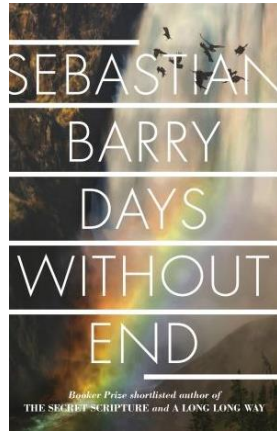


The Secret Scripture (2008)

Barry has captured the Costa Book Award twice — in 2008 & 2017 ...



Days Without End (2016)

“His veritable gospel”: Sebastian Barry and *Religio Medici*

A Bloomsday Lecture by Bruce Stewart UFRN

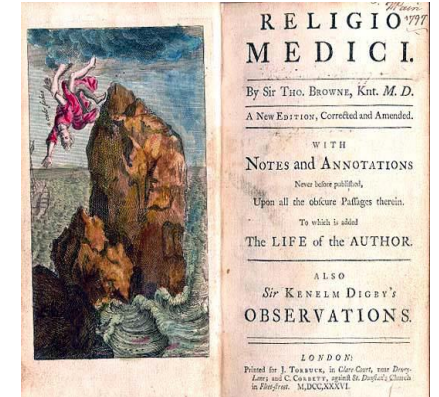
‘The greatest imperfection is in our inward sight, that is, to be ghosts unto our own eyes.’

Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*

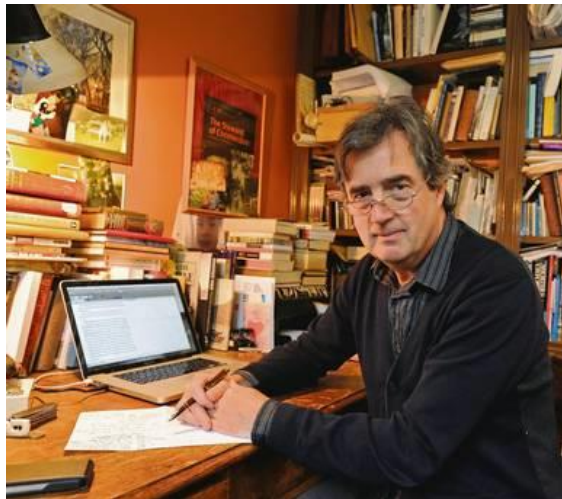
‘Of the numbers who study, or at least read history, how few derive any advantage from their labours! . . . Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated ancient and modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes.’

Maria Edgeworth, Preface to *Castle Rackrent*

—Epigraphs in *The Secret Scripture* (2008)



Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643; 1736 Edn.)



Photos of Barry by David Meehan (*Independent*, UK) and Bruce Stewart (UFRN)

Q: Roseanne McNulty, the central character in *The Secret Scripture* (2008), owns a copy of the *Religio Medici* (1643) by Sir Thomas Browne a sentence from whose works provides an epigraph for that novel. *Why?*

Q: The second epigraph is from the Preface to Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800). *Why?*



Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682)

“I am of Ireland ...”

Trinity College,
Dublin



“I love my country because I know my country. I’m not loving unconditionally or blindly. I’ve tried to look into the whole matter, and I remain in love with this strange land and its people.” (Barry, in interview, NPR, 27 Feb. 2017.



The Abbey Theatre,
founded in 1904, has staged
most of Barry’s new plays.



Nelson’s Column at the centre of Dublin city
was blown up in protest against such
remnants of British Rule 50 years after the
Easter Rising of 1916.



Ireland broke with the past and
voted in favour of Gay Marriage
on 22 May 2015



St Brigid’s, Ballinasloe, Go
Galway, was Ireland’s
biggest lunatic asylum –
the model for Roscommon
Mental Hospital in *The
Secret Scripture* (2008).



The traditional
Irish cottage –
part of the
‘landscape of
the heart’



Sligo City



The 4,000 year-old megalithic
grave at Newgrange is part of
the ancient heritage of Ireland.



Clonmacnoise was a centre of Christian and
classical learning in the 8th century.

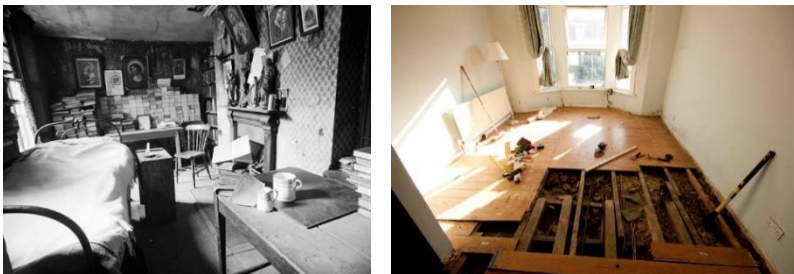
Home places

27 Longford Terrace,
Monkstown, Co. Dublin



In 1976 Sebastian shared a house on Mountjoy Sq. with the present speaker and this led to the writing of a story about a famine victim who leaves a diary under the floorboards – an early version of *The Secret Scripture*.

20 Mountjoy
Square, Dublin



Barry is the son of an architect and a successful stage-and-film actress (Joan O'Hara) – herself the daughter of a Sligo man who served in the British Army. Throughout his writing life, he has explored his family history and taken family members of earlier generations as models for his characters, building up an imaginary history of their interconnected lives - though not a 'family saga' in the ordinary sense.

The Dunnes and McNulty's who populate his works are respectively members of his paternal and maternal families, with a. Collectively they represent a class of Irishmen and women who find themselves living marginal and troubled lives, often at violent odds with the dominant social and political ethos of 'Free State' Ireland.

Fintan O'Toole: 'Sebastian Barry's works are about history, but not in any very obvious or familiar sense. The history that informs these plays is a history of counter-currents, of lost strands, of untold stories. [...] In Barry's luminous plays, grace and disgrace are not opposites but constant companions.' (Preface to *Plays of Sebastian Barry*, London: Methuen 1997)



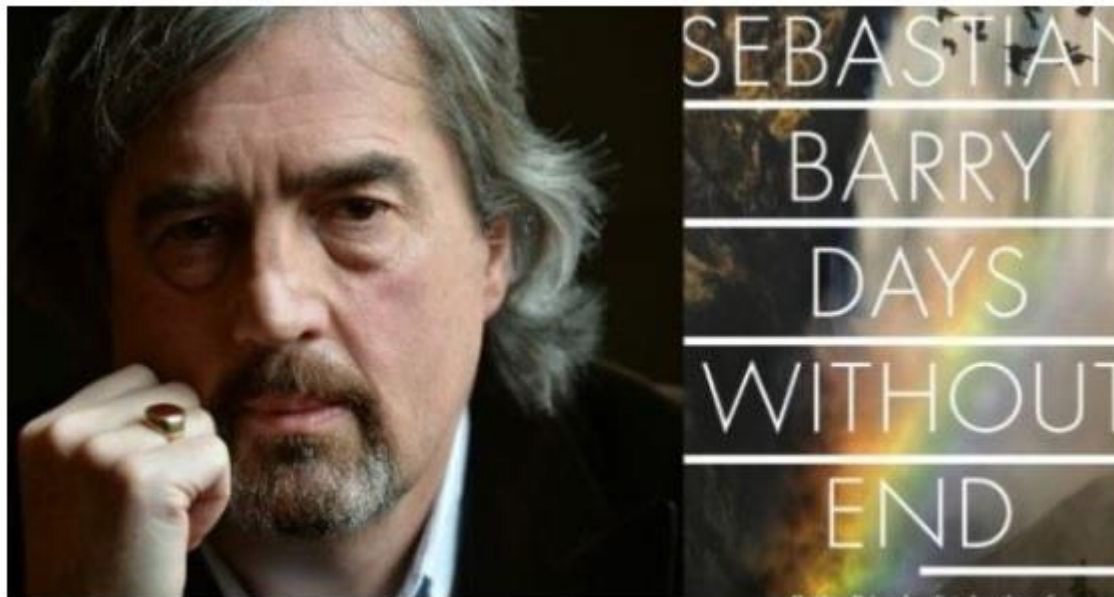
Connacht District Asylum
(closed down in 1997)

How far these characters are really based on family members and how far they are invented remains a matter of doubt but Barry has said that "the whole adventure of these seven books [...] has been to try and go and find, if only in the imagination, these bits and bobs of my family, the people who weren't talked about[.]". But he also said, "I loved them madly. I mean, I was in love with these people, and I wanted more of them." (Sam Briger, interview with Barry, NPR [Washington], 27 Feb. 2017.)

Sebastian Barry wins Costa Novel Award again for *Days Without End*

Fellow winners Brian Conaghan, Keggie Carew, Francis Spufford and Alice Oswald compete with Barry for £30,000 Costa prize

© Tue, Jan 3, 2017, 19:30



Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End*: "a miracle of a book" according to the Costa judges

The Costa judges called *Days Without End* (2016) "a miracle of a book" citing especially its ability to "create spaces for love and safety in the noise and chaos of history." What is most miraculous is that an American novel has been written by an Irish writer, using the Hiberno-English dialect of which Barry is the literary master.

In one respect, however, it is no miracle since so many Irish people migrated to the United States of America that their dialect has become an intrinsic part of American English. Hence it is so often said that Ireland is closer to Boston than it is to London.

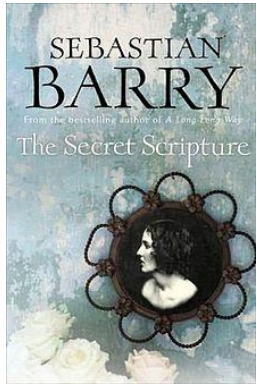
Days Without End is, the judges said, is "a miracle of a book – both epic and intimate – that manages to create spaces for love and safety in the noise and chaos of history". Eoin McNamee, reviewing it in *The Irish Times*, wrote: "There is a majestic rhythm to Barry's prose, deep craft in the shaping of the novel, the impetus of events carrying us through at pace... Sebastian Barry is the most humane of writers. The leeway is always generous; beauty is mined to its last redemptive glint...the voice is humorous, compassionate, true. It is his glory as a writer. It is the stern, glorious music of a great novel."

Barry was born in Dublin in 1955 and now lives in Co Wicklow. His works include the play *The Steward of Christendom* and the novel *The Secret Scripture*, which won the Costa Book of the Year in 2008 and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

—Martin Doyle, *The Irish Times*, 3 Jan. 2017

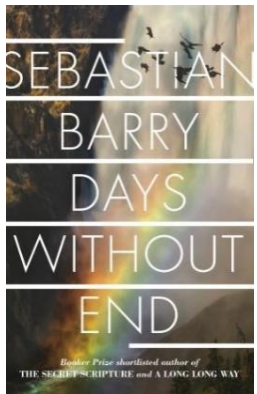
BARRY'S COSTA WINNERS: PEOPLE & PLOTS

The Secret Scripture (2008)



Roseanne McNulty, approaching her hundredth year, is writing a memoir which she keeps under a floorboard in the Roscommon Mental Asylum where she has been held at the behest her former husband's family, with the connivance of a priest, since 1957. She talks with Dr Grene, the psychiatrist in charge who is trying assess her sanity. Their initially guarded relationship grows closer after his wife's death and it finally turns out that they are connected in a radical and surprising way. The thrilling prose loads the personal narratives of each with a powerful message about memory and experience: "There are some sufferings that we seem as a creature to forget, or we would never survive as a creature among all the other creatures." oseanne's story illustrates the well-kept secret that Irish families often used asylums to deal with 'problems'. (Greg Carr / *Read Ireland* (Sept. 2008).)

Days Without End (2016)



Thomas McNulty, barely 17 years old, signs up for the US Army in the 1850s, having fled from the Great Famine in Ireland, the sole survivor in his family at home. With his brother-in-arms John Cole, he takes part in the war of extermination against the Sioux and the Yurok tribes and later fights with the Union in the American Civil War. In the face of terrible hardships the two find in each other not only friends but lovers. The plot moves between the plains of Wyoming and the lush pastures of Tennessee, where Thomas and John create a makeshift family with a young Sioux girl called Winona. *Days Without End* gives a fresh and haunting insight into those fateful years of American history and has been greeted in America as 'a masterpiece of atmosphere and language'. (*Goodreads*, 24 Jan. 2017 [online].)

Note: The summaries given here are edited versions of those named in the by-line.

A short view of the works ...

The Engine of Owl-Light (1987)

This **experimental novel** which incorporates a *Künstlerroman* in the tradition of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with a national history told in **extravagantly varied styles** reveals that Barry's mature style was not so easily arrived at. Episodes set in Ireland – medieval and modern – America, and Switzerland involve recycled characters who appear in similar roles under different names while early scenes anticipate the 'asylum' plot of *The Sacred Scripture* and others set in Africa foreshadow the South Africa episodes in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*.



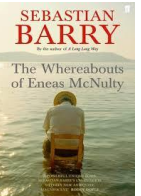
The Steward of Christendom (1995)

The internationally successful play which **made the writer's reputation** with its portrayal of a police superintendent (Thomas Dunne) who ordered a historic charge against Dublin strikers during the 1913 "Lock Out" and was hated for it. In the play, he is stripped naked in an asylum as part of his non-judicial punishment. His defence: **he worshipped Queen Victoria as the Mother of the Empire** with a strong and dutiful passion. *The Steward of Christendom* is among the most-toured Irish plays of this generation. The author claims to be related to Dunne.



The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty (1998)

Eneas rashly **joins the British Forces in Ireland** during the "Troubles" and is run out of the country by his boyhood friend Jonno Lynch, who is now the leader of a local rebel IRA [republican rebels]. After travels in Africa and elsewhere he returns to Ireland and gets tacit permission to live there from Jonno **provided he remains** hidden. Eneas's **catastrophic naivety combined with a perceptive mind** constitutes the tragic flaw of of Barry's heroes.



Annie Dunne (2002)

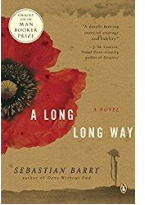
Thomas Dunne's daughter has a **disability and remains unmarried**. She lives on a Wicklow farm with her sister Sarah, who is being wooed by a neighbouring farmer for mercenary reasons. If the marriage takes place, Annie will be homeless. Worst, she is threatened with the lose of the company and affection of the young children of her nephew and his wife – children whom she lovingly minds while their parents become increasingly caught up with **the heartless materialism of the newly emergent Celtic Tiger**. Annie's first-person narrative effectively defines modern Irish nostalgia for the lost innocence of close-knit family life with strong rural roots.



A short view of the works ...

A Long Long Way (2005)

Thomas Dunne's son Willie joins the British Army in World War I and finds himself disgraced on returning to Dublin for leave after the 1916 Rising, in the aftermath of which the nationalist leaders were court-martialled and executed by the British. The novel captures the horrors of the trenches and the courage of the soldiers who lived and died in them and seeks to redeem the Irish servicemen who found themselves on the wrong side of national history at that crucial time in Ireland.



The Secret Scripture (2008)

Roseanne McNulty, the daughter of a murdered Protestant, has been locked away in an asylum by her husband's family who want him to marry a more suitable woman with the connivance of a priest who arranges the annulment of her marriage. Her story exemplifies the frequent use of District Lunatic Asylums to deal with family problems in the Ireland of the day. Barry's novel caught the mood of Ireland at a time when the scandal of the Magdalene Laundries and the Children's Homes hit the news and blemished the good opinion of the country. It is also a gem of literary fiction of an intensely imaginative kind.



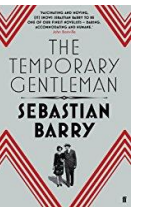
On Canaan's Side (2011)

Lilly McNulty – another daughter of Thomas Dunne - settles in the Black community in Chicago and becomes the target of a mob assassin who murders her lover and pursues her to eliminate the evidence. Later she marries a policeman who deserts her and later still her son Ed joins the US Army for the Gulf War and hangs himself on his return. The first of Barry's American novels, it shares a migrant plot with Colm Tóibín's best-selling *Brooklyn* (2009) though its treatment of current history brings it utterly up to date.



The Temporary Gentleman (2014)

The novel relates the career of Major Jack McNulty, a brother of Eneas and an engineer in the British Army during World War II, and later in British Africa in the late 1950s. He is 'temporary' because he has a 'wartime rank'; in peace, he is just an Irishman. Jack, who is addicted to drink and gambling, reflects on his ruined marriage in old age. Barry has spoken of the novel as a coming-to-terms with a maternal grandfather with whom he had a rift because of his earliest writings about family members.



Days Without End (2016)

Set in the Indian Wars and the American Civil War, Barry's second American novel follows the trail of Thomas McNulty who escaped to America as a boy after his family starved to death in the Irish Famine. Amid scenes of terribly violence, it celebrates the love of McNulty and his fellow-orphan John Cole – a plot inspired by Barry's son who 'came out' when the novel was being written. In an interview, Barry has spoken of the massacre of the Cheyenne villagers at Sand Creek, Texas, when Col. John Chivington led raid to exterminate them in 1864. (NPR, 27 Feb. 2017.)



Barry's prose

Sand Creek, Texas, 1864
Washita, 1868
McWellan's Creek, 1874
Wounded Knee, 1890

....



An American atrocity

[...] No fighter on earth as brave as a Sioux brave. They have their squaws and kindred sheltered and now at the last desperate moment they must risk all to defend them. But the shells have done terrible damage to the camp. Now I can see plain the broken bodies and the blood and the horrible butcher shop of carnage that those bursting metal flowers have manufactured. Young girls are strewn about like the victims of a terminous dance. It is as if we have stopped the human clock of the village, that's what I were thinking. The hands have stuck and the hours will be no more. The braves come on like perfect demons, but I will allow magnificent, keenly storming. There's so much blood in their hearts they might be bombs also. Now we be wrestling, falling and rising, we are thirty soldiers against six or seven, all that our bombs and bullets have missed. These are fierce men with the bitterness of useless treaties in their bellies. Even in the flash and spark of battle I can see how famished they are, the bronze bodies long-muscled and scrawned. We kill these men by sheer weight of numbers. Now only the sheltering [86] squaws and such remain. The sargeant, wheezing like a wind-broke horse, halts the ruckus of death and bids two men go down to the ravine and round up the women. What's in his head to do that we do not know for the women rush up from where they have laid in their forms of grass and with shrieks as sharp as blades charge against the startled soldiers, and they are engulfed in a frenzy of stabbing. Others of us rush and kill these women. Now we have four, five of us dead, and all of them. Fearfully the lip of the ravine is broached. We look down into its sheer stony depths and there in a nest are a butcher's dozen of youngsters, their faces gazing up, as if they are praying to see their people returning to them. But this cannot be.

—*Days Without End* (Faber & Faber 2016), pp.86-87.

Barry's prose

Wounded Knee, 1890



Sebastian Barry's prose roughly accords with the rhythm and the rhetoric of Irish colloquial speech in Hiberno-English – the vernacular of Ireland – but is also marked by a hugely inventive attitude towards the linguistic form of sentences whose imaginative quality has become the hallmark of his writing. He asks us to believe that this is how his narrator thinks and speaks, but to an obvious degree it is also the vehicle of a personal manner of expression and some interviewers have even said that Barry talks like his novels.

[...] No fighter on earth as **brave as a Sioux brave**. They **have their squaws and kindred sheltered** and now at the last desperate moment they must risk all to defend them. But the shells have done terrible damage to the camp. Now I can see plain the broken bodies and the blood and **the horrible butcher shop of carnage** that **those bursting metal flowers have manufactured**. **Young girls are trewn about like the victims of a terminous dance**. It is as if we have stopped the **human clock of the village**, that's what I were thinking. The hands have stuck and the hours will be no more. **The braves come on like perfect demons, but I will allow magnificent, keenly storming**. There's so much blood in their hearts they might be bombs also. Now we be wrestling, falling and rising, we are thirty soldiers against six or seven, all that our bombs and bullets have missed. **These are fierce men with the bitterness of useless treaties in their bellies**. Even in the flash and spark of battle I can see how famished they are, **the bronze bodies long-muscled and scrawned**. We kill these men by sheer weight of numbers. Now only the sheltering squaws and such remain. The sargeant, wheezing like a wind-broke horse, **halts the ruckus of death** and bids two men go down to the ravine and round up the women. What's in his head to do that we do not know for the women rush up from where **they have laid in their forms of grass** and with shrieks as sharp as blades charge against the startled soldiers, and they are engulfed in a frenzy of stabbing. Others of us rush and kill these women. Now we have four, five of us dead, and all of them. **Fearfully the lip of the ravine is broached**. We look down into its sheer stony depths and **there in a nest are a butcher's dozen of youngsters**, their faces gazing up, as if they are praying to see their people returning to them. **But this cannot be**.

—*Days Without End* (Faber & Faber 2016), pp.86-87.

Barry's prose

braves and squaws



Sand Creek, Texas, 1864

[...] No fighter on earth as **brave as a Sioux brave**. They **have their squaws and kindred sheltered** and now at the last desperate moment they must risk all to defend them.

'Brave' and 'squaw' are the accepted terms for male and female Native Americans – respectively a warrior and a wife. The first reflects the grudging admiration of the White Man for the courage of the 'Indians' while the second has a derogatory overtone which this episode goes a long way towards demolishing. The language of the passage is Hiberno-English as spoken by a young Irish emigrant turned soldier in the U.S. Cavalry. His phrase 'as brave as a brave' is strictly *tautological* but functions as a form of emphasis as if the say, "well, they really *are* braves!"

The phrase **had their squaws and kindred shelter** may be rendered in Standard English as, 'they had already sheltered their squaws and kindred [Pt., *parentes*]'. The use of 'have' in a completive sense is peculiar to Irish speakers (e.g., '*I have the book read*', Hiberno-English). The effect of Thomas McNulty's non-standard grammar is to suggest a vernacular account of events which is likely to be truer than the official one. (Barry has expressed a strongly-felt sense of Irish kinship with Native Americans and their historical experience.)

Barry's prose

butcher shop ... terminous dance



McWellan's Creek, 1874

the horrible butcher shop of carnage that those bursting metal flowers have manufactured. Young girls are strewn about like the victims of a terminous dance.

The 'butcher shop' mentioned here as a gruesome metaphor addition of the word 'carnage' is strictly *tautologous* and might sound ridiculous if the subject were not so 'horrible'. The phrase 'bursting shells' is familiar from war reports and stories but 'bursting metal flowers' sounds like the talk of someone who has never seen or even read about them – a false naïvity which gives added force to the narrative. 'Manufactured' is a strange word to use for 'caused' and has the lexical effect of connoting the industrial origin of Western weapons in comparison with the handicraft culture of the Native Americans.

'Terminous dance' is surely the strangest word in the passage as a whole. Its force is hard to measure. In one way it is inept – in another it is just the word to make a sufficiently tragic comparison between the normal pastimes of these young girls and the 'the dance of death' in which they are now involved. It is used here to mean 'lethal', but there really is no '*terminous*' in English (*terminal* is used for diseases like cancer, and *terminate* is synonymous with 'end' or 'destroy' (as in the famous Dalek buzz-word)).

Either this is a serious misuse of English *lexis* or Sebastian Barry is a practitioner of neologism – just like Sir Thomas Browne, who he so intensely admires.

Barry's prose

Indian 'braves'



perfect demons ... long-muscled and scrawned

Indians are 'demons' or 'savages' in a colonial stereotype which locates them as *ethnically* and *ethically* inferior to the 'white man'. The modifier 'perfect' can mean *ideal* but here pertains to a rather arch English usage which reflects the attitude of superiority involved in Empire-building - where it serves as a licence for extermination. On the other hand, the HE narration us to read it as an honest commendation of their courage when at 'the last desperate moment they must risk all to defend' their kin. 'I will allow ..' is a somewhat archaic phrase for 'I will admit'. 'Keenly storming' is barely English: to explain it would take us close the imaginative heart of Barry's prose.

The braves come on like perfect demons, but I will allow magnificent, keenly storming.

These are fierce men with the bitterness of useless treaties in their bellies.
the bronze bodies long-muscled and scrawned.

"Magnificent" may echo General Mahon's famous saying, '*C'est magnifique mais c'est ne pas la guerre*' when watching the Charge of the Light Brigade. (He was a French general of Irish extraction.) 'To storm' means 'to attack a fortified position' but the Indian are not doing that, so perhaps it means that their courage is like a raging storm. Similarly, 'keen' refers to the sharpness of a blade in its root sense and can be used with 'wind' but also with 'hunger', or else as a synonym for 'enthusiasm'. Here it carries several of those connotations: *sharpness, vigour, passion* – and courage in the face of certain death.

The epithet 'long-muscled' is often used to describe a physical trait in athletes but 'scrawned' (v.; p.p.) is a non-word apparently derived by *back-formation* from 'scrawny' (adj.) which means 'lacking in muscle through malnutrition'. (Hunger plays a large part in this novel whether in the starving Indian Reservations or the Confederate prison camps of the Civil War.)

Barry's prose

Wounded Knee, 1890



the ruckus of death

In *The Secret Scripture*, Roseanne McNulty uses the word ‘**ruckus**’ to speak about the copy of *Religio Medici* by Sir Thomas Browne formerly owned by her father – “**a book I still possess in all the flotsam and ruckus of my life.**” She is thus committing a *malapropism* [using the wrong word] since the common phrase is “flotsam and jetsam”, meaning things found floating on the surface after a ship has sunk. By contrast, a ‘ruckus’ is ‘a noisy commotion, a fracas, a rumpus’ – the last a similar *onomatopoeic* word.

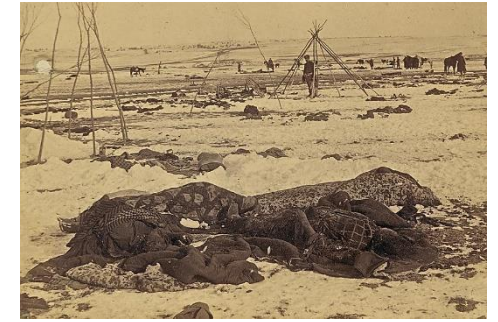
The role of malapropism in Barry's prose is immense; it conveys the sense that his characters discover new meaning in words, or the conjunction between them, which the English dictionary knows nothing about. This is a kind of Irish ‘privilege’ due to the *bilingual* character of the culture. It is also, of course, a close cousin of poetry in which the literal meaning of words is forever being transformed under pressure of the imagination.

[The sergeant ...] **halts the ruckus of death**

What the sentence says, quite literally, is that the Sergeant tells the soldiers to stop killing the Indians, or – rather – tells them that their job is finished and that they can now rest easy. It is a callous idea but a true one. Yet, because the word ‘**ruckus**’ is out of place, it seems to function as a defining modifier of death, as if to say that death is a **ruckus** – or that our ideas and experience of it is confused and turbulent, and idea that consorts well with the recurrent themes of Sir Thomas Browne whose *Urn-Burial* (1648) was an early model for Barry's style.

Barry's prose

forms and nests



Wounded Knee, 1890

The shape left in the grass by a rabbit, hare, or other small mammal is known as a '*form*' - a familiar sign of wild-life in the British and Irish countryside. Here the grass has been flattened by the Indian 'squaws' in hiding. When they rise up to defend themselves their voices are like 'blades' and, although otherwise unarmed, they are cut down by the soldiers who 'rush and kill these women' before turning to the 'ravine' where their children (or 'youngsters') have been hidden. That hiding-place is now described as a 'nest' with all the connotations of nurture and safety in the animal kingdom - instead of which they are mercilessly slaughtered in a genocidal assault.

Although 'broach' (v.) means 'approach' or 'open' (viz., "he broached the subject"), it is never used for topological features such as *rivers* or *mountains*, yet 'lip' can be used for *cliffs* or *ravines* - and, of course, for *wounds*. Nevertheless, the grammatical sense is so odd that the effect is to suggest that the narrator is unsettled by the memory he describes. In fact, he may have the right word after all since the lives of the children are about to be 'broached' in the sense of being poured out like the contents of a *flask* or *bottle*.

they have laid in their forms of grass

Fearfully the lip of the ravine is broached.

there in a nest are a butcher's dozen of youngsters

There is a special irony in the phrase 'a butcher's dozen' - which means thirteen - since this is the number of people shot dead by British Paratroopers on 29 January 1972 when the Army attacked a Civil Rights march in Northern Ireland. The Irish poet Thomas Kinsella wrote a poem about the atrocity soon after, calling it "A Butcher's Dozen".

Barry's prose

the human clock



Massacre victim identified as Chief Big Foot (Wounded Knee, 1890)

The “clock” trope used here was introduced a few pages earlier: ‘[Must be six o’clock now and all the babes and children of the camp are astir, and the squaw are at the kettles.](#)’ (p.83.) There Here the it refers to an invisible clock that *keep time* in the lives of humans in an Indian village. But, of course, Indians don’t have clocks and the metaphor is itself a token of the invasion of their timeless, a-historical world by our time-based idea of history and so-called progress. (The word history is used very sparingly in the novel, notably in the sentence, ‘I guess that love laughs at history a little (p.77).’)

[we have stopped the human clock of the village, that’s what I were thinking](#)

The addition of ‘that’s what I were thinking’ – where ‘were’ is vernacular bad grammar – ascribes a complex anthropological notion to the narrator, as if he were capable of formulating it on the poetic or intuitive level. In the same way, the brutal denial that the children will ‘see their people returning to them’ after the execution of their mothers is presented as his insight in curiously vatic tones: ‘this cannot be’ where the quasi-biblical phrase suggests that all the forces of history are against it - just as when the older soldiers in the platoon say:

“Indians were just evil boys [who] were to be cleared off the face of the earth, most likely that would be the best policy” in the opening scenes of the novel. (pp.2-3.)

[But this cannot be.](#)

Barry's prose

The massacre of defenceless Indians by American soldiers – the second such episode in the novel – derives its force for a combination of narrative elements:

- The stark historical facts
- The use of first-person narrative
- The narrator's Hiberno-English dialect
- The festive imagery (*flowers, dance, nest, &c.*)



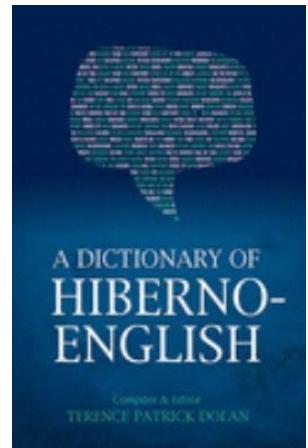
Sand Creek, Texas, 1864

[...] No fighter on earth as brave as a Sioux brave. They have their squaws and kindred sheltered and now at the last desperate moment they must risk all to defend them. But the shells have done terrible damage to the camp. Now I can see plain the broken bodies and the blood and the horrible butcher shop of carnage that those bursting metal flowers have manufactured. Young girls are strewn about like the victims of a terminous dance. It is as if we have stopped the human clock of the village, that's what I were thinking. The hands have stuck and the hours will be no more. The braves come on like perfect demons, but I will allow magnificent, keenly storming. There's so much blood in their hearts they might be bombs also. Now we be wrestling, falling and rising, we are thirty soldiers against six or seven, all that our bombs and bullets have missed. These are fierce men with the bitterness of useless treaties in their bellies. Even in the flash and spark of battle I can see how famished they are, the bronze bodies long-muscled and scrawned. We kill these men by sheer weight of numbers. Now only the sheltering squaws and such remain. The sargeant, wheezing like a wind-broke horse, halts the ruckus of death and bids two men go down to the ravine and round up the women. What's in his head to do that we do not know for the women rush up from where they have laid in their forms of grass and with shrieks as sharp as blades charge against the startled soldiers, and they are engulfed in a frenzy of stabbing. Others of us rush and kill these women. Now we have four, five of us dead, and all of them. Fearfully the lip of the ravine is broached. We look down into its sheer stony depths and there in a nest are a butcher's dozen of youngsters, their faces gazing up, as if they are praying to see their people returning to them. But this cannot be.

—*Days Without End* (Faber & Faber 2016), pp.86-87.

So what's Hiberno-English?

Hiberno-English [HE] is a dialectic of English that emerged in Ireland after the invasion of the formerly Irish-speaking country by English armies from the 12th century onwards – excepting in Ulster (the north-east) where Ulster-Scots predominates. A gradual language-shift from Irish (or Gaelge/Gaelic) to English over the centuries rapidly accelerated after the Famine of 1845-49 which devastated rural areas. Today, less than 25,000 people speak Irish as natives – somewhat less than the number of Polish speakers in the island under EU 'free movement' rules.



[https://books.google.com.br/
books?id=uPo0oB19gDUC](https://books.google.com.br/books?id=uPo0oB19gDUC)

What are the features of HE?

- HE varies phonetically from Standard English [SE] in many ways though the two dialects are mutually intelligible. HE speakers often stress penultimate syllables, e.g., adveRTÍSement (HE) for adVErTisement (SE), and commonly insert an intermedial vowel in consonant clusters such as '-lm' (e.g., *filum* for *film*.) Many HE speakers fail to differentiate 't' from 'th' and even use 'd' for both in speech – e.g., *dat* for *that*. The terminal 't' in most words is soft - more like 'sh' than the velar English 't'.
- Irish has no Present Perfect and HE speakers use the adverb *after* instead. Thus 'I've just broken my hand' becomes '*I'm just after breaking my hand*' – consistent with the grammar in Irish (or Gaelic): *Tá mé tar éis ag briseadh mo lámh*. Similarly 'must have' is often rendered 'must of' – e.g., "Caught-His-Horse-First *must of gone* down into Mexico" (*Days Without End*, 2016, pp.74-75). In another grammatical twist, '*He does be eating his dinner*', which echoes the Irish habitual verb *bíonn*, means 'he is eating his dinner now', and '*I'll do it again*' can mean 'I'll do it *l'ater*'.
- Numerous Early Modern English words which have died out in England are still used in Ireland – words such as '*rashers*' for 'bacon'. Hence, when Stephen says '*tundish*' to the Dean in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist* (1916), the English-born priest doesn't understand him. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney has amusingly called this episode "The Feast of the Holy Tundish". It is well-known that words like '*whiskey*' and '*slogan*' are from Irish (*uisce beatha*, *slua gán*). To complicate matters, the Irish variety is called 'whisky'.
- Many expressions in HE have been translated or transliterated from Gaelic giving words like *marya*, from *mhear dha* ['oh yeah - like that'], meaning 'I don't believe it', or '*where would be lave* [leave] *it?*' meaning 'he's just like his parent.' There are no words in Irish for 'yes' or 'no'. Instead, the grammatical forms 'it is/it is not' [*Sin é/ní hea*] are used. For SE speakers, this can sound like evasion or deceit – hence the title of a poem-collection *The Irish For No* (1987) by Ciaran Carson. There are also, of course, Irish loan-words in English – e.g., 'whiskey' [*uisce beatha*/water of life], 'bog' [*bog*/soft]; 'brogue' [*bróg*/shoe] and slogan [*slua gan*/war-cry].

Barry & the Common Reader

The “common reader” is one without any special training in language or literature who just ‘likes’ books. Nowadays, many novel-readers are speakers of ‘other Englishes’ - or even other languages (French, Portuguese, &c.) All the same, it seems they still expect an Irish writer to conform to standard English!

whatever about

Discussão em 'English Only' iniciado por mia0815, Setembro 20, 2010.

[Previous Thread](#) [Next Thread](#)



mia0815

Senior Member

Taiwan
Taiwanese

The Secret Scripture

'All the time I might have helped her, all those years she was here, I had more or less left her alone. I wanted to tell him, she has helped herself, she has spoken to, listened to, herself [...] That moreover I believe that if the wonderful Amurdat Singh had not summoned me, I probably would never have practised psychiatry, and did not believe that I had ever been a good psychiatrist, whatever about a good man.'

I can't really see the connection between being a good psychiatrist and being a good man.

What does 'whatever about a good man' really mean?

Thank you.

mia0815, Setembro 20, 2010

#1



Loob

Senior Member

English UK

"Whatever about" looks to me like an Irish turn of phrase - perhaps an Irish forero can confirm 😊. I haven't come across it before, but I would take it to mean "let alone": did not believe that I had ever been a good psychiatrist, let alone a good man.

Loob, Setembro 20, 2010

#2

<https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/whatever-about.1922523/>

Beginning and Endings: Hiberno-Irish in *The Sacred Scripture* (2008)

Sebastian Barry opens his 2008 novel with a plenitude of linguistic features which are purely Irish (or Hiberno-English) and which have the effect of calibrating the voice of the narrator as formally uneducated but highly alert to impressions and verbally creative. In obverse fashion, he ends her 'memoir' with a passage which sticks to Standard-English grammar and discourse and is only slightly tinged with Irishness – a mark that he ultimately belongs to a wider-than-Irish speech community and has a wider audience in mind.

That place where I was born was a cold town. Even the mountains stood away. **They were not sure, no more than me, of that dark spot, those same mountains.**

There was a black river that flowed through the town, and if it had no grace for moral beings, it did for swans, and many swans resorted there, and even roe the river like some kind of plunging animals, in floods.

The river also took the rubbish down to the sea, and bits of things that were once owned by people and pulled from the banks, and bodies too, if rarely, oh and poor **babies, that were embarrassments**, the odd time. **The speed and depth of the river would have been a great friend to secrecy.**

That is Sligo town, I mean.

(Opening of Roseanne's Journal, p.3.)

If you are reading this, then the mouse, the woodworm and the beetle must have spared these jotters.

What can I tell you further? I once lived among humankind, and found them **in their generality** to be cruel and cold, and yet could mention the names of three or four that were like angels.

I suppose we measure the importance of our days by those few angels we spy among us, and yet aren't like them.

If our suffering is great on account of that, yet at close of day **the gift of life is something immense. Something larger than old Sligo mountains, something difficult but oddly bright**, that makes equal in their fall the hammers and the feathers.

And like the impulse that drives the old maid to make a garden, with a meagre rose and a straggling daffodil, gives a hint of some coming paradise.

All that remains of me now is **a rumour of beauty.**

(Ending of Roseanne's Journal, p.268.)

‘The History and Topography of Nowhere’ (*Inherited Boundaries*, 1986)

Sebastian Barry is highly conscious of the particularity – or even the peculiarity – of Hiberno-English, and conscious, too, of the history of colonial invasion and conquest behind it. In the introduction to a poetry anthology which he edited in 1986, he sketched a brief history of Irish literary culture in these terms:

The Gaelic tradition ended, to all intents and purposes, in the 17th century, and the Anglo-Irish tradition ended with the establishment of the independent Irish state in 1921 so that **the Hiberno-English tradition**, having been an element alongside the other two traditions, **found itself abruptly and and horrifyingly on its own** in the 20th century. **The Protestants were out, the Gaelic smothered, and the Hiberno-Irish tradition**, difficult to define and extremely nervous of definitions, **was in - or at least *there*, the astonished survivor.**

[...] **to be born in the 1950s in the Republic was to be born, with no great ceremony, nowhere.** It was a country without definition, because it was a new place. All the acceptance of foreign rule, the dominion of priests, the isolated desire for revolution had metamorphosed quaintly into dullness, dismay, and inaction. **Everything was done by way of freedom, nothing by way of peace.**

[...] To be other than Catholic, third-class — a very bready form of an excellent religion, was traitorous to the strange new emblems of one untroubled country. **The only colour in the place was the cheerfulness of the Dublin parks in summer and the Walt Disney cinema in Grafton Street.** There was to be nothing only mediocrity — superiority was English, possibly.

Inherited Boundaries: Younger Irish Poets in the Republic of Ireland (Dolmen Press 1986), pp.2-3.



Inherited Boundaries
(Dolmen Press 1986)



Inherited traditions: Anglo-Irish Literature



Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849)

Edgeworth provided the model of the vernacular Irish narrator in *Castle Rackent* (1800) from which Barry quotes his second epigraph in *The Secret Scripture*: '[...T]here is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated ancient and modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes.' (CR, Preface, pp.[iii]-iv). The similarity of 'secret memoirs' with Barry's title should not be overlooked and there are sentences in the novel which convey the same idea as this – e.g., 'a person without anecdotes that they nurse while they live, and that survive them, are more likely to be utterly lost not only to history but the family following them'. (SS, p.11; see also 'memories and anecdotes', p.36.)



John Millington Synge (1871-1909)

Synge invented a form of Anglo-Irish drama in which the Hiberno-English dialect of Irish peasants is treated as a form of oral poetry. *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) tells of a young man in the West of Ireland who wins the admiration of the locals when they learn that he has killed his father – apparently, at least: 'Bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking, would face a foxy devil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell', says one character. That archaic word 'lonesome' is hall-mark Synge and also a recurrent word in Barry's novels. In *The Sacred Scripture*, for example, Roseanne gives birth alone – 'something so lonesome, so full of danger' (p.250), while *Days Without End* has 9 such references – e.g. 'lonesome soldier' (p.57), 'lonesome beauty' (p.116) and 'lonesome flowers' (p.174).



James Joyce (1882-1941)

Barry made the usual Joycean pilgrimage to Paris when he graduated from Trinity College and he developed a brief fascination with his stylistic variations in *Ulysses* and even the 'dream language' of *Finnegans Wake* which is imitated in parts of his first novel *The Engine of Owl-light* (1987) – e.g., 'Al hes afterchilder waz lowlee menne and gerlls [...] Dat loif wass dificelt and colde, and ther woreld wass a musik of deseaz an owels.' (p.386.) The ultimate effect of this kind of experimentation was to teach Barry to espouse the comparative simplicity of a single narrative voice to the contrary of Joyce's multi-stylistic method. Likewise, Joyce taught him the lesson that the Irish can 'best' English writers in their own language.



Samuel Beckett (1906-89)

Synge and Beckett both wrote about marginalised characters in plays such as Synge's *In The Shadow of the Glen* (1904) and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955) – very different works which are both inherently Irish. Barry made a close study of Beckett's plays and fiction and echoes his distinctly where disgraced Irish Police Commissioner of former British days reflects on his relationship with his father. 'And I would call that the mercy of fathers, when [...] the child sees at last that he is loved, loved and needed and not to be lived without, and greatly.' (*Steward of Christendom*, 1995, p.56) – a clear echo of Molloy's 'the man was innocent, greatly innocent' in Beckett's *Molloy* (1951; Trilogy, 1979, p.11) – where both writers make literary hay out of the Irish (mis-)use of the English adverb *greatly*.

Enough said? ...

... Hardly!

Does all this talk about Hiberno-English adequately explain the linguistic text of a novel by Sebastian Barry. Probably not. In addition to the opportunities for creativity with language supplied by a conflicted history of Irish bilingualism, there is also the well-known Irish love of the English language. James Joyce once said, 'they taught us their language and we beat them at it.'* Yet, in English literary history, too, there have been writers examples writers for whom the written word is *not just* the vehicle of an objective – or even subjective - state of affairs but, instead, a way of constituting the English language as the extraordinary instrument of thought and expression that it is.

There is a **river** that moves between the fields that in the summer takes the **light** and uses my **window** as a signal, signalling to what or who or where I do not know. The **riverlight** plays in the glass. [...]

He sat in the chill light. The **river**, **drowned in its own water**, and **drowned a second time** in the rains of February, **was not in a position to throw its light**. The **window-glass** was severely itself. **Only the still grass** of winter far below **lent it a slight bemirch of green**. His **eyes**, now much clearer somehow and more distinct without the beard, were looking forwards as if at an object about a yard away, that stare that faces have in portraits. I sat on the bed, and without the slightest embarrassment watched him, because he wasn't watching me at all. He was **looking into that strange place, the middle distance**, the **most mysterious, human, and rich of all distances**. And from his **eyes** came slowly tears, **immaculate human tears, before the world touches them**. **River, window and eyes**. (*The Secret Scripture*, Faber Edn. p.101.)

The considerable strangeness of this passage is hardly explicable in terms Hiberno-English philology. No one can doubt that the writer is a competent English speaker and that he is actually doing something with language other than using it in the normative fashion as an unobstrusive medium of communication. sense. In so doing, he has an English model in mind no less than an Irish one – both named in the epigraphs of the novel in question for the readers' convenience! These are Sir Thomas Browne and Maria Edgeworth.

The art of epigraphs



Sir Thomas Browne 1605-82

“... ghosts unto our own eyes” (Sir Thomas Browne)

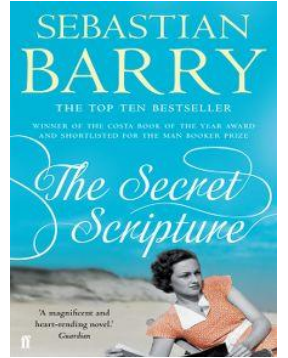
“... a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes” (Maria Edgeworth)

‘The greatest imperfection is in our inward sight, that is, to be ghosts unto our own eyes.’

Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*

‘Of the numbers who study, or at least read history, how few derive any advantage from their labours! . . . Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated ancient and modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes.’

Maria Edgeworth, Preface to *Castle Rackrent*



The Secret Scripture
(Paperback Edn. 2008)



Maria Edgeworth (1768-1846)

The first of these two epigraphs is from the works Sir Thomas Browne, best known for his *Religio Medici* (1643) which contains wide and varied speculations on the part of a 17th century physician who was trained in Montpellier, the French university-town associated with the name of Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) on whose famous *Essais* (1580) Sir Thomas Browne modelled his speculative style of writing.

The second is from a novel of 1800 by Maria Edgeworth, the daughter of an “improving” [reforming] Anglo-Irish landlord. Edgeworth is often called the first Irish novelist and was certainly the first to use Hiberno-English for narration – as she did in *Castle Rackrent*, where the narrator is ‘honest’ Thady Quirk who seems to regard his employers with barely disguised contempt and whose son, a Catholic lawyer, ultimately takes over the Rackrent estate after the owners have wasted all their fortune in gambling and drink.



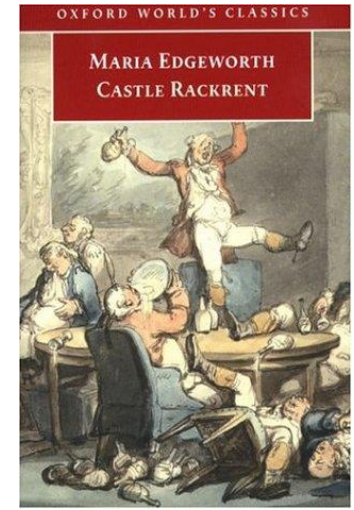
Maria Edgeworth's Preface to *Castle Rackrent* (1800): 'History, Memoirs & Anecdotes'

THE prevailing taste of the public for anecdote has been censured and ridiculed by critics, who aspire to the character of superior wisdom: but if we consider it in a proper point of view, this taste is an incontestible proof of the good sense and profoundly philosophic temper of the present times. **Of the numbers who study, or at least who read history, how few derive any advantage from their labors!** The heroes of history are so decked out by the fine fancy of the professed historian; they talk in such measured prose, and act from such sublime or such diabolical motives, that few have sufficient taste, wickedness or heroism, to sympathize in their fate. **Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated antient or modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes.** We cannot judge either of the feelings or of the characters of men with perfect accuracy from their actions or their appearance in public; it is from their careless conversations, their half finished sentences, that we may hope with the greatest probability of success to discover their real characters. [...]

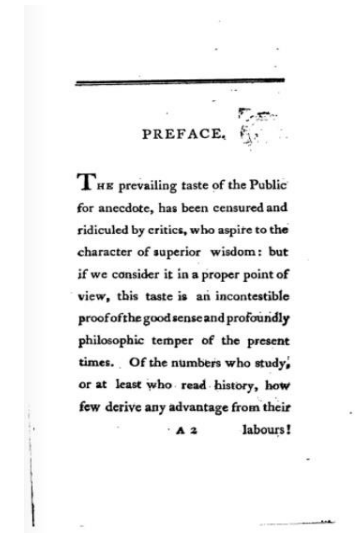
Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* is the founding work of Anglo-Irish fiction and a staple text for any course in Irish literary history. It is also a source-book for Hiberno-English diction and an invaluable social chronicle. The appeal of its Preface to Barry is probably based on its defence of the 'memoir' and the 'anecdote' as 'superior' to history or biography in revealing the truth of human character. It also has the value of a model of vernacular narration written by an author who was not herself a native speaker of Hiberno-English.



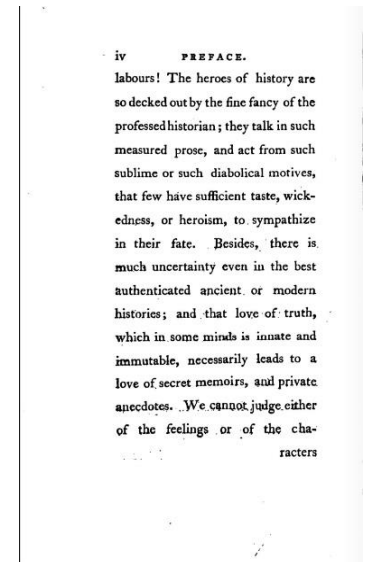
Maria Edgeworth
(*Letters*, 1894)



Castle Rackrent
(Oxford 1965)



The Preface to *Castle Rackrent* (1801 Edn.), pp.[iii]-iv.

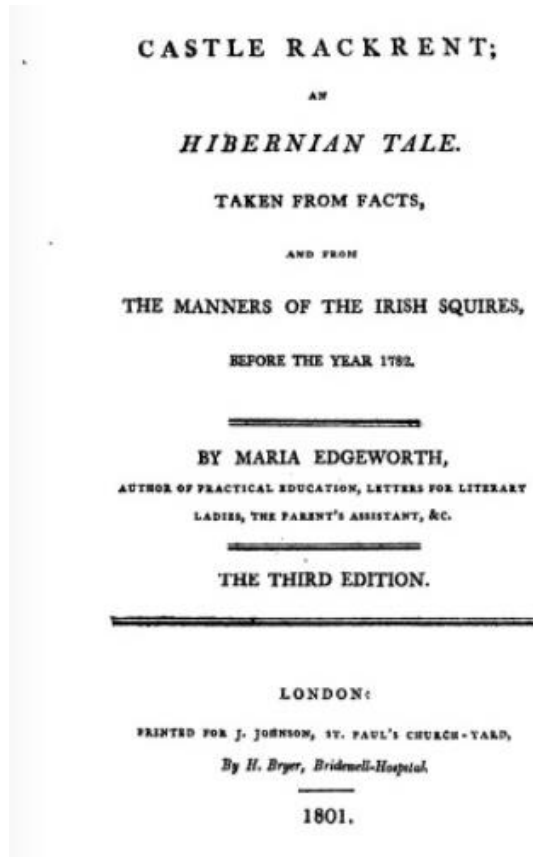


A lexical census of 'memory' in *The Secret Scripture* (2008)

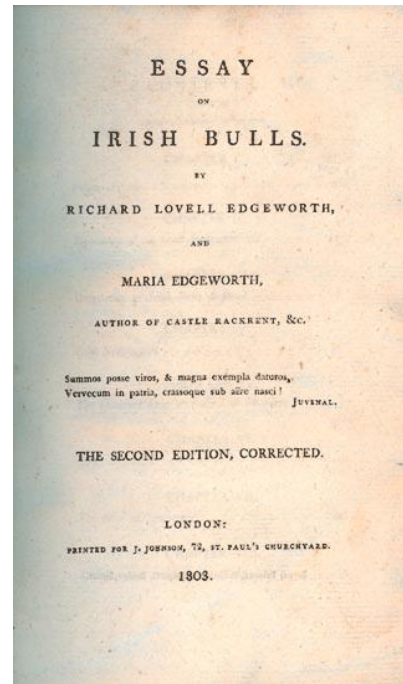
1] [...] not killing himself [...] was a constant source of **memory** and joy, and I am sure consoled him (*Roseanne of her father's motorbike racing*; p.9); 2] [...] those little called Neapolitan, which of course were not as I thought in **memory** of Napoleon, but songs invented in the streets of Naples [...] (p.13.) 3] Dread like a sickness, a **memory** of a sickness, the first time in many years I had felt it. (p.28.) 4] Often he knew the old soul that was to be interred, and would share **memories** and **anecdotes** if that seemed pleasant and generous to do so. (*Roseanne of her father as graveyard keeper*; p.36). 4] But he understood the rebellion. In his bedroom in a drawer he kept a **memorial** booklet for the Rising of 1916 with photographs of the principles involved, and a calendar of battles and sorrows. (*Roseanne of her father's Irish patriotism*; p.36.) 6] It is very stupefying to be Irish and have none of the traits or the **memories** or even a recognisable bloody accent. (*Dr Grene of his Irishness*; p.46.) 7] There is an underlying sense of rumour, of judgement, of **memory**, like two peoples that have once committed grave crimes against each other, but in another generation. (*Dr. Grene on Anglo-Irish relations*; p.47.) 8] Perhaps in later years I heard versions of that night that didn't fit my own **memory** of all, but all the same, there was always one grand constant, that I had stopped in my path to fetch Fr Gaunt [...] (*Roseanne on the fatal incident*; p.54.) 9] We used to go down to one of the little Cornish bays, my father and mother and myself [...] my nappies heavy with the water, a very vivid **memory** (*Dr Grene on his own childhood*, p.78.) 10] **memories** that I have of Fr Gaunt are always curiously precise and full (*Roseanne*, p.91.) 11] a lone person takes great comfort from her people, even in the watches of the night, even the **memory** of them (*Roseanne*, p.98). 12] Mrs McNulty, that is a beautiful description of traumatic **memory**. (p.101.) 13] I had this unbidden **memory** of my father sitting on his bed [...] (*Roseanne*, p.102.) 14] At first I wondered [...] was she, in the matter of her past, truly incapable of **memory**, that is, in some sense actually insane? (*Dr Grene*, p.120.) 15] to me she was not psychotic, but that her **memory** had suffered the silverfish of age. (*Dr Grene*, p.122.) 16] I have a vivid **memory** of his as if contained in a sort of photograph (*Roseanne on Tom*, p.132.) 17] I am looking for my mother in these **memories** and I cannot find her. She has simply disappeared. (*Roseanne*, p.148.) 18] I thought of windmills in paintings, he strange emotions even attaching to their **memory**. (*Dr Grene*, p.149.) 19] I was presenting a paper on versions of **memory**, the absolute fascist certainly of **memory**, the bullying oppression of **memory**. (*Dr Grene*, p.178.) 20] I will see how much of it I can write down from **memory** (*Dr Grene on the Fr Gaunt's deposition*, p.178.) 21] But **memories** are both long and short in Ireland (*Dr Grene*, 179.) 22] Needing to be brought again close to his **memory**, or any **memory** of him that seemed to make him more present (p.188.) 22] You look like her, or may your face has taken the place of hers in my **memory** (*John Lavelle to Roseanne*, p.190.) 23] I must admit there are **memories** in my head that are curious even to me [...] **memory**, I must suppose, if it is neglected becomes like a box room [...] (p.201.) 24] But if I put my faith in certain **memories** perhaps they will serve as stepping stones [across] the torrent of "times past" without being plunged entirely into it. (p.201.) They say the old at least have **memories**. I am not sure this is always a good thing. (*Roseanne*, p.201.) 25] I wonder is that the difficulty, that my **memories** and my imagings are lying deeply in the same place? (*Roseanne*, p.219.) 26] that famous rose bred by Josephine in **memory** of Napoleon's love for her, "Souvenir de Malmaison" (*Dr Grene*, p.220.) 27] I have to be very careful with these **memories** because I realise there are a few vivid **remembrances** from this troubled time that I know in my heart cannot have happened. (*Roseanne*, p.254.) 28] Maybe this year there would be a new look to them, not quite St Anne's or "Malmaison", but becoming slowly Sligo, "Souvenir de Sligo", a **memory** of Sligo. (*Dr Grene*, p.23.) 29] wiping out the very nation they were trying to give new life to, actually burning **memory** in its boxes (*Dr Grene on the burning of the Custom House*, p.253.) 30] I have even a **memory** of him holding me while I wept (*Roseanne of Fr Gaunt*, p.266.) Now **memory** falters. Yes. It shudders, like a motor [...] (*Roseanne remembering Eneas*, p.266.) 31] Now **memory** stops It is entirely absent. [...] I **remember** Eneas coming in his army uniform one night, charming the staff into seeing me. (*Roseanne*, p.266.) 32] A **memory** so clear, so wonderful, so beyond the bounds of possibility. (*Roseanne on re-meeting Eneas*, p.267.) 33] Fr Gaunt, while maybe sincere in his great desire to have her committed, was also subject to mere error of **memory** (*Dr Grene*, p.278.) 34] We have enough problems with linear narrative and true **memory**. (*Dr Grene on Roseanne and Fr Gaunt's memories of the same events*, p.280.) 35] So that my first inclination to identify her **memory** as a traumatic one, with details transposed and corrupted, [...] (*Dr Grene*, p.280.) 36] It is just possible that years and years ago she told me about the hammers and feathers as an anecdote [...] actually seem to have a vague **memory** of it. (*Dr Grene*, p.280.) 37] I see now it would have been an assault on her **memory**. (*Dr Grene, grateful that he did not use Fr Gaunt's deposition*, p.281.) 38] I am beginning to wonder what is the nature of history. Is it only **memory** in decent sentences, and if so, how reliable is it? (*Dr Grene*, p.293.) The huge edifice immediately earthward, leaving only a hanging **memory** of its old positions against the skyline. (*Dr Grene, observing the demolition of the asylum*, p.297, p.297.) I was thinking I was quite over Bet, Bet was a safe **memory**, but it was only just beginning. (*Dr Grene on grief*, 297.)

Frequency count: 48 incidents of *memor-* (1 per 6.25 pages); note also 91 incidents of *remember-* (1 per 3.3 pages), and 4 incidents of *anecdote-* (1 per 75 pages. [BSGS])

Essay on Irish Bulls (1801)



In addition to *Castle Rackrent*, Maria Edgeworth wrote a study of Hiberno-English under the title *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1805) defendin the Irish against charges of stupidity on the grounds that their use of language exhibits superior wit and humour to that of many Standard English speakers.



The Irish Parliament was a keystone of Irish Protestant nationalism from the date of Legislative Independence in 1782 to its extinction in 1800 following the 1798 Rebellion which was triggered by the French Revolution. After 1800, Irish independence was a political cause for Irish Catholics only.



The Essay on Irish Bulls (1805) was the earliest study of the vagaries of Irish speech in English – our Hiberno-English – which seemed odd and even irrational to contemporary English ears. The Edgeworth's defended it strenuously but also seemed to relish many of the stranger sayings which they reported such as these gems of Sir Boyle Roche, an Irishman speaking in the Irish Parliament in 1782:

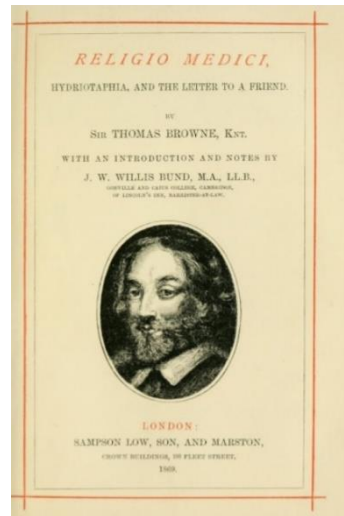
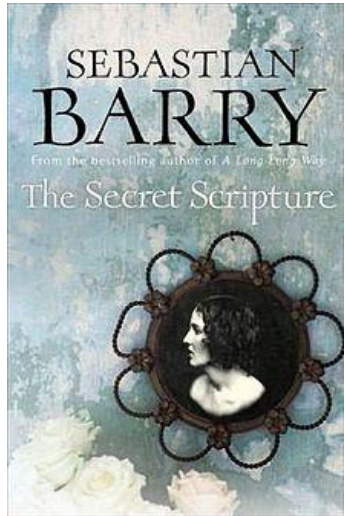
'Why should we put ourselves out of the way to do anything for posterity, for what has posterity done for us?'

"It would surely be better, Mr. Speaker, to give up not only a part, but, if necessary, even the whole, of our constitution, to preserve the remainder!"

Allusions to 'anecdotes' in *The Secret Scripture* (2008)

1] a love of secret **memoirs** and private **anecdotes** (Maria Edgeworth - *epigraph*); 2] a person without **anecdotes** [...] are more likely to be utterly lost [...] (*Roseanne*, p.11). 3] Often he knew the old soul that was to be interred, and would share **memories** and **anecdotes** if that seemed pleasant and generous to do so. (*Roseanne of her father*, p.36). 4] I have made an **anecdote** out of the tragic death of my brother, for which, as is clear to me from the cooled syntax, I obviously blame myself. (*Dr Grene*, p.280.)

The Secret Scripture - The Browne epigraph (I)



In the case of Barry's epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne in *The Secret Scripture* (2008), there is no problem identifying it: it is from the text that Barry cites – *Christian Morals*, first published posthumously and afterwards in an edition edited by Dr Samuel Johnson and later again in numerous editions.

It was not, however, included in the volume which Barry takes great trouble to identify as being in the possession of Roseanne McNulty. This is an edition of *Religio Medici* by Browne, first published in 1643 and reprinted in a collection of Browne's *Works* edited by JW Willis Bund for the publisher Sampson, Low, Son, and Marston of London in 1869.

'The greatest imperfection is in our inward sight, that is, to be ghosts unto our own eyes.'

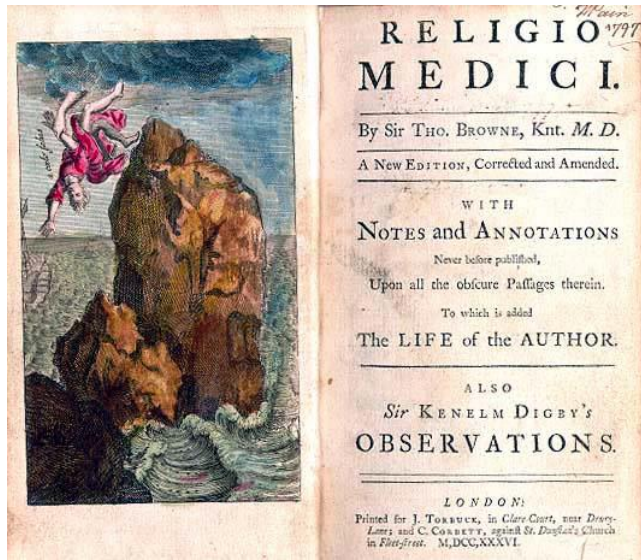
Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*

'Of the numbers who study, or at least read history, how few derive any advantage from their labours! . . . Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated ancient and modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes.'

Maria Edgeworth, Preface to *Castle Rackrent*

The assumption seems warranted that Barry himself owns a copy of the 1869 edition of *Religio Medici* which he describes so accurately – but where he met the lines from *Christian Morals* which he uses as epigraphs both for this novel and for the much earlier *Engine of Owl-light* (1987) is not so obvious since *Christian Morals* is not included in the edition of *Religio Medici* and other works published in 1869.

We will perforce return to this knotty bibliographical problem later on since it has much bearing on our conception of Barry's familiarity with and use of the works of Sir Thomas Browne.



Sir Thomas Browne 1605-82

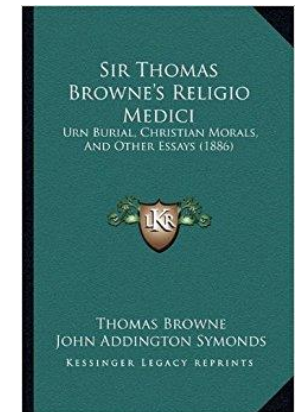
“The greatest imperfection in our inward sight, that is, to be ghosts unto our own eyes.”
(*Christian Morals*, posthum. 1712; reps. 1756, &c.)

Sebastian Barry encountered Maria Edgeworth and Sir Thomas Browne as standard authors on the English Literature course at Trinity College, Dublin, in the 1970s. In 1987 he used a quotation from Browne’s *Urn Burial* (1658) as an epigraph to his first novel *The Engine of Owl-light* – a highly experimental work which stretches the possibilities of stylistic innovation to the limits.

Sir Thomas Browne, a 17th century physician in Durham who was knighted by Charles II in 1671, was the most ‘ingenious’ prose-writer of his age. His manner seems fanciful, but what still comes through is a mind engaged not only in lively topics of all kinds but engaged with its own engagement too. In other words, a brilliantly self-reflexive stylist who takes his own mind for his material as much as the external matters he surveyed in the matter of an 17th century scientific enquirer trying to make sense of the increasingly complicated modern world.

For generations of modern writers he has always been something of a special discovery – an example of the writer’s writer *par excellence*. Samuel Taylor Coleridge numbered him among his “first favourites” and wrote that there is a “curious twist” to his mind. Emily Dickinson kept an edition of his works beside her bed and Herman Melville called him a “crack’d Archangel” and imitated his style. For Virginia Woolf he was the forerunner of all the psychological novelists and Juan Luis Borges, who translated him, identified with him so closely that he called himself ‘just another word for Browne’.

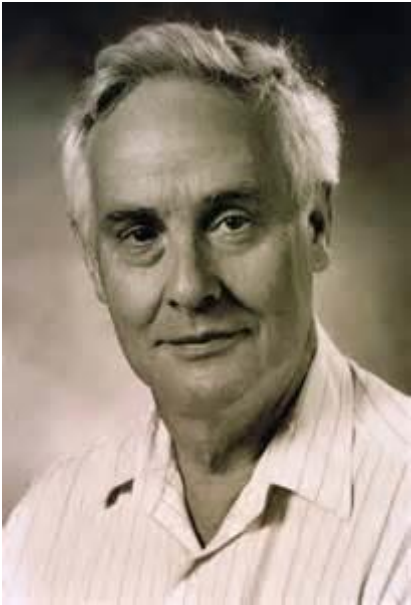
John Addington Symonds,
ed., *Sir Thomas Browne,
Religio Medici* [... &c.]
(London 1886; rep. Kissinger
2010)



The Main Works

- *Religio Medici* (1643)
- *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646–72)
- *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658)
- *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658)
- *A Letter to a Friend* (1656; pub. 1690)
- *Christian Morals* (1670s; pub. 1716)

The 'eerie splendour' of Sir Thomas Browne



Benedict Anderson 1936-2015

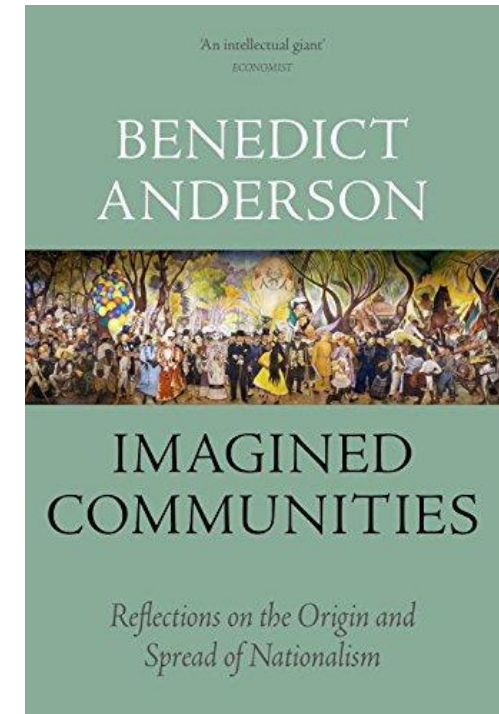
"eerie splendour..."

PATRIOTISM AND RACISM

Listen to Thomas Browne encompassing in a pair of sentences the length and breadth of man's history:⁸

Even the old ambitions had the advantage of ours, in the attempts of their vainglories, who acting early and before the probable Meridian of time, have by this time found great accomplishment of their designs, whereby the ancient Heroes have already out-lasted their Monuments, and Mechanicall preservations. But in this latter Scene of time we cannot expect such Mummies unto our memories, when ambition may fear the Prophecy of Elias, and Charles the Fifth can never hope to live within two Methusela's of Hector.

Here ancient Egypt, Greece, and Judaea are united with the Holy Roman Empire, but their unification across thousands of years and thousands of miles is accomplished within the particularity of Browne's seventeenth-century English prose.⁹ The passage can, of course, up to a point be translated. But the eerie splendour of 'probable Meridian of time,' 'Mechanicall preservations,' 'such Mummies unto our memories,' and 'two Methusela's of Hector' can bring goose-flesh to the napes only of English-readers.



Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983)

"Such mummies of our memories ..."

Browne's aphorisms

Religio Medici [1643], ed.,
Greenblatt & Targoff 2012

A sentence by Sir Thomas Browne is a remarkable thing, charged with a life of meaning that seems to trifle with the occasion and to discover in itself new rhythms of thought and expression unknown in English before. As a polylingual scholar – Latin, Greek, French and Italian being his main sources after English – he combined the widest vocabulary of any writer of his age and gave us hundreds of neologisms of which the following (among others) have survived: “medical,” “suicide,” “exhaustion,” “hallucination” and “coma” among them. (Some of these will be familiar to Portuguese speakers from their Graeco-Roman sources.)

“I find there are many pieces in this one fabricke of man and that this frame is raised upon a masse of Antipathies [...] Thus is man that great and true Amphibium, whose nature is disposed to live not onely like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds.”

“We carry with us the wonders, we seeke without us: There is all *Africa*, and her prodigies in us. .. the world that I regard as my selfe, it is the Microcosme of mine owne frame, that I cast my eye on.”

“Half our dayes we passe in the shadowe of the earth, and the brother of death exacteth a third part of our lives.”

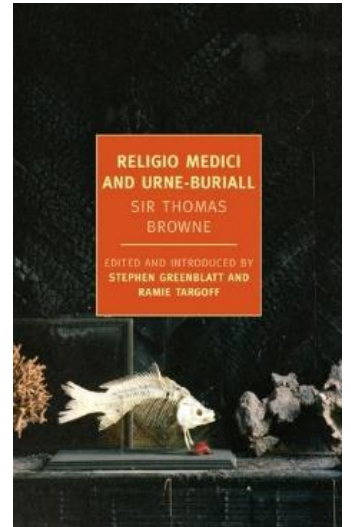
“I am no way facetious, nor disposed for the mirth and galliardize of company; yet in one dreame I can compose a whole Comedy, behold the action, apprehend the jests, and laugh my selfe awake.” (xxiii)

“I could never divide my self from any man upon the difference of an opinion, or be angry with his judgement for not agreeing with mee in that, from which perhaps within a few days I should dissent my life.”

“Man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave, solemnizing Nativities and Deaths with equal lustre, nor omitting Ceremonies of bravery, in the infamy of his nature. Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible Sun within us.”

“The long habit of living indisposeth us for dying.”

—from sundry works by Sir Thomas Browne



For Stephen Greenblatt – best-known for his highly readable yet deeply scholarly life of Shakespeare (*Will in the World* (2001) –Browne was one of the first writers to turn his gaze fully on the human mind in all its natural confusion:

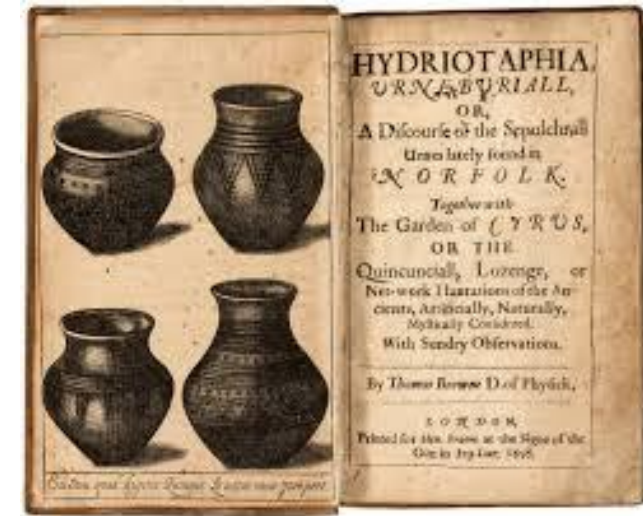
For him *everything* within him seems fascinating; he did not want, in the interest of mere consistency, to throw any part of himself away. In one moment he is a skeptic, in the next a dogmatic believer; a well-trained scientific mind and then a mocker of science; a man ‘blessed with a constitution so generall, that it consorts and sympathizeth with all things’.

Besides his writings, Browne was one of the great collectors of his age. Again, according to Greenblatt, the object was ‘to emphasise category confusion, to exemplify metamorphoss and occult resemblance, to arouse astonishment at the world's strangeness and infinity variety, and to collapse the distinction between art and literature.’ (Greenblatt, op. cit., p.xxi)

When Sebastian Barry met Sir Thomas Browne

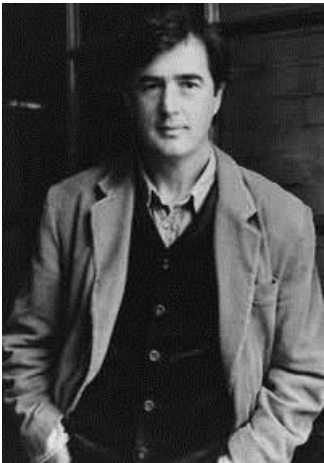
Barry's first novel – *The Engine of Owl-light* (1987) – bears an epigraph purportedly from the *Urn-burial* (1648) by Sir Thomas Browne. It is a sensational quotation and brilliantly-well adapted to the theme that anti-historical novel which is set in several centuries and lands including medieval Ireland, modern Switzerland, and the South East of the United States of America in 'hippy' times.

Barry studied English and Classics at Trinity College [TCD] in the 1970s and met Browne's *Religio Medici* on the English syllabus.



Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall, or A Discourse of the Sepulchral Urnes lately found in Norfolk ... (1648)

Engine of Owl-light (1987)



EPIGRAPH: 'HOWEVER, TO PALLIATE THE SHORTNESS OF OUR LIVES, AND SOMEWHAT TO COMPENSATE OUR BRIEF TERM IN THIS WORLD, IT'S GOOD TO KNOW AS MUCH AS WE CAN OF IT, AND ALSO SO FAR AS POSSIBLY IN US LIETH TO HOLD A THEORY OF TIMES PAST, AS THOUGH WE HAD SEEN THE SAME. HE WHO HATH THUS CONSIDERED THE WORLD [...] MAY CONCEIVE HIMSELF IN SOME MANNER TO HAVE LIVED FROM THE BEGINNING, AND TO BE AS OLD AS THE WORLD; AND IF HE SHOULD STILL LIVE ON, 'TWOULD BE BUT THE SAME THING.'
(*HYDRIOTAPHIA; OR URN-BURIAL*, 1658; MY ELLIPSIS.)

.... The trouble with the epigraph is that it is not from *Urn-burial*, but from another work by Browne called *Christian Morals* – a work to which Barry would return to take an epigraph to *The Secret Scripture* in 2008.

THE SOURCE OF BARRY'S EPIGRAPH IN *THE ENGINE OF OWL-
LIGHT* (1987)

“Christian Morals”, *Sir Thomas Browne’s Works Including His Life And Correspondence*, ed. by Simon Wilkin F.L.S., Vol. IV (London: William Pickering 1835)

SECT. XXVIII.—That a greater number of angels remained in heaven, than fell from it, the school-men will tell us; that the number of blessed souls will not come short of that vast number of fallen spirits, we have the favourable calculation of others. What age or century hath sent most souls unto heaven, he can tell who vouchsafeth that honour unto them. Though the number of the blessed must be complete before the world can pass away; yet since the world itself seems in the wane, and we have no such comfortable prognosticks of latter times; since a greater part of time is spun than is to come, and the blessed roll already much replenished; happy are those pieties, which solicitously look about, and hasten to make one of that already much filled and abbreviated list to come.

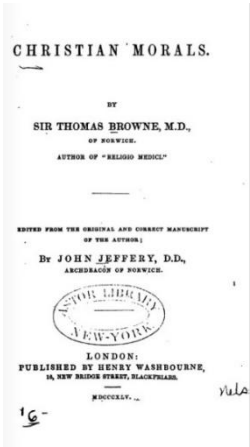
SECT. XXIX.—Think not thy time short in this world, since the world itself is not long. The created world is but a small parenthesis in eternity, and a short interposition, for a time, between such a state of duration as was before it and may be after it. And if we should allow of the old tradition, that the world should last six thousand years, it could scarce have the name of old, since the first man lived near a sixth part thereof, and seven Methuselahs would exceed its whole

duration. However, to palliate the shortness of our lives, and somewhat to compensate our brief term in this world, it's good to know as much as we can of it; and also, so far as possibly in us lieth, to hold such a theory of times past, as though we had seen the same. He who hath thus considered the world, as also how therein things long past have been answered by things present; how matters in one age have been acted over in another; and how there is nothing new under the sun; may conceive himself in some manner to have lived from the beginning, and to be as old as the world; and if he should still live on, 'twould be but the same thing.

SECT. XXX.¹—Lastly; ² if length of days be thy portion, make it not thy expectation. Reckon not upon long life: think every day the last, and live always beyond thy account. He that so often surviveth his expectation lives many lives, and will scarce complain of the shortness of his days. Time past is gone like a shadow; make time to come present. Approximate thy latter times by present apprehensions of them: be like a neighbour unto the grave, and think there is but little to come. And since there is something of us that will still live on, join both lives together, and live in one but for the other. He who thus ordereth the purposes of this life, will never be far from the next; and is in some manner already in it, by a happy conformity, and close apprehension of it. And if, as we have elsewhere declared,³ any have been so happy, as personally to understand christian annihilation, extacy, exolution, transformation, the kiss of the spouse, and ingression into the divine shadow, according to mystical theology, they have already had an handsome anticipation of heaven; the world is in a manner over, and the earth in ashes unto them.

Tip: The sentence quoted here will recur as part of Dr Grene’s supposed reading of *Religio Medici* in *The Secret Scripture* (2008).

‘HOWEVER, TO PALLIATE THE SHORTNESS OF OUR LIVES, AND SOMEWHAT TO COMPENSATE OUR BRIEF TERM IN THIS WORLD, IT’S GOOD TO KNOW AS MUCH AS WE CAN OF IT, AND ALSO SO FAR AS POSSIBLY IN US LIETH TO HOLD A THEORY OF TIMES PAST, AS THOUGH WE HAD SEEN THE SAME. HE WHO HATH THUS CONSIDERED THE WORLD [...] MAY CONCEIVE HIMSELF IN SOME MANNER TO HAVE LIVED FROM THE BEGINNING, AND TO BE AS OLD AS THE WORLD; AND IF HE SHOULD STILL LIVE ON, ’TWOULD BE BUT THE SAME THING.’ (HYDRIOTAPHIA; OR URSCHRIPTURE (1658) MY ELLIPSIS.)



“Christian Morals”, [1716], *Works fo Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. John Jeffery (Lon: Henry Washbourne 1845)

“Christian Morals” [1712] , in Sir Thomas Browne’s Works Including His Life And Correspondence, ed. by Simon Wilkin F.L.S., Vol. IV (London: William Pickering; Norwich: Josiah Fletcher 1835) - Sects. xxviii-xxxx.

Sect xxviii - That a greater number of angels remained in heaven, than fell from it, the school men will tell us; that the number of blessed souls will not come short of that vast number of fallen spirits, we have the favourable calculation of others. What age or century hath sent most souls unto heaven, he can tell who vouchsafeth that honour unto them Though the number of the blessed must be complete before the world can pass away; yet since the world itself seems in the wane, and we have no such comfortable prognosticks of latter times; since a greater part of time is spun than is to come, and the blessed roll already much replenished; happy are those pieties, which solicitously look about, and hasten to make one of that already much filled and abbreviated list to come. (Wilkins, 1835, CM, Part III, p.13.)

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Sect xxx - Lastly; if length of days be thy portion make it not thy expectation. Reckon not upon long life; think every day the last, and live always beyond thy account. He that so often surviveth his expectation lives many lives, and will scarce complain of the shortness of his days. Time past is gone like a shadow; make time to come present. Approximate thy latter times by present apprehensions of them: be like a neighbour unto the grave, and think there is but little to come. And since there is something of us that will still live on, join both lives together and live in one but for the other. He who thus ordereth the purposes of this life, will never be far from the next; and is in some manner already in it, by a happy conformity, and close apprehension of it. And if as we have elsewhere declared,* any have been so happy, as personally to understand christian annihilation, extacy, exolution, transformation, the kiss of the spouse, and ingression into the divine shadow, according to mystical theology, they have already had an handsome anticipation of heaven; the world is in a manner over, and the earth in ashes unto them. (Idem.)

Barry's stylistic debt to Sir Thomas Browne

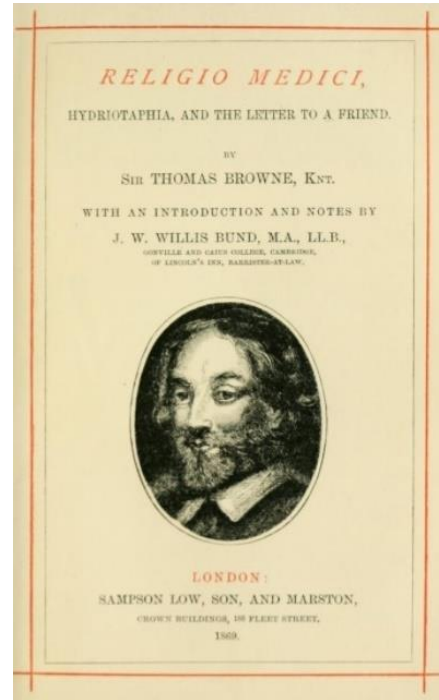
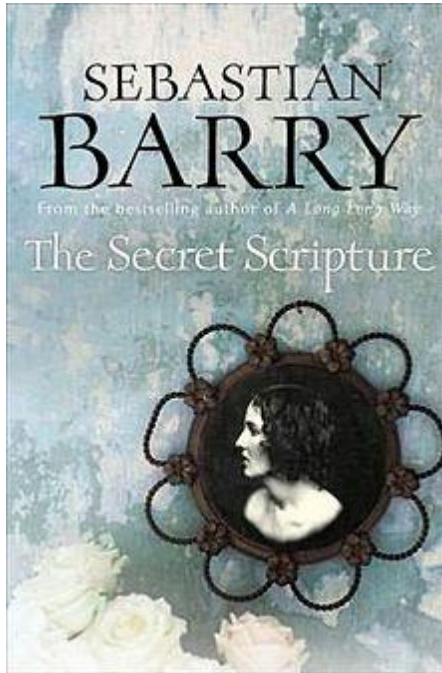
Sir Thomas Browne's prose shows a constant tendency to launch into scientific, philosophical and even theological generalisations about human life amidst a spate of inventive images and curiously-framed words that draw upon different spheres of knowledge in a conversable and pleasing way which clearly mirrors the sheer pleasure of a mind engaging in framing such bold ideas in such markedly heterogeneous terms. Barry imitates this trait yet the point of his sentences is always very much his own as reflecting a knowledge of life which he credibly extracts from the Irish social and historical experience embodied by his characters.

"It is funny, but it strikes me that a person without anecdotes that they nurse while they live, and that survive them, are more likely to be utterly lost not only to history but the family following them. Of course this is the fate of most souls, reducing entire lives, no matter how vivid and wonderful, to those sad black names on withering family trees, with half a date dangling after and a question mark." (*The Secret Scripture*, Faber 2008, p.47)

"It is along the strands of the world that the privilege of possessing children is most blatantly seen. What torment for the spinster and the childless man, to see the various sizes of little demons and angels ranged along the tide line. Like some species of migratory animal. The human animal began as a mere wriggling thing in the ancient seas, struggling out onto land with many regrets. That is what brings us so full of longing to the sea." (Ibid., p.137.)

"I am beginning to wonder strongly what is the nature of history. Is it only memory in decent sentences, and if so, how reliable is it? [...] Most truth and fact offered by these syntactical means is treacherous and unreliable. And yet I recognise that we live our lives, and even keep our sanity, by the lights of this treachery and this unreliability, just as we build our love of country on these paper worlds of misapprehension and untruth. Perhaps this is our nature, and perhaps unaccountably it is part of our glory as a creature, that we can build our best and most permanent buildings on foundations of utter dust." (Ibid.p.293.)

The Secret Scripture - The Browne epigraph (II)



In the case of Barry's epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne in *The Secret Scripture* (2008), there is no problem identifying it: it is from the text that Barry cites – *Christian Morals*, first published posthumously and afterwards in an edition edited by Dr Samuel Johnson and later again in numerous widely distributed editions.

It was not, however, included in the edition which Barry takes great trouble to identify as that in the possession of Roseanne McNulty – in fact, a copy of *Religio Medici* by Browne, first published in 1643 and reprinted – after many other editions – in a collection of Browne's Works edited by Willis Bund for the publisher Sampson, Low, Son, and Marston of London in 1869.

"The greatest imperfection is in our inward sight, that is, to be ghosts unto our own eyes."

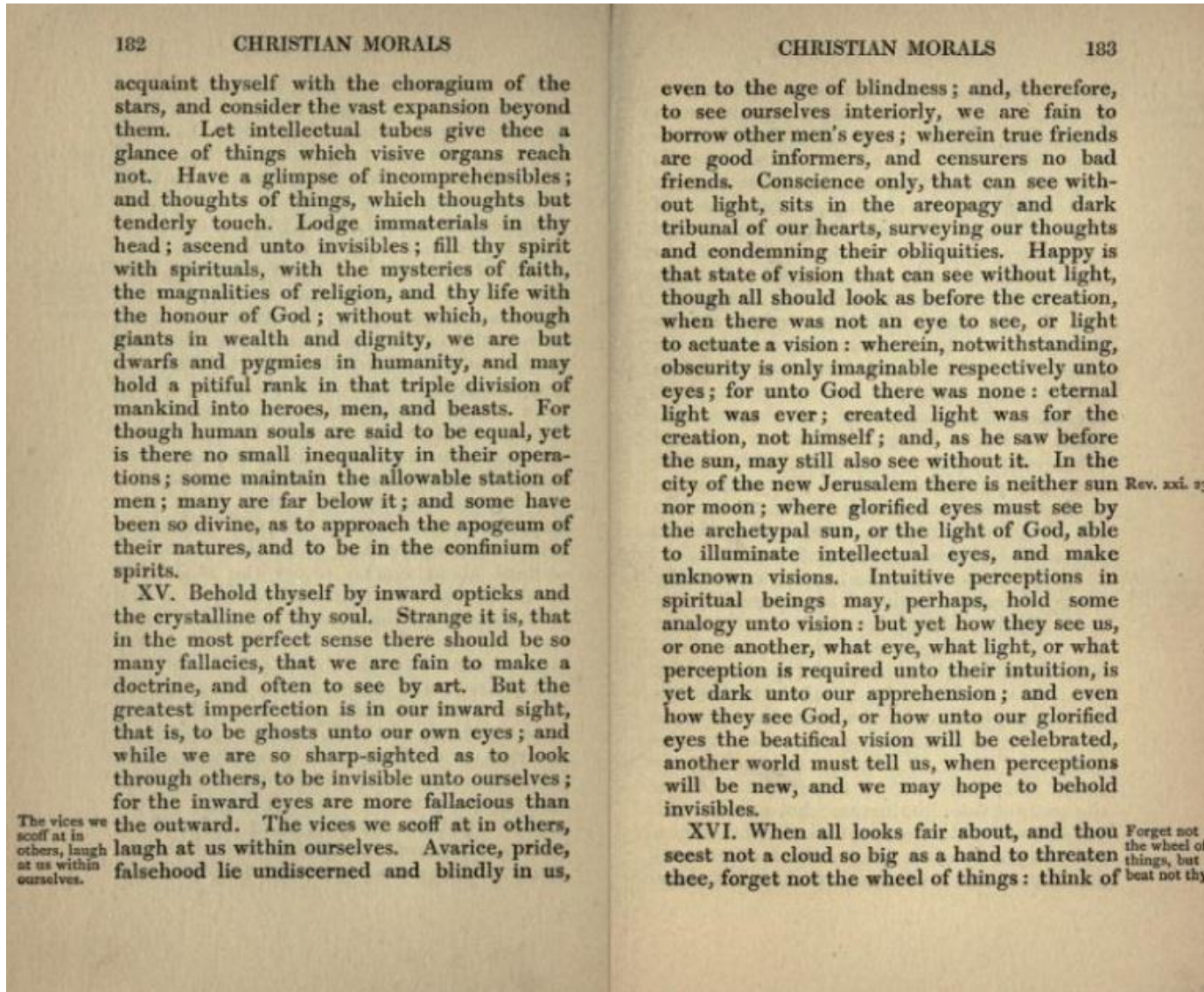
Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*

'Of the numbers who study, or at least read history, how few derive any advantage from their labours! . . . Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated ancient and modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes.'

Maria Edgeworth, Preface to *Castle Rackrent*

The assumption seems warranted that Barry owns a copied of the 1869 *Religio Medici* which he describes so accurately – but where did he meet with the lines from *Christian Morals* which he uses as epigraphs both for this novel and for the much earlier *Engine of Owl-light* (1987)?

Source of the 'ghost' epigraph in *The Secret Scripture* (2008)



Christian
Morals
(1712)

SECT. xv.—Behold thyself by inward opticks and the crystalline of thy soul.⁶ Strange it is, that in the most perfect sense there should be so many fallacies, that we are fain to make a doctrine, and often to see by art. But the greatest imperfection is in our inward sight, that is, to be **ghosts** unto our own eyes; and while we are so sharp-sighted as to look through others, to be invisible unto ourselves; for the inward eyes are more fallacious than the outward. The vices we scoff at in others, laugh at us within ourselves. Avarice, pride, falsehood lie undiscerned and blindly in us, even to the age of blindness; and, therefore, to see ourselves interiorly, we are fain to borrow other men's eyes; wherein true friends are good informers, and censurers no bad friends. Conscience only, that can see without light, sits in the areopagy⁷ and dark tribunal of our hearts, surveying our thoughts and condemning their obliquities. Happy is that state of vision that can see without light, though all should look as before the creation, when there was not an eye to see, or light to actuate a vision: wherein, notwithstanding, obscurity is only imaginable respectively unto eyes; for unto God there was none: eternal light was ever; created light was for the creation, not himself; and, as he saw before the sun, may still also see without it. In the city of the new Jerusalem there is neither sun nor moon; where glorified eyes must see by the archetypal sun,⁸ or the light of God, able to illuminate intellectual eyes, and make unknown visions. Intuitive perceptions in spiritual beings may, perhaps, hold some analogy unto vision: but yet how they see us, or one another, what eye, what light, or what perception is required unto their intuition, is yet dark unto our apprehension; and even how they see God, or how unto our glorified eyes the beatifical vision will be celebrated, another

Inward opticks in *The Secret Scripture* (2008)

Browne's sentence has the meaning that we should examine our own characters for vices just as we examine others. The trouble is, he tells us, that our ability to look inward is inferior to our ability to look around us with our natural eyes. The result is that we are often absent as being immaterial and therefore invisible to natural vision – the 'sense' of sight. All of this is condensed in his wonderful turn of phrase: 'the greatest imperfection of our inward sight is to be ghosts unto our own eyes' – the phrase which Barry has snatched from the longer sentence to use as an epigraph for his novel.

Behold thyself with inward opticks and crystalline of they soul. Strange it is, that in the most perfect sense there should be so many fallacies, that we are fain to make a doctrine, and often to see by art. But the greatest imperfection is in our inward sight, that is, to be ghosts unto our own eyes[.] and while we are sharp-sighted as to look through others, to be invisible unto ourselves; for the inward eyes are more fallacious than the outward. (Sir Thomas Browne, "Christian Morals" [1712], in *Works* (1756 &c.)

The aptness of that epigraph to *The Secret Scripture* is both obvious and overwhelming. In it Dr Grene peers at Roseanne but not as hard as she looks into herself. Her journal – hidden under the floor-boards – is the instrument that she used to conduct this essay in self-examination in the course of which she manages to expose the cruel character of contemporary Ireland in the period between the 1930s and the 1950s (and later, by many accounts. Finally, *The Sacred Scripture*, as a novel, is virtually a mirror image of her act of heroic introspect, combined with Dr Grene's. Each represents respectively the observer and the observed, yet each is the observer of the other and in this way the failures of perspective are corrected.

Religio Medici as a plot element in *The Secret Scripture* (2008)



The Secret Scripture was filmed by Jim Sheridan in 2016, with Rooney Mara and Vanessa Redgrave as Roseanne McNulty, respectively young and old. The novelist was known to dislike plot-changes in the screen adaption.

Roseanne has kept a 29th-century edition of *Religio Medici* (1643) which formerly belonged to her father, who regarded it as a “veritable gospel”, according to her. She speaks of knowing much of it by heart but does not actually quote it – those much of her thoughts and writing reflect the style of at older author.

Towards the close of the novel, she gives the book to Dr Grene, who has been ‘assessing’ her sanity in the last days of the Mental Hospital in view of possible release. She ask him to give it to her son – an undertaking that he believes to be impossible, until by and extraordinary coincidence he discover that he himself

The book is thus not only a stylistic model for the novel, it is also a crucial ‘prop’ in one of the central transactions of the novel. In addition, it’s insistent concern with moral intelligence as a form of inward science informs much of the writing and the lessons of the plot. (She also has a copy ‘Mr Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*’, p.30.)

My father was a passionate, I might almost say celestial-minded Presbyterian man, which was not a particularly fashionable quality in Sligo. The *Sermons* of John Donne he prized above all, but his veritable gospel was *Religio Medici* by Sir Thomas Browne, a book I still possess in all the flotsam and ruckus of my life, in a little battered volume. I have it here before me on my bed, with his name in black ink inside, Joe Clear, and the date 1888, and the town Southampton, for in his extreme youth he had been a sailor, sailing into every port of Christendom before he was seventeen.

Religio Medici as an influence on the characters in *The Secret Scripture* (2008)

The Secret Scripture (2008) is replete with references to *Religio Medici* and Roseanne certainly believes that it is a major influence on her thinking. In time it comes to be an influence on Dr Grene as well.

[Roseanne:] My own story, anyone's own story, is always told against me, even what I myself am writing here, because I have no heroic history to offer. There is no difficulty not of my own making. The heart and the soul, so beloved of God, are both filthied up by residence here, how can we avoid it? These seem not my thoughts at all, but maybe are borrowed out of old readings of Sir Thomas Browne. But they feel as if they are mine. They sound in my head like my own belling thoughts. It is strange. I suppose therefore God is the connoisseur of filthied hearts and soulds, and can see the old, first pattern of them, and cherish them for that.

He had better be in my case, or I may dwell with the devil shortly. (p.55.)

Again:

[Dr Grene:] What creatures we are, bringing a simple bloom to that over the centuries, and turning those mangy scavanging animals at the edge of our ancient camp fires into Borzois and poodles. The thing itself, the first thing, will never do us alone, we must be elaborating, improving, poeticising. "To palliate the shortness of our lives," I suppose as Thomas Browne wrote in the book that Roseanne has given me to give to her son. Between *Religio Medici* and the Royal Horticulturall Society's *Roses* have I pitched a tent of sorts. (p.254.)

By quoting a sentence apparently remembered from the *Religio Medici* – which he has received from Roseanne - Dr Grene suggests that his reflection on the human compulsion to refine upon what nature has provided – wild dogs turned into 'Borzois and poodles' – is a Brookean idea in form and substance. This seems true; the bibliographical fact, however, is that those words – "[t]o palliate the shortness of our lives" – do not come the *Religio Medici*, as he implies. Instead, they come from the *Christian Morals* (1712), a text which is not included in the collection of *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne* (1869) which he has received from the hands of Roseanne McNulty. Where, then, did he meet them?

This most extended reference to *Religio Medici* in *The Secret Scripture* takes this form:

[...] Dr Grene lifted from the tale my father's of copy of *Religio Medici* and looked at it idly enough. I was surprised when my father died to see that the book was **printed in 1867**, although I knew he had it always for many years.

[...]

Because I knew the little book so well, I could guess that Dr. Grene was looking at. It was the picture of Sir Thomas Browne, with a beard. Perhaps as **he looked at that beard, a very fierce jutting object in a round engraving**, he may suddenly have been regretting the loss of his own. **Sampson, Low, Son, and Marston were the printers**. The Son was beautiful. The son of Sampson Low. Who was he, who was he? Did he labour under the whip of his father, or was he treated with gentleness and respect? **J. W. Willis Bund** supplied the notes. Names, names, all passed away, forgotten, mere birsong in the bushes of things. If J. W. Willis Bund can pass away forgotten, how much easier for me? [...]

[...]

My father,' I said.

'He was an educated man then?'

'He was indeed. He was a minister's son. From Collooney.'

'Collooney,' he said. 'Collooney suffered so in the troubles in the twenties,' he said. 'I am glad somehow that one time there was a man there that read the *Religio Medici*.'

The way he said the last two words slowly I knew he had never encountered the book before.

Dr Grene opened the book further, passing the introduction, and hunting mildly for the beginning of the book, as a person does.

"To the reader. Certainly that man were greedy of life, who should desire to live when all the world were at an end ..."

Dr Grene gave a strange little laugh, not a true laugh at all, but a sort of miniature cry. Then he laid the book back where he had found it.

[...]



From this we extract the information that the book is entitled *Religio Medici*, written by Sir Thomas Browne – though we are not told when – and published in 1869 by a company called Sampson, Son, Low, Son, and Marston in 1869. And, further, that it contains the opening sentence, “To the reader ... [&c.], as quoted here. Is this true?

Roseanne's Edition of *Religio Medici*

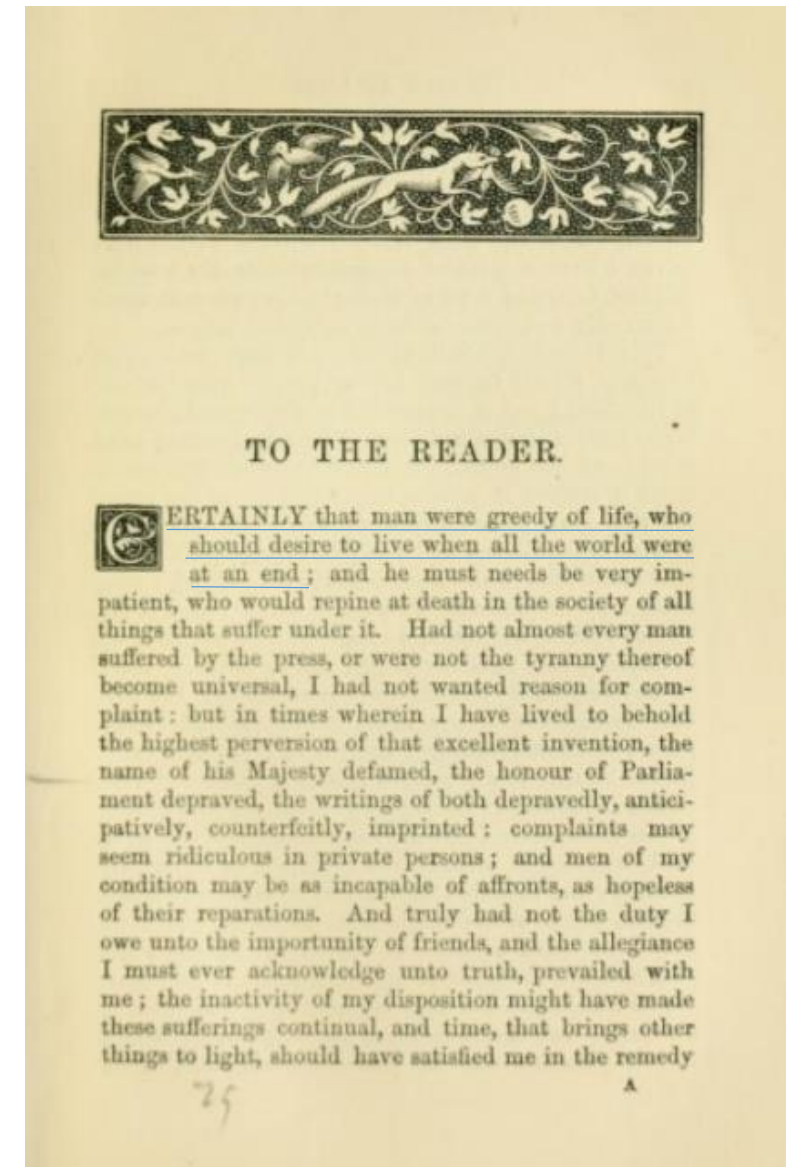
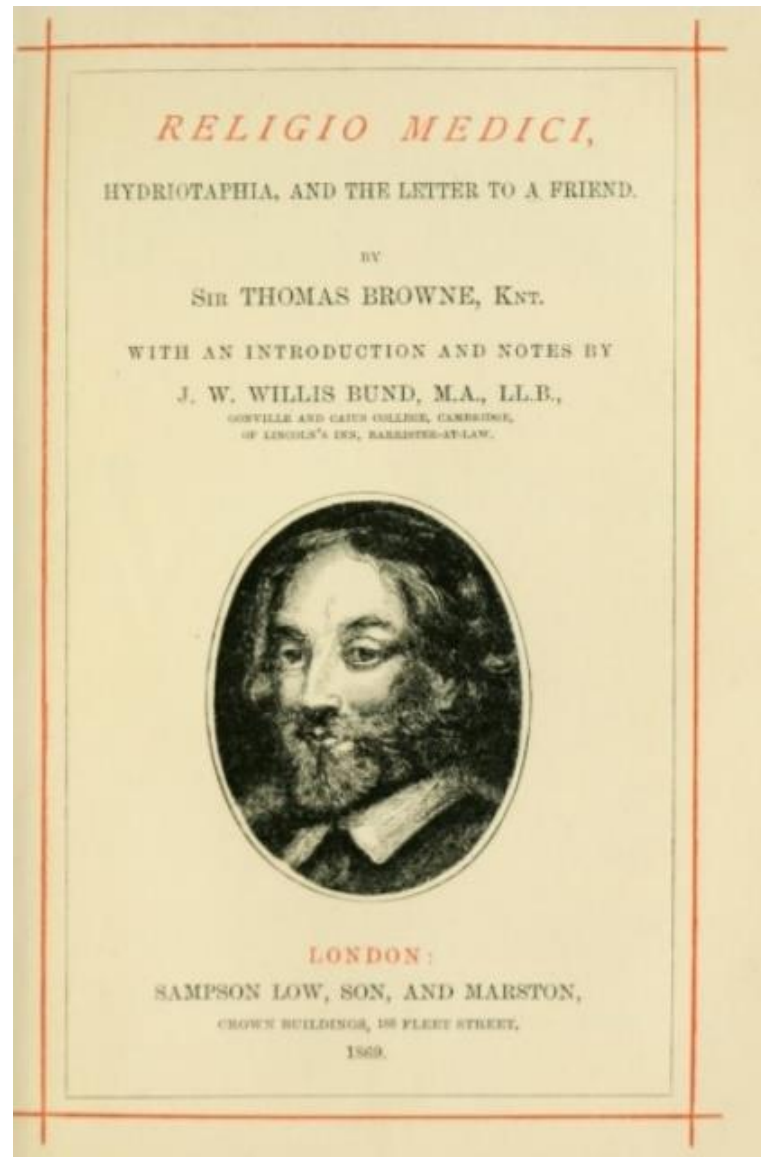
12. **Christian Morals.** Rivingtons, 1863. [Keynes 174.] A reprint of the 1756 edition with Johnson's "Life," facsimile of title-page and a frontispiece portrait of the author by G. P. Harding. Square 8vo, 5 1/2" x 7 1/2", in a choice contemporary binding by M. M. Holloway of dark blue morocco with gilt crests, red end-papers, all edges gilt. The presentation inscription: "To Mrs. S. Garrard, Aug. 10th, 1865 from M. H." appears to be from the binder.

13. **Religio Medici, Hydriotaphia and the Letter to a Friend.** With an Introduction and Notes by J. W. Willis Bund. Samson Low, 1869. [Keynes 31.] The first printing of this very popular edition on the publisher's Bayard Series, flexible dark reddish brown cloth, all edges gilt, green silk marker, binder's ticket of Burn on green end-paper.

14. **Religio Medici, Letter to a Friend &c. and Christian Morals.** Edited by W. H. Greenhill. Macmillan, 1881. [Keynes 36.] The first printing of this popular and frequently reprinted edition, maroon cloth, gilt, edges uncut, blue-black end-papers. Golden Treasury Series; this copy has the earliest variety of the 4 page series advert at end.

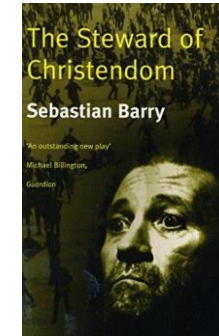
Catalogue of the Colbeck Collection at British Columbia Univ. Library (2010)

The 1869 Edition of *Religio Medici* includes the title-work with *Hydriotaphia, or Urn-burial* (1648) and *Letter to a Friend* (posthum. 1690). It does not contain *Christian Morals* (posthum. 1712) from which Barry's epigraph is taken – though this can be found in almost every collected edition of Browne's works.



Sebastian Barry and Family/History

Fintan O'Toole: 'Sebastian Barry's plays are about history, but not in any very obvious or familiar sense. The history that informs these plays is a history of counter-currents, of lost strands, of untold stories. [Against the simple narrative of Irish history as a long tale of colonisation and resistance, Barry releases more complex stories of people who are, in one way or another, a disgrace to that history.](#) In Sebastian Barry's luminous plays, grace and disgrace are not opposites but constant companions.' (Preface to *Sebastian Barry: Plays 1*, London: Methuen 1997.)



"It is not history. But I am beginning to wonder strongly what is the nature of history. Is it only memory in decent sentences, and if so, how reliable is it? I would suggest, not very. And that therefore most truth and fact offered by these syntactical means is treacherous and unreliable. And yet I recognise that we live our lives, and even keep our sanity, by the lights of this treachery and this unreliability, just as we build our love of country on these paper worlds of misapprehension and untruth. Perhaps this is our nature, and perhaps unaccountably it is part of our glory as a creature, that we can build our best and most permanent buildings on foundations of utter dust." (Dr. Grene, in *The Secret Scripture*, p.293.)

Sam Briger: "Why do you think you keep returning to the [history of your family](#)?"

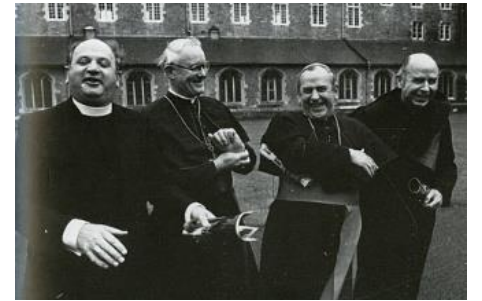
Barry: I think it started in childhood where, you know, I was a little boy in love with my family and family members, my great aunt Annie, my - that I wrote a little novel about called *Annie Dunne* and my grandfathers [... *unintelligible*]. He was the - he was a major in the British army during the Second World War. He has a book called *The Temporary Gentleman*. And my other grandfather and - who was a painter and nationalist [who came out in 1916](#).*

So, you know, these were two grandfathers completely at odds historically in Ireland. But I loved - they were at odds, but I loved them equally. I mean, I loved them madly. I mean, I was in love with these people, and I wanted more of them." (Idem.)

I.e., he participated in the 1916 Rising against the British 'Coming out' in 1916 is a mark of honour and membership badge for the dominant political class in the new Irish nation.

A 'miraculous conclusion'

Bishops Casey, Newmann and Daly with
Cardinal Tomás O Fiach (2nd from right)



In *The Secret Scripture*, Barry takes on modern Irish history with its saga of guerrilla warfare and fratricidal murder as well as the institutional violence of the mental asylum and the care homes, so often conducted by the religious orders with the connivance of the Irish state. The result should be the apportion blame in much the way that the Irish public has recently blamed the priests and nuns for the brutality of the 'Lamplight' laundries, the soc-called 'industrial schools' (or reformatories), and the dying rooms in 'children's homes' for illegitimate children. Indeed, for many readers, there must be an expectation that, in this novel, a reckoning will be made and a recompense extracted from the guilty malefactors.

In Barry's story, Fr Gaunt is the aptly-named parish priest who facilitates the marriage-annulment which results in Roseanne's incarceration as a promiscuous young woman – presumed mad in accordance with Degeneracy Theory and local prejudice. In *The Secret Scripture* his puritanical mentality and the long shadow that it casts across her life – including the paradoxical memory that, at one point, she actually wept upon his shoulder - suggests that he should be treated as the arch-villain of the narrative. Not so. In the *dénouement* Fr Gaunt is exonerated for his patent crimes in a sentence that expresses the wisdom and the moderation of the novelist's over-view:

“The world is not full of betrayers, it is full of people with decent motives and a full desire to do right by those who know them and love them. This is a little-known truth, but I think it is a truth nonetheless. Empirically, from all the years of my work, I would attest to that. I know it is a miraculous conclusion, but there it is. We like to make strangers of everyone. We are not wolves, but lambs astonished in the margins of the fields by sunlight and summer.”

Dr Grene, in *The Secret Scripture* (London: Faber 2008), p.186.

The 'kindly instincts of young men in Sligo'

Religio Medici (1643)
Frontispiece



Equally, the IRA-men who bring about the death of Roseanne's father might be anathemised as murderers who kill at the behest of an inhuman nationalism. In fact they are characterised as impressionable young men whose normally 'kindly instincts' have got caught up in the 'hurricane' of civil war in Ireland, 1919-22. Who can doubt that the plain phrase 'young men' serves as a motif in this novel? Consider first how they enter the story, carrying the dying body of an IRA companion, retold in Roseanne's words:

Three men came in carrying a fourth and, as if driven themselves by an unseen force, seemed to sweep me back from the table, and before I knew what had happened, I had the back of school dress rubbed against the damp whitewash of the wall. They were like a hurricane of activity. They were all young men and the man being carried was no more I would guess than seventeen. [...]. (*The Secret Scripture*, Faber 2008, p.37.)

Is it possible that the motif of the tower is inspired by the frontispiece of *Religio Medici*?

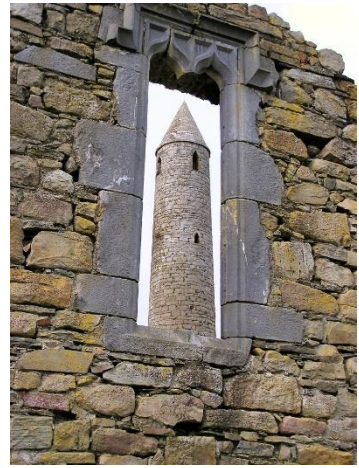
[...] The civil war that followed caused further mayhem to the kindly instincts of young men in Sligo. Eventually time was found to turn attention to Roseanne's father, and his end was curious and protracted.

One night as he came home he was abducted on the corner of his street. [...] He was taken by a number of men and [179] dragged off into the cemetery. [...] Fr Gaunt thinks the plan was to take him to the top of the round tower there [...] and fling him out of the window at the top, or some such strategy. His mouth was stuffed with white feathers, no doubt to characterise his former works [...] Then alas he was beaten with hammers, and an effort made to push him out the little window [...] Their less than theatrical solution to the question of his execution was to hang him in a derelict house nearby. [...] They were young men trying to avenge a great wrong, and young men are excitable and sometimes clumsy. No, not much missed, such a man. / Except by Roseanne. (Ibid. p.179-80.)

Barry is certainly a candidate for inclusion in any anthology of Irish 'atrocities fiction' – a category which would include novels by Eugene McCabe and Eoin MacNamee dealing with terrorist murder gangs on both sides of the Northern Ireland Troubles. But the hammers and white feathers are in fact, props from the private family life of the McNulty's and there is no reason why they should be significant to the IRA-men, other than that the novel requires them to serve as a motif. (For that motif, see also pp.19-22; 53, 62, 268, 278-80.)

Conclusion: Towers and Angels

In *The Secret Scripture*, Sebastian Barry makes a final visit to the remarkable prose of Sir Thomas Browne whose *Religio Medici* inaugurated a style of fanciful speculation in which the modulation of the thinking voice and the furthest reaches of idiom and vocabulary serve to place a stream of thought made audible, conducted in a voice which vibrates with the inner note of the human mind thinking in real-time. In view of that achievement, Browne has been called the original of the interior monologue and, more generally, the “thinking” narrative in English.



In Barry, that voice – that possibility of human eloquence – has been adapted to the purposes of Anglo-Irish fiction in which the peculiarities of Hiberno-English phrase and idiom perform a like effect of carrying the prose away from the conventional tenor of English fiction-prose: hence Barry’s novels, like the plays of John Millington Synge, are often felt to be poetic rather than prosaic in the genre sense. Yet, together with borrowing such stylistic effects, Barry also borrows Browne’s intellectual scepticism and his disregard for orthodoxies of all kinds while reiterating his concern with the classical themes of grace and fall, justice and redemption.

In so doing, he brings into higher definition - and with striking effect- his life-long meditation on the few passages Browne’s most famous works – *Religio Medici*, *Urn Burial*, and *Christian Morals* that he has first encountered as a Trinity student in the early 1970s and never forgot. The result is an remarkable testimony to the rich imaginative indebtedness of the best modern Irish writer to both its Irish and its English antecedents, but perhaps most of all, its share in the legacy of the Irish Literary Revival.

... Thank you!