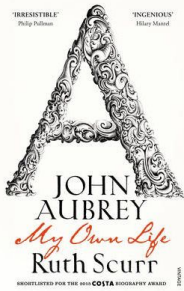


Book Review



Ruth Scurr, *John Aubrey: My Own Life* (London, Chatto & Windus 2015). xxiv + 518 pp. Hardback, £25 [ISBN: 9780701179076], Cardcovers, (Vintage 2016) £9.99 [ISBN: 9780099490630]

The early members of the Royal Society are familiar to us from the diaries of Evelyn and Pepys, countless biographies and the publication of the papers of luminaries including Boyle, Hooke and Newton. There were two notable biographies of John Aubrey published in the twentieth century: Anthony Powell, *John Aubrey and his Friends* (1948) and Michael Hunter, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning* (1975). In keeping with the mercurial spirit of the new millennium Ruth Scurr adopts an innovative approach to the problem of life-writing. Using the copious available archival material, she has produced the diary that Aubrey might have – indeed arguably should have – written. This imaginative treatment immerses us in Aubrey's world, which we see through his eyes and from his perspective. It is a beguiling vehicle for conveying a sense of the milieu in which the author of *Brief Lives* moved and I would thoroughly recommend it as a compelling picture of what it was like to live through the Civil War and Restoration. As a biographical form I find it less satisfactory. Scurr makes Aubrey no more self-aware than might be expected, so aspects of his life for which a straight biographer would provide context and interpretation are here passed over and the reader is left to make of it what they will. My doubts about this approach are no doubt coloured by my own experience of struggling to make sense of the life of one of Aubrey's contemporaries in order to produce a conventional biography and jealousy that I had less imagination than our author.

Although most closely associated with Wiltshire and Surrey, Aubrey had important links to Gloucestershire. His paternal grandmother married a Bristol alderman as her second husband and, when Aubrey was a child, he would visit her house at Compton Dando. Scurr's approach conveys well how encountering the standing stones at Stanton Drew near his grandmother's house spurred Aubrey's antiquarian interests long before his celebrated encounter with the Avebury circle when out hunting with friends. We also obtain a sense of how the atmosphere of intellectual curiosity and excitement that Aubrey encountered at Oxford and later as a member of the Royal Society, encouraged the way his antiquarian interests developed along scientific lines. We can also glimpse the genesis of the *Brief Lives* in anecdotal material picked up during childhood and squirreled away for later use. However, the exploration of some areas of Aubrey's life, particularly his financial and legal problems, suffers from the lack of contextual underpinning offered by the diary form. One example of this of local significance occurred towards the end of his life, when Aubrey drew up a list of ideas for ways to improve his always precarious finances. One was to obtain a patent for a scheme to improve the navigation for shipping to Bristol. The plan was mentioned in 1687 to the Common Council by the alderman Sir Thomas Langton and 'kindly received'. The limitation of Scurr's method means that there is no explanation of such questions as why or how you would obtain a royal patent for such a project, how Aubrey envisaged it would make its fortune, or how many such schemes were presented to Bristol's aldermen. The reader, whose curiosity is stirred, will have to seek the answers elsewhere.

Frustratingly for Gloucestershire historians, Aubrey never implemented his idea of compiling a study of our county along the lines of his *Natural History of Wiltshire*. Reading this imagined diary helps us to see what a wonderful resource that might have been and at the same time to understand why it was one more plan that never stood a chance of coming to fruition. The Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century is often presented in a very Whiggish manner. This valuable book presents a more nuanced and human perspective on an important period of our intellectual history.

JAN BROADWAY