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978-1-108-06563-4 - The Autobiography of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury:
With Introduction, Notes, Appendices, and a Continuation of the Life

Edited by Sidney L. Lee

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The Autobiography of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury

Diplomat, philosopher and friend of John Donne and Ben Jonson, Edward Herbert (c.1582–1648), first Baron Herbert of Cherbury, is best known for his philosophical treatise *De veritate*, examining the nature of truth. After Oxford and a period at court, he served as ambassador to France from 1619 to 1624. A reluctant Royalist, he surrendered the family seat, Montgomery Castle, to Parliament in 1644. His lively and amusing account of his adventures up to 1624 was first published by Horace Walpole in 1764 in an edition of only 200 copies. From the narrative we learn of Herbert's social triumphs in France and of his duels, affairs of the heart, views on education, and herbal remedies. Reissued here is the 1886 limited edition of 1,000 copies that was edited by the literary scholar Sidney Lee (1859–1926). Lee has completed Herbert's life story and offers an insightful introduction to the whole.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

*Six hundred copies of this book printed for England, and four
hundred for America. No more will be printed.*

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BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD

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P R E F A C E.



IT may be of service to the reader to explain the arrangement of this volume. In the Introduction which precedes the Autobiography, I have attempted—firstly, to describe Lord Herbert's varied character, as displayed in his own writings and in historical records; and secondly, to review his eminent achievements in literature and philosophy, of which he himself has given no account. In the essay which succeeds the Autobiography, I have tried to trace his political career in detail from 1624—the year when his own memoirs abruptly terminate—to 1648, the date of his death. In an appendix I have printed several original illustrative documents, many extracts from Herbert's unpublished correspondence, and some historical notes on topics to which frequent allusion is made in the Autobiography on the assumption—no longer justifiable—that they are matters of common knowledge. Former editors have treated the work as a mere curiosity of literature. I have endeavoured in my notes and elsewhere to prove that it deserves the serious attention of the student, not only of English literature, but of English social history in the early seventeenth century.

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My text is that of the first printed edition issued from Horace Walpole's private press in 1764. I differ from that text alone in my treatment of proper names. Soon after I had set myself the task of identifying the persons mentioned by Lord Herbert, I came to the conclusion that the names had very often been wrongly transcribed, and my notes will, I trust, justify the changes I have made. Thus, on p. 49, I replace *Tzlesius* by *Telesius*, on p. 55 *Scordus* by *Cordus*, on p. 116 *William Crofts* by *William Crosse*, and so forth. I greatly regret that I have been unable to consult the original manuscript, but my search for it, as I explain elsewhere, has proved unavailing.

I have to thank the Earl of Powis, the Rev. T. Burd of Chirbury, and the Rev. Dr. Sewell, Warden of New College, Oxford, for the readiness with which they replied to the various inquiries I addressed to them while preparing the book. I also desire to acknowledge my obligations to M. de Rémusat's admirable little volume, *Lord Herbert de Cherbury, sa Vie et ses Œuvres*, and to the Archæological Collections published by the Powysland Club, which are invaluable to the student of Welsh history and biography.

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INTRODUCTION.



“It would not be altogether absurd if a man were to thank God for his vanity among the other comforts of life.” Benjamin Franklin sets these words in the forefront of his autobiography, and they deserve to be set in the forefront of all successful works of the kind. A man may think to apply a record of his own life to various purposes. He may fashion it as a text-book of conduct for his children, as a history of his relations with the politics, religion, or literature of his time, as a generous panegyric of his friends, or as an ill-natured denunciation of those who have shared his life’s successes or defeats. But from whatever point of view the successful autobiographer approaches his subject, unconsciously the same spirit moves him. He is convinced not merely that his life has been worth living, but that he has lived it to eminent advantage. He is self-centred; he is self-satisfied; he loves himself better than his

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neighbour; he weighs others in the balance, and finds them wanting; he knows himself to be of full weight. All professions to the contrary may safely be ignored. Absolute truthfulness is the last thing we expect of the successful autobiographer. No man can give an impartial estimate of himself; failure is only courted by attempting it, and success in autobiography is not attainable unless this condition receive practical recognition. But although "vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like," are the salt of autobiography, sincerity of a kind we do require of it. The writer must be true to his own self-conceit. He must have no self-conscious misgivings about his own real value. The austere may condemn his attitude with what warmth they will. The man of human sympathies will give vanity fair quarter wherever he meet it, and no better reward for his forbearance can be promised him than the power of rightly appreciating that small circle of literature in which Lord Herbert's autobiography holds a central place.

The rigid moralist should devote himself to the "poor shrunken things" of autobiography where the true autobiographical spirit is held in check, or whence it is altogether excluded. Let him not at any rate sit in judgment on the vainglorious performance of Lord Herbert of Cherbury. Mr.

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Swinburne has claimed for this autobiography a place among the hundred best books of the world. On no other work of its class has the critic conferred similar rank. Questions of literary precedence can never hope for final answers, and there may be points of view from which this judgment is disputable. But it is doubtful if any other autobiography breathes quite as freely the writer's overweening conceit of his own worth, which is the primary condition of all autobiographical excellence. At every turn Lord Herbert applauds his own valour, his own beauty, his own gentility of birth. At home and abroad he flatters himself that he is the cynosure of neighbouring eyes. He, in fact, conforms from end to end to all the conditions which make autobiography successful. He is guilty of many misrepresentations. No defect is more patent in his memoirs than the total lack of a sense of proportion. Lord Herbert's self-satisfaction is built on sand. It is bred of the trivialities of fashionable life,—of the butterfly triumphs won in court society. He passes by in contemptuous silence his truly valuable contributions to philosophy, history, and poetry. But the contrast between the grounds on which he professed a desire to be remembered and those on which he *deserved* to be remembered by posterity, gives his book almost all its value. Men of solid mental ability and achievements occasionally like to pose in society as gay Lotharios; it is rare,

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however, for them to endeavour, even as autobiographers, to convey the impression to all succeeding generations that they were gay Lotharios and not much else besides. Yet it is such transparent errors of judgment that give autobiography its finest flavour.

Lord Herbert professes "to relate to his posterity those passages of his life which he conceives may best declare him and be most useful to them." He asserts that he writes "with all truth and sincerity, as scorning to deceive or speak false to any." When he took the work in hand he was more than sixty years old, and it was therefore fitting (he argued) that he should review his life so as to reform what was amiss and comfort himself with those actions "done according to the rules of conscience, virtue, and honour." No worthier object could he have proposed to himself in his declining years; yet so easily are autobiographers diverted from their avowed purposes, that with the exception of the notices of his very early life and a digression on education, there is no passage in the book which could serve any useful end in the hands of the "young person." There is nothing very interesting in the record of Lord Herbert's youth.¹

¹ Enthusiastic admirer of the book as was Horace Walpole, he told Mason that he had better skip the first fifty pages, and Montagu that the first forty pages would make him

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Born in 1583—twenty-two years after Bacon, and nineteen after Shakespeare—he was brought up in the luxury that became the eldest son of an old county family. He lost his father when he was thirteen or fourteen years old; was “exceedingly inclined” to his studies and to music; and at the age of fifteen or thereabouts was married, while still at Oxford, to a wealthy cousin far older than himself, in accordance with an unromantic family arrangement, in which his own inclinations were not considered. Herbert was not a very spirited boy; and his mother, who took great pride in him, governed him and his wife rigorously during his minority. When approaching manhood he avoided “the evil example” of other young men, but, in the closing years of Elizabeth’s reign, “curiosity rather than ambition” brought him to court. Then temptation spread its net for him for the first time, and he enjoyed the entanglement. He came to recognise that he was singularly handsome. Queen Elizabeth suggested that it was a pity he should have married so young, and twice clapped him gently on the cheek, while he kissed her aged hands. He was one of a crowd of persons

sick (Letters, iv. 156, 252). This is rather unfair to Lord Herbert; but the unique interest of the book is certainly not to be found in the early pages.

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created Knight of the Bath at James I.'s coronation. "I could tell," he remarks on this occasion, "how much my person was commended by the lords and ladies that came to see the solemnity then used; but I shall flatter myself too much"—a tell-tale reservation—"if I believed it" (p. 83). He affected to take seriously the words of the formal oath, which bound him to defend all unprotected females, and he soon afterwards resolved to adopt the profession of knight-errantry. He had now, he boasts, lived with his wife in all conjugal loyalty for ten years, and had successfully resisted all allurements to the contrary. He was twenty-five years old, and deemed it desirable to see something more of the world. He told his wife that it became him to seek adventures "beyond sea." Mistress Herbert took another view of the situation, but her husband had his way, and in the next decade lived a very restless life.

He went first to France; made friends with the Duc de Montmorency, an elderly French beau, and while staying at his attractive castle of Merlou tried to find occasion for his first duel in the playful endeavour of a French chevalier to take "a knot of ribbon" from a little girl's head-dress. He rode the great horse, played the lute, and sang with great applause. He visited Henri IV. at the Tuileries, and the King "embraced him in his arms,

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and held him some while there." The divorced Queen Margaret invited him to her balls, and gave him a place next her own chair, to the wonder and envy of the assembled company. He flirted with the Princess of Conti, who had a less than doubtful reputation. The ladies, however, did not confine their attention to him; they admired another man—one M. Balagni—"who could not be thought at most but ordinary handsome," and the puzzling circumstance caused Lord Herbert no little disquietude.

Having tasted of foreign travel, Lord Herbert returned home, only to set out again on another expedition in the Low Countries, where there was a prospect of war. The town of Juliers was to be besieged by Dutch, French, and English troops. No command was offered Herbert, and he performed no service of real importance in the campaign, although he hints at quite another conclusion. But he had the satisfaction of meeting M. Balagni again. He dared his gay rival to all manner of boyishly foolish escapades, in which he contrived that the Frenchman should come off second-best. But the exploit that made him most notorious in this campaign was a quarrel with Lord Howard of Walden. "There was liberal drinking" one night in Sir Horace Vere's quarters, and Lord Herbert spoke merrily to his companions, so merrily that one of them, Lord Howard, an English officer,

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took offence, and came towards him “in a violent manner.” Some days later Herbert’s sensitive honour was wounded by a Frenchman’s taunt that he had not demanded satisfaction of Lord Howard. He therefore sent him a challenge, and the duel would have been fought had not the principals been arrested before they met, and the childish dispute been stayed by the Lords of the Council. Such accidents invariably terminated Herbert’s duels. Men of sense complained that he was choleric and hasty. He admitted that this, generally speaking, was true, but with appalling boldness he added, amid all manner of protestations, that he never had a quarrel with a man for his own sake; he often hazarded himself for his friends, but when injury was offered him in his own person, he sheathed his sword, and contented himself with an inward feeling of resentment. On his return to England he describes himself as carrying with him the reputation of a hero: “And now, if I may say it, and without vanity, I was in great esteem both in court and city, many of the greatest desiring my company” (p. 127). The public generally had heard “so many brave things” of him that his portrait, which he had had painted very many times, was in great demand.¹ Ladies, from the Queen

¹ Lord Herbert describes below three portraits of himself — i. (p. 85) in the robes of a Knight of the Bath, by an

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downwards, placed it in their cabinets or near their hearts, and gave occasion “of more discourse” than he (modest man!) could have wished. One lady (Lady Ayres), “a considerable person” according to Lord Herbert—although history has neglected her altogether—was discovered by the gallant, under circumstances reflecting little credit on himself (p. 129), looking upon his picture “with more earnestness and passion than he could have easily believed.” He was the more surprised at her intense admiration of him, not because Lady Herbert was occupying any of his attention, but because at the moment his own affections were engaged by an anonymous beauty, whose attractions caused him real anxiety. But Lady Ayres’ passion supplied him with congenial food for reflection until her husband treated him to a very uncomplimentary buffeting in Whitehall. In one place he protests before God that he had at court more favours (appa-

unknown artist (now at Powis Castle); 2. (p. 111) mounted on a favourite horse; 3. (pp. 127, 128) a miniature painted by “one Larkin” (now at Charlecote). Of the first of these pictures an etching appears in this volume. Isaac Oliver is credited with the original painting of Lord Herbert lying on the ground after a duel, an etching of which also appears below. An engraving of this picture, which is now at Powis Castle, formed the frontispiece to Horace Walpole’s edition of the autobiography in 1764. There is at Penshurst Castle a fifth portrait of Lord Herbert, attributed to Oliver.

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rently of this kind) than he desired, but such, he consoles himself, are the penal ties attaching to the possession of rare manly beauty.

To a volatile nature like Lord Herbert's, strong passion was altogether foreign. At the best of times his wife received from him conjugal loyalty; true love did not enter into their relations with one another; the lover's fleeting raptures were excited in him by other women's charms. So far as his autobiography informs us, he had no near and dear friends. Affability he had in plenty, but affability is not a staple commodity, and is a poor substitute for the enduring virtue of friendship. Aurelian Townsend, his companion on his first journey, and Ned Sackville, whom he travelled with later, proved pleasant company for a while, but he soon wearied of them and sought new associates. Sir Robert Harley, "being *then* my dear friend," was once insulted in his presence, and the insult was promptly resented by Lord Herbert, who in spite of weak health drew his sword upon the offender. But the story in Lord Herbert's mouth merely becomes a new testimony to his own adventurous disposition. He was good-natured in his dealings with his social inferiors, as is usually the case with the vainglorious. Richard Griffiths, his servant, found him a kindly master. He generously used his influence with Count Maurice of Nassau to spare the life of a

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soldier who had killed his companion, and he recounts the circumstance for the most part attractively; but he spoils the effect of the narration by finally making the Count address all the high officers of the camp in the words: "Do you see this cavalier, with all that courage you know, hath yet that good-nature to pray for the life of *a poor soldier?*" Lord Herbert clearly infers that his generosity, like his amours, added something to his own reputation. He shows himself more disinterested in his affection for his horses, which he rode to advantage; he lamented their sickness, entrusted them to careful keeping in his absence from home, and left provision for them in his will.

Lord Herbert found the sowing of the wild oats which he had neglected to sow in early youth a satisfying pastime in manhood, and did not lightly relinquish the recreation. In 1614 he reappeared in the Low Countries. The Spaniards under Spinola were in the field against the Dutch. Herbert and the Dutch commander (Count Maurice of Nassau) were now the best of friends, and when the fighting was interrupted they played chess with each other, or discussed horses. The Count also made Herbert his companion in his love-making, and "yet so that I saw nothing openly (the modest autobiographer apologises) more than might argue a civil familiarity." On one occasion Herbert

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wanted to decide the dispute between the Dutch and the Spaniards by challenging a Spanish champion in the name of his mistress to single combat, but this romantic ambition was promptly suppressed by his friends. Spinola's high reputation led Herbert, although associated with a hostile camp, to seek an introduction to him; Boswell was not more eager to introduce himself to famous men. Herbert, therefore, walked across to the Spanish quarters, caught the General at dinner, sat down beside him, and on taking his leave, offered to fight under him, if he ever led an army against the infidel Turk. Immediately afterwards Herbert's military ardour cooled, and he visited the notable towns of Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, paying and receiving high-flown compliments all along the route. He twice visited the Elector-Palatine and his wife at Heidelberg. At Rome the master of the English College received him hospitably, because (Herbert is careful to remind us) he had heard men oftentimes speak of him "both for learning and courage." On the return journey he spent much time in Savoy, where the Duke and his minister Scarnafissi had also heard that he was a cavalier of great worth, and treated him accordingly. He promised to raise a troop of horse in Languedoc in behalf of the Duke, who was engaged in war with Spain. On the journey to Languedoc he went out of

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his road to see the daughter of an innkeeper, who (he had been told), was the handsomest woman in Europe, and the sight was peculiarly refreshing. Like adventures accompanied him until his arrival in England in 1618, when the Duke of Buckingham suddenly chose him to go as English ambassador to France.

The responsibility of office somewhat sobered him, and he performed his diplomatic duties with energy and discretion. He lived at Paris in great state, as befitted, in his opinion, the representative of a great nation; spent far more than his salary or his private resources justified, and was jealous of his privileges. By an eccentric ruse he asserted his right to have precedence of the Spanish ambassador in court ceremonies. It goes without saying that he continued his gallantries at the French court. He was, in fact, in such robust health, that he was disposed (he tells us) to some follies which he afterwards repented. He comforted his conscience, however, with the knowledge that he was neither intemperate nor deceitful in his pleasures, and that he could, an' he would, extenuate his fault by telling circumstances that would have operated adversely on the most sober-minded of men. His repartees were of course the delight of French society, and he was a universal favourite. The only person who did not make himself agreeable to him

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was M. de Luynes, the French king's favourite. Luynes was a man of low breeding, and was little likely to be influenced by Lord Herbert's graces of demeanour. When, therefore, Luynes supported a policy of aggression against the French Protestants, and Herbert, in accordance with his instructions, remonstrated on their behalf, the two soon came to high words. Luynes sent a special messenger to James I. to complain of his representative's misconduct, and Herbert followed to explain matters. Herbert suggested that he should fight Luynes, but James I. did not take kindly to the proposal, although he was satisfied with Herbert's explanations. On Luynes' death in 1621, Herbert returned to the French court, and remained there till the early months of 1624, when he was suddenly and permanently recalled. In the closing years of his embassy Herbert showed himself to real advantage; he used all his influence at Paris in behalf of the Protestant Elector-Palatine, the titular King of Bohemia; he sought to cement an alliance between England and France as opposed to Spain, and to consolidate the union of England and Holland. But with the bitter disappointment of his recall his autobiography comes to an abrupt termination.

Lord Herbert's lack of strict veracity, which I have already laid to his charge, is not a defect with which he has been previously credited. Horace