's own transcriptions of sermon texts (f. 52r), suggesting that Elizabeth deliberately squeezed this verse in amongst her mother's own writings. Although it is impossible to tell when and why Elizabeth Lyttelton inherited MS Add. 8460 from her mother Dorothy Browne, the rhetorical impression created by the material form of this text is of a daughter building on her mother's legacy of piety and intellectual engagement.

In this respect, Elizabeth Lyttelton appears to have made of MS Add. 8460, over the course of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a document that is quite different in character from the one that her mother created in the 1650s. Dorothy's notebook represented for her a space apart from familial and domestic concerns, in which she could reflect upon the spiritual sustenance that she had gained from listening to sermons and reading in books. Nowhere in this volume does she mention her family – neither her numerous children nor her celebrated husband. The absence of any such references is perhaps the more striking given that, during the period when she was writing in this volume, Dorothy gave birth to four children (including twin boys) and buried three of them. The notes that Dorothy writes to her children on her husband's letters from the 1660s onwards are full of domestic details about clothes, recipes and family members. Dorothy's notebook, on the other hand, is a much more serious *aide-mémoire* and a place in which its owner could develop the ideas that she had heard, read and remembered to enable her own, personal, spiritual growth.

For Elizabeth Lyttelton, as she transcribed religious and secular poetry and prose, the notebook may have served these same intellectual and spiritual functions, but it also served an additional purpose: to memorialise her family, including her mother. Victoria Burke notes that Lyttelton was 'interested in playing an active role in the preservation of her father's literary reputation after his death' and that, for her, 'the family offered a congenial space for manuscript compilation'.¹² Lyttelton's explicit references to her father's readings and writings do indeed give the impression of a daughter keen to record her involvement in the intellectual life of an admired father and celebrated author. Lyttelton's interests in preserving her mother's legacy are evident in a different way: not in what she writes, but rather in the physical space that her writings occupy. Lyttelton's debts to her father are made public by her explicit acknowledgement of her interest in his intellectual career; her debts to her mother are more private, evident only to those family members and friends who might recognise their two hands and the relationship between them. The intellectual bonds between male members of the Browne family are evident in the many letters on medicine and natural philosophy that Sir Thomas Browne exchanged with his oldest son, Edward.¹³ Elizabeth Lyttelton's references to her father suggest that she, too, participated in the family culture of intellectual endeavour. But the identification of Dorothy

¹² Burke, 'Contexts', p. 316.

¹³ See Brent Nelson, 'The Browne Family's Culture of Curiosity' in Reid Barbour and Claire Preston, eds, *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 80-99.

Browne's hand in MS Add. 8460 suggests that Elizabeth Lyttelton may also have seen herself as an inheritor of her mother's intellectually engaged piety. The manuscript stands as a quiet memorial to the women of a remarkable family.

MS Add. 8460 reveals benefits of studying early modern manuscripts not only for what they can reveal about particular individuals – whether celebrated, canonical authors or rather more obscure women writers – but also for what they tell as complete documents, read in and of themselves. Every manuscript has its secrets, and not every question about every manuscript will find an answer, no matter how diligent the enquiry. But by piecing together all of the available evidence, the cultures – social, political, cultural and domestic – that produce such extraordinary relics of the past come into focus a little more clearly.

Bibliography

Manuscripts

Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson D. 391

Primary Sources

Sir Thomas Browne's Works Including his Life and Correspondence, ed. Simon Wilkin, 4 vols (London: William Pickering, 1836)

The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 6 vols (London: Faber and Gwyer, New York: W. E. Rudge, 1928-31)

Secondary Sources

Burke, Victoria E., 'Contexts for Women's Manuscript Miscellanies: The Case of Elizabeth Lyttelton and Sir Thomas Browne', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (2003), 316-328

Keynes, Geoffrey, *The Commonplace Book of Elizabeth Lyttelton, Daughter of Sir Thomas Browne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919)

Nelson, Brent, 'The Browne Family's Culture of Curiosity' in Reid Barbour and Claire Preston, eds, *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 80-99

This essay is published under a version of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDeriv license.

You are free to copy, distribute and transmit it, under the following conditions:

Attribution. You must attribute it, in all cases, to Rebecca Bullard.

Non-commercial. You may not use it for any commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon it.

Any requests to use the essay in a way not covered by this license should be directed to the author.