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978-1-316-60686-5 - Urne Buriall and the Garden of Cyrus  
Sir Thomas Browne  
Frontmatter  
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SIR THOMAS BROWNE  
URNE BURIALL  
AND  
THE GARDEN OF CYRUS

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EDITED BY  
JOHN CARTER



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## PREFACE

IT is three hundred years since the publication, by Henry Brome, at the Sign of the Gun in Ivy Lane, of a rather shoddily printed small octavo volume containing two of the most precious glories of English prose.

The author, Thomas Browne, Doctor of Physic, as he styled himself on the title-page, was then fifty-five years of age. He had already published, fifteen years earlier, *Religio Medici*, the work of philosophical reflection for which he is chiefly remembered today, and, in 1646, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (commonly known as ‘Browne’s Vulgar Errors’), the collection of scientific and historical speculations which was even more widely popular during his own lifetime. In 1716, thirty-four years after its author’s death and without benefit of his final revision, was published *Christian Morals*, that essay which to Lytton Strachey seemed almost like an elaborate and magnificent parody of the Book of Proverbs and which so powerfully influenced the prose style of Dr Johnson.

*Urne Buriall* and *The Garden of Cyrus*, the two ‘wonderful deliverances’ which George Saintsbury considered to contain ‘the quintessence both of Browne’s thought and of his expression’, were the perfected products of his maturity. Their factual contents, like their ostensible occasions, are antiquarian and ‘scientific’ in the unscientific manner of that omnivorously inquiring age: indeed, some passages in both the essays read like extracts from a very unusual kind of notebook, constantly illuminated by a flashing or fantastic phrase. But for the most part, and particularly in *Urne Buriall*, the curious lore, the strange fantasies, the whimsical speculations, the extraordinary conceits, the relish for picturesque legend and equally picturesque reality, the fascination exerted on the

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author by bizarre historical and mythical figures—all these jewelled elements, like the thousand small pieces of stained glass in a great rose window, are harmonised by Browne's deeply reflective imagination, and patterned, with the most polished and elaborate artistry, into paragraph after paragraph of baroque magnificence.

However, where Johnson and Coleridge, Pater and Saintsbury, and (perhaps the most perceptive of all) Lytton Strachey, have praised and analysed, there is not much left to say about Sir Thomas Browne's style in general, nor about these two masterpieces in particular, that has not been said better before. I shall therefore stand between the reader and the author no longer than to aver that this text is as accurate as I can make it; to thank my learned friends Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Dr Jeremiah Finch, Mr John Sparrow and the late John Hayward for their advice (none the less warmly where I have not taken it) on half a dozen points of exegesis; and to offer a grateful and affectionate salute, across the years and now all those long miles to Grundisburgh, to the Eton master who first opened a schoolboy's ears to Sir Thomas Browne's music.

CHELSEA

*Michaelmas 1957*