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Language of description: English

Iaith y disgrifiad: Saesneg

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The autobiography of Lord Herbert of Cherbury,

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Crynodeb o wybodaeth | Summary of information

Lleoliad Repository:	Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru = The National Library of Wales
Teitl Title:	The autobiography of Lord Herbert of Cherbury,
Cod cyfeirnod Reference code:	NLW MS 9146E.
Virtua system control number [alternative]:	vtls006104122
Dyddiad Date:	[1932]. (dyddiad creu date of creation)
Lleoliad ffisegol Physical location:	ARCH/MSS (GB0210)
Dyddiadau creu, golygu a dileu Dates of creation, revision and deletion:	April 2011.
Nodyn Note [generalNote]:	Title based on contents.
Nodyn Note [generalNote]:	Preferred citation: NLW MS 9146E.

Hanes gweinyddol / Braslun bywgraffyddol | Administrative history | Biographical sketch

Nodyn | Note

Edward Herbert is best known as a philosopher and metaphysical poet, but he was also a diplomat, soldier, political satirist, country gentleman, adventurer, courtier, linguist, historian, musician, dramatist and flamboyant socialite. He is deservedly regarded as one of the last 'Renaissance men', and contributed significantly to the bridging of the gulf between Renaissance thought and that of the Enlightenment. Herbert was born at Eyton-on-Severn, Shropshire, on 3 March 1583, the eldest son of Richard Herbert (d. 1596), the Member of Parliament for Montgomery and sheriff of Montgomeryshire; among his six brothers were the poet George Herbert (1593-1633) and Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels. Edward was famously handsome, vain, impetuous and quarrelsome, but he was also highly culturally sophisticated. Although he received little formal education as a young boy, he came into contact with the poet John Donne (1572-1631), who was employed as a tutor for the Herbert children, and also the autodidact Edward Thelwall (d. 1610). Under these formative influences, Herbert studied logic, languages and music. He entered University College, Oxford, in May 1596, where, in addition to hunting and duelling, he developed an interest in philosophy and religion. By the time he was in his twenties, his academic

accomplishments were impressive. As well as being fluent in Latin and French, and at least competent in Greek, Italian, Spanish and Welsh, he acquired a knowledge of astronomy, geography, history, botany and medicine, while his financial and military responsibilities at Montgomery encouraged him to master arithmetic and geometry.

After leaving Oxford in 1599, Herbert married his cousin Mary, through whom he acquired the Castle Island estate in County Kerry. He then lived a relatively quiet life until the accession of James I in 1603, when, sensing the opportunity of royal favour, he attended the new king's court in London, and was made a Knight of the Bath. He returned to Montgomery in 1605 to continue his studies and take up new responsibilities as magistrate and sheriff of Montgomeryshire; he was elected Member of Parliament for the county in the same year. From 1607, however, the king gave Montgomery castle first to the Herberts of Pembroke and then to the Herberts of Powis Castle, and it was more than ten years before Edward Herbert was able to secure permanent possession of it for himself.

In 1608, Herbert left home on the first of many excursions to fight and study on the continent. He spent much of the next decade fighting against the Spanish, travelling widely through the Low Countries, France, Italy and Germany, and meeting many of the most prominent politicians, soldiers and intellectuals of the period. In 1619, shortly after the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War, which was to dominate English foreign policy for the rest of his life, Herbert was appointed English ambassador in Paris under the aegis of the royal favourite George Villiers (later duke of Buckingham), but he was recalled in 1621 when he fell out with the Constable of France. He resumed his post in 1622, but his influence in both the English and the French courts was waning, and he crucially failed to obtain Louis XIII's support for the Elector Palatine. He was dismissed in 1624, and his involvement in practical politics subsequently declined, despite his attempts to regain royal favour by writing an account of the 1627 La Rochelle expedition which portrayed the duke of Buckingham in a favourable light.

By the mid 1620s, Herbert's life of adventure was becoming displaced by his devotion to learning, which continued until the end of his life. He produced a number of political and historical treatises, and his lyrical and often obscure verses won him recognition as a poet, but Herbert's real importance was as a philosopher. In particular, his ideas about the relationship between truth, knowledge and the human mind - set out in his first significant work, 'De Veritate', in 1624 - led him into an attempt to reconcile the major world religions by examining what he considered to be common notions of religion. Such was the influence of his ideas that Thomas Halyburton (1674-1712) called him 'the father of English deism', and René Descartes (1596-1650) said that his 'mind had few equal'.

Herbert's services to the crown were rewarded by the creation of two new baronies: he was made baron Herbert of Castle Island in 1624 and baron Herbert of Cherbury in 1629, the first title relating to the family estates in Ireland, and the second to the lordship of Chirbury in Shropshire. He remained in debt from his lavish lifestyle on the continent, however, and this worsened when he became involved in a protracted dispute with his son, Richard, over possession of the Irish estate after the death of Mary Herbert in 1634. The rest of Herbert's life was marked by financial difficulties, ill health and depression. On the outbreak of civil war in 1642, Herbert had still not been paid in full by the crown for his work in France. Furthermore, he also opposed arbitrary power on principle, so although nominally a Royalist, he remained in effect neutral throughout the war. He declined repeated invitations to join the Royalist cause and held Montgomery castle with his own small personal retinue rather than allow a Royalist garrison to be installed, leaving the town largely undefended and doing little to repair the town walls and gates. Montgomery, however, occupied too vital a strategic position in the Welsh borders to avoid becoming involved in the conflict. In September 1644, the town was seized apparently unopposed by Parliamentary forces, and the castle was besieged. The defences were in good order, but Herbert quickly entered negotiations, the main purpose of which seems to have been to ensure the safety of his library, and he surrendered without a fight when petards were fixed to the castle gates. In return for the castle, it

was agreed that he should receive a large sum of money, and that his library and other possessions would be conveyed safely under guard to his house in London. By the time the Royalists attempted to recover Montgomery a few days later, Herbert had moved to London, where he eventually received a pension from Parliament. He died in London on 20 August 1648, and was buried in Middlesex at the church of St Giles in the Fields.

Natur a chynnwys | Scope and content

A photostat facsimile of a draft of the Autobiography of Lord Herbert of Cherbury lent by the Earl of Powis from his private collection in 1932.

Nodiadau | Notes

Nodiadau teitl | Title notes

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Nodiadau eraill | Other notes

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