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John Aubrey, My Own Life



Synopsis

Born on the brink of the modern world, John Aubrey was witness to the great intellectual and political upheavals of the seventeenth century. He knew everyone of note in England—writers, philosophers, mathematicians, doctors, astrologers, lawyers, statesmen—and wrote about them all, leaving behind a great gift to posterity: a compilation of biographical information titled *Brief Lives*, which in a strikingly modest and radical way invented the art of biography. Aubrey was born in Wiltshire, England, in 1626. The reign of Queen Elizabeth and, earlier, the dissolution of the monasteries were not too far distant in memory during his boyhood. He lived through England's Civil War, the execution of Charles I, the brief rule of Oliver Cromwell and his son, and the restoration of Charles II. Experiencing these constitutional crises and regime changes, Aubrey was impassioned by the preservation of traces of Ancient Britain, of English monuments, manor houses, monasteries, abbeys, and churches. He was a natural philosopher, an antiquary, a book collector, and a chronicler of the world around him and of the lives of his friends, both men and women. His method of writing was characteristic of his manner: modest, self-deprecating, witty, and concerned above all with the collection of facts that would otherwise be lost to time. *John Aubrey, My Own Life* is an extraordinary book about the first modern biographer, which reimagines what biography can be. This intimate diary of Aubrey's days is composed of his own words, collected, collated, and enlarged upon by Ruth Scurr in an act of meticulous scholarship and daring imagination. Scurr's biography honors and echoes Aubrey's own innovations in the art of biography. Rather than subject his life to a conventional narrative, Scurr has collected the evidence—the remnants of a life from manuscripts, letters, and books—and arranged it chronologically, modernizing words and spellings, and adding explanations when necessary, with sources provided in the extensive endnotes. Here are Aubrey's intricate drawings of Stonehenge and the ancient Avebury stones; Aubrey on Charles I's execution (‘‘On this day, the King was executed. It was bitter cold, so he wore two heavy shirts, lest he should shiver and seem afraid’’); and Aubrey on antiquity (‘‘Matters of antiquity are like the light after sunset—clear at first—but by and by crepusculum—the twilight—comes—then total darkness’’). From the darkness, Scurr has wrested a vibrant, intimate account of the life of an ingenious man.

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Customer Reviews

The English antiquarian John Aubrey (1626-1697) wrote a lot but published little (in fact only a book of 'Miscellanies' was printed towards the very end of his life). However, he was a curious man who was continually writing on an immense variety of subjects. Aubrey's particular interest was Britain's past, its artefacts (both physical and oral) that were in danger of being lost. So Aubrey sought to record the ancient stones and stories, especially those of his home county Wiltshire, before they disappeared for good. Scurr has selected extracts from Aubrey's scattered manuscripts and arranged them chronologically, so that the end result reads like his diary, from birth to death. The result is a wonderful book and I enjoyed it immensely. Aubrey speaks to you through the centuries giving his account of events both momentous (the Fire of London, the Civil War, the Restoration) and small ("I met Mr Hooke [the physicist] this evening at Cardinal's Tavern in Lombard Street. We drank until past midnight and Mr Hooke vomited up wine"). It's hard to believe that these are Aubrey's own words, but each entry is meticulously sourced with Scurr's interventions restricted to modernizing the words and spelling and adding words of her own 'to explain events or interactions that would otherwise be obscure and to frame or offset the charm of Aubrey's own turns of phrase'. Where I have compared Scurr's version with the original, Aubrey's words have been reproduced remarkably faithfully. I would recommend this book to any reader, encouraging them to plunge straight into Aubrey's world. I'll finish, however, with a few of my favourite extracts which I hope will whet the appetite: "To my great joy, I have been admitted, formally, to the Royal Society.

This book is a delight. When one reads a diary or a collection of letters, one usually must wade through mundane and tedious material to encounter the occasional gem. The beginning of this book led me to expect the usual (though the gems were worth it), but, before long, I started to enjoy it all.

This is because John Aubrey: My Own Life is not a diary. It is a biography written in the form of a diary, so Ruth Scurr had the opportunity to make it more fun to read than a real diary usually is. She relies heavily on Aubrey's own words, but she makes alterations and additions, which she does not disclose (except that I suspect that the parenthetical English translations that follow Aubrey's Latin phrases are Scurr's). In her introduction, Scurr acknowledges that she "modernised his words and spellings" and "added words of my own to explain events or interactions that would otherwise be obscure and to frame or offset [set off?] the charm of Aubrey's own turns of phrase." A couple of reviews of the book note specific changes that she made. Adam Smyth in the London Review of Books states that she changed "it came into my Lords thoughts" to "It occurred to his lordship," and she changed "bought a Hen, and made the woman exenterate it" to "bought a hen and had her kill it." Both these changes are inexplicable to me. The latter might have been intended to save the reader a trip to the dictionary, but, in other instances, Scurr retains Aubrey's archaic usages and they are one of the pleasures of the book. He refers, for example, to a "bottle of hay," which means a "bundle of hay." And "exenterate" does not mean "kill"; it means "disembowel."

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