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Belton House, Lincolnshire, MS S.115.20

Notes on the Manuscript

This commonplace book and another at A13.4.18 appear to be in the hand of 'Old' Sir John Brownlowe or Brownlow (20 January 1593/4 – 27 June 1679), 1st baronet of Belton.¹ He was the great-uncle of 'Young' Sir John Brownlowe (1659-1697), 3rd baronet of Great Humby, and the builder of the present Belton House, which with its contents was acquired by the National Trust in 1984. The attribution is made on the similarity of the hands in the two books with the hands in other volumes at Belton which are safely attributed to 'Old' Sir John.

Family background

'Old' Sir John was the son of Richard Brownlowe (1553-1638), chief prothonotary of the Court of Common Pleas for 47 years and the compiler of various works on legal precedents. Richard's grandfather came from Derbyshire but moved to Nottinghamshire; Richard began buying land in Lincolnshire, including the manors of Ringstone in the parish of Rippingale, acquired c.1598, and Belton, a few miles away, bought for £4000 c.1617. He appears to have spent a month or two at Ringstone each year, while being based in London within reach of the courts.

Richard's elder son John, like his brother William (1595-1666), was educated at Oxford and at the Middle Temple, though neither seems to have practised law actively. Both were created baronets in 1641, though they supported the Parliamentarian side during the Civil War and Commonwealth. Richard settled Belton and much of his other Lincolnshire property on John in 1621, and John lived mostly in the old house at Belton with his wife Alice, daughter of Sir John Pulteney. He did, however, also own a house in Drury Lane, London, as well as a property at Isleworth in Middlesex (where Alice died in 1676). The old house at Belton was demolished in 1695 when 'Young' Sir John built the present house on a neighbouring site (also using stone from the similarly demolished hall at Ringstone).

'Old' Sir John had no children, though he and his wife brought up his great-niece Alice Sherard and had close links to his great-nephew 'Young' Sir John (grandson of his brother Sir William); the two young people had both lost their fathers in 1668. To 'Old' Sir John's delight, they were attracted to one another and married in 1676.

¹ The main source for the life of the early Brownlowes is *Records of the Cust Family, Series II: The Brownlows of Belton*, by Lady Elizabeth Cust (London: Mitchell, Hughes, and Clarke, 1909). The chapter on 'Old' Sir John is at pp. 58-110, and includes a transcription of the memorandum book referred to below. For more recent studies of the family, see Peter Hoare, 'The Perils of Provenance: Serial Ownership, Bookplates and Obfuscation at Belton House', *Library History*, 18, 3 (2002), 225-34; and 'The Brownlowes and Custs of Belton House, Lincolnshire, and their Bookplates', *The Bookplate Journal*, n.s., 6, 1 (2008), 3-37.

'Old' Sir John's books

In 'Old' Sir John's will of 1673 he had bequeathed 'all my printed books, not otherwise disposed of' to 'Young' Sir John (his wife was to have 'all the books that she doth usually make use of'), but after his wife's death the bequest to 'Young' Sir John was expanded to make him the principal legatee. There are one or two references to books in a memorandum book started in 1660, for example in 1662 'Quere what books my nephew R:B: borrowed at Ringston' (a reference to 'Young' Sir John's father [Sir] Richard), and in 1671 'a boxe by the dore in my booke roome' which contained more than £400 in cash. This suggests that 'Old' Sir John must have had a significant collection of books in the old house at Belton, but no catalogue of them has survived.

However, many of them must have passed to 'Young' Sir John after his great-uncle's death in 1679: thirty-six titles have been identified from inscriptions as certainly or probably belonging to 'Old' Sir John among the books now at Belton, and many others no doubt also belonged to him. (There are more than 250 pre-1600 books at Belton, both English and continental, some of which will certainly have belonged to 'Old' Sir John — and perhaps his father Richard — but which lack any positive identification.)

The printed books identified date from 1637 to 1679, the year of 'Old' Sir John's death; most are marked with initials or a monogram 'JB', and a number have more extensive inscriptions. Several show the price he paid for them, from 1s. 6d. in 1658 to an apparent 84s. in 1697 (for Joseph Hall's *Contemplations on the Holy Jesus*). The books fall into two main groups, theological and historical, though there are also some on political thought such as Clarendon on Hobbes's *Leviathan*. A few law books are also present, including the 1651 edition of the first part of Richard Brownlowe and John Goldesborough's *Reports of diverse choice cases in law*, which has an inscription 'Given me by Mr Walbanke June 16th 1651' — a gift from the publisher of Sir John's father's work (this book also has loose manuscript notes largely on family matters).

The theological books are relatively few, and do not include any that need special comment; but the historical group is much more extensive. They show a keen interest in world affairs, with books on various countries and their recent history, from Portugal and Denmark to the Ottoman and Moghul Empires. A typical example is the anonymous *Description of Candia, in its ancient and modern state: with an account of the siege thereof, begun by the Ottoman Emperour in the year 1666, ... and surrendered the latter end of 1669*. This book has a publication date of 1670, but also has Sir John's monogram and the date he acquired it, given as 'Jan. 12th 1669' — Sir John usually preferred to use the old-style dating. In this case he must have bought the book very soon after its publication in January 1670, and shortly after the end of the siege. The book also has manuscript notes by him on the flyleaf. A few other books have dates in old style, and one or two even have acquisition dates before the end of the year before the imprint date!

One notable item is the set of two folio volumes of *A general collection of the discourses of the virtuosi of France*, published in 1664-65. The first volume has the acquisition date 16 June 1664 and the price £2, and there are three pages of manuscript notes at the end of the second volume. The

authorship of these notes is attested in the 1754 inventory post-mortem of Viscount Tyrconnel, another Sir John Brownlowe and 'Old' Sir John's great-great nephew, who added greatly to the Belton library in the first half of the eighteenth century. This lists the books, noting the presence of 'An abridgment & index by Old Sir John Brownlow in his own hand-writing'. (These volumes were sold by the family in 1971 and were bought back by the National Trust in 2008.)

'Old' Sir John's literary interests are thus well attested at Belton, both by printed books and by the surviving commonplace books.

Bibliography

Cust, Elizabeth, Lady, *Records of the Cust Family, Series II: The Brownlows of Belton* (London: Mitchell, Hughes, and Clarke, 1909)

Hoare, Peter, 'The Brownlows and Custs of Belton House, Lincolnshire, and their Bookplates', *The Bookplate Journal*, n.s, 6, 1 (2008), 3-37

— 'The Perils of Provenance: Serial Ownership, Bookplates and Obfuscation at Belton House', *Library History*, 18, 3 (2002), 225-34

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