Traherne, Thomas

(*c.* 1637–1674)

Julia J. Smith

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Traherne, Thomas (*c.* 1637–1674), poet and writer, was born within the walls of the city of Hereford, the son of a shoemaker, a master craftsman and freeman of Hereford who kept at least two apprentices, and who was very probably John Traherne (*fl.* 1629–1648), of the parish of All Saints. Nothing is known of the identity of Traherne's mother, but he had a younger brother, Philip (1640–1723), with whom he maintained a close relationship throughout his life, and who was to become chaplain to the Levant Company in Smyrna (1670–75), and subsequently minister of Wimborne Minster, Dorset (1684–1723).

Childhood and education

Traherne's writing powerfully recreates both the innocence of his infancy, in which he was 'Entertained like an Angel with the Works of GOD', and his fall, as he was 'made to learn the Dirty Devices of this World' (*Centuries*, 3.2, 3). His experience was paralleled by that of Hereford; the royalist city, which had 'seemed to stand in Eden' (ibid., 3.3), was occupied for the first time in 1642 by parliamentary troops, and was finally captured for parliament in December 1645. John Traherne, who had fought as an officer in the local royalist militia, was taken prisoner, and paid a ransom of £4. His fortunes, however, seem to have revived, and in Michaelmas 1648 he completed the purchase of property in the parish of All Saints, almost certainly that in Widemarsh Street which was later to belong to Thomas and after his death to be settled on the city for use as almshouses. Hereford retained a parliamentary garrison, and the clergy of the cathedral and city churches were replaced by puritan nominees, some of whom would later support Traherne's presentation to a living. Probably too they influenced his education; he may have attended Hereford Cathedral school, and although 'Scholes were a Burden' he certainly received the equivalent of a grammar school training. But to the young Thomas, the world was a 'Comfortless Wilderness'; even as a child he had begun 'to long after an unknown Happiness', the attainment and communication of which was to be the object of his life (ibid., 3.14, 15).

On 1 March 1653 Traherne was admitted as a commoner at Brasenose College, Oxford, a college governed with a zealous puritanism, to the requirements of which he must have conformed. He matriculated as a plebeian on 2 April 1653, was admitted to the degree of BA on 13 October 1656, created MA on 6 November 1661, and admitted BD on 11 December 1669. As a student he relished both the 'Beautifull Streets and famous colledges' of Oxford (*Select Meditations*, 3.83), and 'the Taste and Tincture of another Education ... Glorious Secrets, and Glorious Persons past Imagination'; but notoriously found that 'There was never a Tutor that did professely Teach Felicity' (*Centuries*, 3.36, 37). His notes on his conventional undergraduate reading are to be found in his *'Early notebook'* (Bodl. Oxf., MS Lat. misc. f. 45). He remained in Oxford at least until Lent 1657, when he took part in the disputations required of a determining bachelor.

Credenhill

On 30 December 1657 Traherne was admitted by the commissioners for the approbation of public preachers to the rectory of Credenhill in Herefordshire, to which he had been presented by its patron, Amabella, countess dowager of Kent. He was supported by certificates from some of the county's leading presbyterian clergy, William Voyle, William Lowe, Samuel Smith, and George Primrose, preachers at Hereford Cathedral, who were all to be ejected after the Restoration. Traherne may well have received ordination from them since, although presbyterian classes were never established in Herefordshire, they ordained many ministers in the cathedral in an attempt to stem sectarianism, an aim with which Traherne would certainly have agreed. At this date, therefore, he is probably to be seen as having moderate puritan sympathies. When at the Restoration he sought episcopal ordination long before the eventual church settlement required it, it is not clear whether he did so out of doctrinal conviction, or in order to strengthen his title to his living. He was ordained deacon and priest at Launton, Oxfordshire, on 20 October 1660 by Robert Skinner, bishop of Oxford, the see of Hereford being vacant. On 18 August 1662, unlike his sponsors, he subscribed to the *Act of Uniformity*.

It seems to have been during this period of uncertainty for the church shortly after the Restoration that Traherne composed his *Select Meditations* (first published in 1997), a series of short reflections on his own vocation 'to teach Immortal Souls the way to Heaven' (3.83), his devotional life, and its relationship to the political and ecclesiastical turmoils of the nation. It juxtaposes a fervent commitment to 'the Beautifull union of my Nationall church' and its 'External Flourishing' (1.85, 3.23) with an intense perception of spiritual realities, including an experience of the infinity of the human soul so powerful 'that for a fortnight after I could Scarsly Think or speak or write of any other Thing' (4.3).

Traherne was to remain rector of Credenhill until he died in 1674; apart from some temporary absences he was, as his churchwarden reported in 1673, 'continualy resident amongst us' until early in the year of his death (Hereford County RO, registrar's files, 1673/488). His parish, 5 miles north-west of Hereford, was a very small one of about two dozen households, about half of them living close to the poverty line, and had neither school nor midwife. Traherne himself, with a living worth £50 a year, was relatively affluent, and there was only one house in the parish larger than his four-hearth rectory: he 'called his Hous the Hous of Paradice' (*Centuries*, 4.22). Ecclesiastical records show him engaged in the usual round of a parish minister, reporting that he 'does duly visit the sick, Instruct the youth' (Hereford County RO, registrar's files, 1673/488), although Traherne did not always find such visiting easy: 'And when I enter into Houses, let me remember the Glory I saw in the feilds' (*Select Meditations*, 2.100). His churchwarden thought him 'a goo[d] and Godlie man well Learned ... and a good Preacher of gods word and a very devout liver' (Hereford County RO, registrar's files, 1667/349). On 28 May 1669 a Mr John Traherne was buried in the parish, perhaps his father. Later in his ministry Traherne also had ecclesiastical responsibilities outside his own parish; on 26 July 1667 he was appointed a surrogate for the dean of Hereford in his consistory court, and regularly presided there during 1671 and 1672.

Traherne's church of St Mary, 'the Roffe well covered wth tyle, the wyndowes well glazed' was 'soe decentlie ordered as becometh the howse of God' (Hereford County RO, registrar's files, 1666/36), but of his liturgical practice little is known. Twenty-five years after his death, it was said by an anonymous acquaintance that he

'became much in love with the beautiful order and *Primitive* Devotions of this our excellent Church', and 'never failed any one day either publickly or in his private Closet, to make use of her publick Offices' (*Serious and Pathetical Contemplation*, sig. A4*v*). Such an affection for the Anglican liturgy must have developed gradually; after the Restoration Traherne had seen not the *Book of Common Prayer*, but the Lord's prayer as 'the Liturgie of His church' (*Select Meditations*, 3.58b). His *'Church's year-book'* (Bodl. Oxf., MS Eng. th. e. 51), a collection of meditations and devotions on the liturgical calendar, which he began before 1670, may have been part of the process by which he familiarized himself with classic Anglican texts.

It was probably at the beginning of Traherne's ministry at Credenhill that, having 'all my Time in mine own Hands', he took the momentous resolution to 'Spend it all, whatever it cost me, in Search of Happiness' (*Centuries*, 3.46). This dedication may have been associated with a period of 'Close Retirements' lasting some years, in which he walked 'with God, as if there had been non other but He and I' (*Select Meditations*, 3.69). As he progressed in 'the study of Felicitie', he achieved the perception which illuminates all his writing, that 'all things were Gods Treasures in their Proper places' (*Centuries*, 3.52, 60), and this discovery in turn led to a burning desire to communicate his vision to others. Indeed, as his anonymous acquaintance remembered, Traherne was 'so wonderfully transported with the Love of God to Mankind' that 'those that would converse with him, were forced to endure some discourse upon these subjects, whether they had any sense of Religion, or not' (*Serious and Pathetical Contemplation*, sig. A4*r*).

Manuscript works

The same acquaintance also recorded that Traherne spent 'most of his time when at home, in digesting his notions of these things into writing' (*Serious and Pathetical Contemplation*, sig. A4*r*), an assertion amply verified by the quantity of Traherne's original works which survive in manuscript. Definite dates cannot be assigned to most of these works, a number of which remained unfinished at Traherne's death; many of them appear to have been written after the Restoration, and several, including *'Commentaries of heaven'* (BL, Add. MS 63054) and *'The kingdom of God'* (LPL, MS 1360) were composed at least in part after 1670. It is however primarily Credenhill which must be seen as the context of their composition.

Traherne's major works vary widely in genre, ranging from the ecstatic lyric poems (first published in 1903), which celebrate 'the Old / And Innocent Delights' of Eden and childhood (Eden, ll. 33–4), to *'Commentaries of heaven'*, an encyclopaedia of felicity in which 'EVRY BEING' is, with much ingenuity, 'Alphabeticaly Represented As it will appear In the Light of GLORY' (title-page). This latter work, conceived on a vast scale but completed only from *'Abhorrence'* to *'Bastard'*, embraces not only theological topics, but also shows a keen interest in contemporary scientific discoveries and in political and ecclesiastical affairs. In *Centuries* (first published in 1908) Traherne instructs a friend in 'those Truths you Love, without Knowing them' (1.1) by unfolding his own experience of felicity, both as a child and as an adult, through a series of meditations. *'The kingdom of God'* is a physico-theological work, which moves from exploration of the attributes of God and the 'Glory & Perfection' of his spiritual kingdom (fol. 177*r*), to an account, often given in terms of the new philosophy, of the 'World of Mysteries' (fol. 258*v*) comprehended within the created universe. *'The ceremonial law'* (Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V. a. 70) is a biblical poem in heroic couplets, based on the events of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, which combines a lively narrative of the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness with typological exposition. All of these works, through Traherne's vivid and often idiosyncratic style and

vocabulary, embody his characteristic themes of the infinity of space, the limitless potential of 'This busy, vast, enquiring Soul' (Insatiableness II, 1.1), our creation in the image of God, the necessity of free will, the 'Permanent and Steddy' treasures of Adam in Eden (*Select Meditations*, 3.12), and their repossession in greater abundance by the redeemed. Although none of these works was published by Traherne, some of them show clear evidence of having been prepared for publication, *'Commentaries of heaven'* in particular addressing 'Publick Persons' (fol. 17*r*. 2).

Traherne however also had a more immediate and intimate audience of 'living Auditors' for his works (*Select Meditations*, 2.45). The ten extant manuscripts of his writings, although chiefly autograph, also contain contributions in some six other hands. These show that a number of other people, one of whom has been identified as Traherne's brother Philip, worked with him in the production of the manuscripts, copying out his own work, making extracts from other authors under his direction, and perhaps occasionally adding short passages of their own selection or composition. The manuscripts also provide evidence that Traherne showed his work to friends for comment. The friend who read the unfinished *'Ceremonial law'* responded enthusiastically, 'I like this mightily' (flyleaf), while the marginal annotations to *'A sober view of Dr Twisse his considerations'*, Traherne's survey of Calvinist and Arminian debate, take a more critical stance: 'all this is Good & True, but y^{u} have said it over & over' (LPL, MS 1360, fol. 84*r*). *Centuries* is addressed to a friend, and 'of the Soul' (Yale University, Beinecke Library, Osborn MS b. 308) written in response to a request. Writing was not a solitary activity for Traherne, and most of the manuscripts can be seen in some degree as communal productions.

Associates and character

Traherne placed a high value on the possession of 'Intelligent Friends & Heavenly Companions', although many of the friends mentioned in his writing, such as the 'Knight, & a Traveller' from whom he heard 'som curious Observations' on ants, remain unidentified (Commentaries, fols. 29*v* 2, 101*r* 1). Interestingly, in spite of his vehement attacks on 'Disobedient Hereticks' (*Select Meditations*, 3.23), most of his known associates, including Sir Edward Harley, Thomas Barlow, Thomas Good, and Sir Orlando Bridgeman, were sympathetic to nonconformists, or were actively involved in attempts to comprehend them within the national church. Traherne apparently met John Aubrey, and possibly he also knew the devotional writer Susanna Hopton, who lived at nearby Gattertop, and whose niece and god-daughter Susanna Blount married Philip Traherne in August 1670. Traherne himself never married, but 'led a single and a devout life' (Wood, *Ath. Oxon.*, 2.531). He seems to have made a deliberate choice of celibacy: 'I would be Disentangled from all the World, but God alone. Free to Suffer & to follow Vertue' (Inducements to retiredness, LPL, MS 1360, fol. 5*r*).

Contemporary references speak highly of Traherne's character. Thomas Good thought him 'one of the most pious ingenious men that ever I was acquainted with' (Worcester Cathedral Library, MS D. 64), and he was remembered as 'a man of a cheerful and sprightly Temper ... ready to do all good Offices to his Friends, and Charitable to the Poor almost beyond his ability' (*Serious and Pathetical Contemplation*, sig. A4*v*). Traherne himself knew that he also suffered from the weaknesses of a sociable personality: 'Too much openness and proneness to Speak are my Diseas. Too easy and complying a Nature' (*Select Meditations*, 3.65). A contrasting trait in his character was his obvious relish in his skill as a controversialist, as he described an intellectual skirmish in 'the *New-Parks*' at Oxford with a 'Grave Person' committed to 'promoting Popery' (*Roman*

Forgeries, 1673, sig. B7*r*); recounted how he twice questioned the baptist John Tombes 'at his Amsterdam, his Heretical Church in Leominster', leaving that distinguished scholar 'as Blank, & mute as a Fish'; and boasted that 'it is the Easiest thing in the World to convince & confound a Jew, as I my self have done' (Commentaries, fols. 194*r* 2–*v* 1, 139*v* 1).

Contact with Oxford and London

During his residence in Credenhill, Traherne maintained contact with Oxford, returning to take his MA in November 1661 and his BD in December 1669; on both occasions he was dispensed from some of the statutory requirements. In 1664 he donated 20*s*. towards the completion of the new library and chapel at Brasenose. On at least one of his visits he worked in the Bodleian Library, 'the Glory of *Oxford*, and this Nation', on his *Roman Forgeries* (sig. B7*r*), a polemical tract exposing the alleged falsification by Roman Catholics of the councils of the first 420 years of the church; one scarce book he discovered in the collection of Thomas Barlow, Lady Margaret professor of divinity. Traherne emphasized the meticulousness of his research: 'I do not trust other mens information, but mine own eyes' (sig. B6*v*). He was working on *Roman Forgeries* in the early 1670s, but described it in *'Commentaries'* as complete, and 'fit to be published' (fol. 104*v* 2). In autumn 1673 he was in London arranging its publication.

Roman Forgeries was entered in the Stationers' register by the bookseller Jonathan Edwin on 25 September and licensed on 24 November 1673, becoming, by the timing of its publication, a contribution to the anti-Catholic political ferment of that year. Its title-page attributes it simply to a 'Faithful Son of the Church of ENGLAND'. Traherne probably remained in London for some time: he may have made handwritten corrections to the printed copies of his book, and he was apparently absent from Credenhill on 17 October, when the incumbent of a neighbouring parish was acting as its curate. While in London he may have had contact with the latitudinarian divine Edward Stillingfleet, and more importantly with his future patron Sir Orlando Bridgeman, lord keeper of the great seal until his removal from office in November 1672. *Roman Forgeries* dedicates to Bridgeman 'The USE and BENEFIT' of the author's 'Ensuing Labors' (sig. A2*r*), perhaps indicating a hope of employment in Bridgeman's service.

Final months at Teddington

Traherne was apparently back in Credenhill on 15 January 1674, but by 19 February he had 'removed out of the Country' to become domestic chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman at Teddington, Middlesex (*Serious and Pathetical Contemplation*, sig. A4*v*). How Traherne obtained such a position, which was a recognized step to preferment, is not known, although it could have been through the family connections of Sir Edward Harley. Bridgeman, a man with 'very serious impressions of religion on his mind' (*Burnet's History*, 1.454), had since his dismissal lived in seclusion at his substantial villa in the fashionable village of Teddington, with his second wife, Dorothy, 'a woman that hath no good esteeme by any that knows her' (*Life ... of Sir William Dugdale*, 396), and their daughter, Charlotte. As chaplain Traherne would have taken prayers for the family and for the other employees of the house, but he was not the incumbent of Teddington, which was served by its perpetual curate. Nor would he have had any opportunity to take the prominent role in ecclesiastical

politics played by Hezekiah Burton, Bridgeman's chaplain when he was lord keeper. He may, however, have met Burton and another former chaplain, Richard Cumberland, both of whom were close friends of Bridgeman, and who shared both his latitudinarian views and his opposition to Hobbes.

The whole of Traherne's brief residence at Teddington was overshadowed by illness and death. His first recorded act in Bridgeman's service was to witness his will; by early May Bridgeman was seriously ill, and on 25 June 1674 he died. After his patron's death Traherne remained at Teddington with Lady Bridgeman, preparing his *Christian Ethicks* for the press. This treatise offers a guide to 'the way of *Vertue*' (sig. A2*v*) neither by presenting moral conduct in terms of duty or expediency, nor by condemning vice, 'which is far the more easie Theme' (sig. A4*r*), but by making 'as *visible*, as it is possible for me, the lustre of its *Beauty*, *Dignity*, and *Glory*' (sig. A3*r*). The work's connection with the Bridgeman household may be reflected both in its engagement with Hobbes's 'arrogant *Leviathan*' (p. 519), and in that it envisages an audience of 'Birth and Breeding' (p. 11). *Christian Ethicks* was entered in the Stationers' register by Jonathan Edwin on 6 August 1674, and was licensed for publication on 25 November, but the 'Author's much lamented Death' (sig. a8*v*) had taken place before he had been able to correct the proofs.

On 27 September 1674 Traherne was 'lyeing sick at the Lady Bridgmans house', and made a nuncupative will, commenting 'I have not soe much, but that I can dispose of it by word of mouth'. He had apparently already begun transferring his houses in Widemarsh Street to the corporation of Hereford for use as almshouses on 25 August. In his will he left a ring to Lady Bridgeman and to Charlotte, and small bequests to each of the Bridgeman servants. To his brother Philip, absent in Smyrna, he left all his books and 'my best hatt', telling his sister-in-law Susanna, who was present, 'I desire you would keep it for him' (TNA: PRO, PROB 10/1061). By 3 October Traherne was dead, although the exact date of his death is unknown. He was buried at Teddington on 10 October 1674 'under the reading Desk in the church, just entering into the Chancell he had no stone laid over him' (Bodl. Oxf., MS Wood F 45, fol. 40).

Reputation and rediscovery of manuscripts

At his death, Traherne had only a slight reputation as a scholar 'well read in primitive antiquity' (Wood, *Ath. Oxon.*, 2.531). Neither *Roman Forgeries* nor *Christian Ethicks* was widely read, and when in 1699 his *Serious and Pathetical Contemplation* (now known as *Thanksgivings*) was published 'At the request of a Friend of the Authors', it was thought to be 'to no purpose' to identify its author (title-page, sig. A3*v*). His other manuscript works remained unpublished, although Philip abortively prepared a volume of poems for the press, and by the early nineteenth century they were widely dispersed. Traherne would have sunk into oblivion had it not been for the extraordinary rediscovery of his manuscript writings which took place during the twentieth century. This story began in winter 1896–7 when W. T. Brooke purchased two manuscripts, *Centuries* and a folio volume containing poems and a commonplace book, from two London book barrows for a few pence. Thought at first to be by Henry Vaughan, they were subsequently identified as Traherne's through the detective work of Bertram Dobell, who published *The Poetical Works* (1903), and *Centuries* (1908). This led to several other discoveries, including some notebooks, and the identification of *Poems of Felicity* in the British Museum (published in 1910). In 1964 *Select Meditations* was identified, and in 1981 *'Commentaries of heaven'* was recognized as Traherne's, having been rescued about 1967 from a burning rubbish tip in Lancashire, already partly scorched. In late 1996 and early 1997, exactly one hundred years after the first

discoveries, two further manuscripts came to light: *'The ceremonial law'*, which had been in the Folger Shakespeare Library since 1958; and a large volume in Lambeth Palace Library, containing *'Inducements to retiredness'*, *'A sober view'*, *'Seeds of eternity'*, *'The kingdom of God'*, and a fragment on *'Love'*. Given the fortuitousness of this sequence of discoveries, it is entirely possible that yet more manuscript works may be found.

Partly as a result of the nature of the first discoveries, Traherne was seen for much of the twentieth century primarily as a poet, rather than as a prose writer, and as a radiant and sometimes facile mystic who 'was unaffected by the domination of either king or protector' (Iredale, 2). A tendency to associate his work with that of the earlier metaphysical poets seemed further to distance it from the concerns of the Restoration period in which he actually wrote. More recent major discoveries and changing critical tastes have led to a growing appreciation of the qualities, both literary and intellectual, of his prose, and an increased understanding of the depth of his engagement with the philosophical and political issues of his time. None the less a number of major works remain as yet unpublished, so that the comment written in a seventeenth-century hand on the flyleaf of the Lambeth manuscript still stands: 'Why is this soe long detaind in a dark manuscript, that if printed would be a Light to the World, & a Universal Blessing?'

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