

Thomas Browne of Edinborough, Mentioned In AFDIA Footnote

Post by "Cassius" of May 30, 2020 at 6:31 AM

I add this here as a note for anyone interested in the origin of A Few Days In Athens. This footnote appears on [page 189 of the 1850 edition](#). It seems to me that it is significant that the book singles out "the late amiable and enlightened teacher, Thomas Browne of Edinborough," as "chargeable with the weakness" of censuring the Epicurean school "whose doctrines he has

It might seem strange that, while the truth of the leading principles of the Epicurean philosophy have been long admitted by all sound reasoners, the abuse of the school and of its founder is continued to this day: this might and would seem strange and incomprehensible, did we not, on every subject, find the same cowardly fear of facing, openly and honestly, the prejudices of men. Teachers, aware of the ignorance of those they teach, develop their doctrines in language intelligible only to the few; or, where they hazard a more distinct exposition of truth, shelter themselves from obloquy, by echoing the vulgar censure against those who have taught the same truth, with more explicitness, before them. The mass, even of what is called the educated world, know nothing of the principles they decry, or of the characters they abuse. It is easy, therefore, by joining in the abuse against the one, to encourage a belief that we cannot be advocating the other. This desire of standing fair with the wise, without incurring the enmity of the ignorant, may suit with the object of those who acquire knowledge only for its display, or for the gratification of mere curiosity. But they, whose nobler aim, and higher gift it is, to advance the human mind in the discovery of truth, must stand proof equally

as Browne to see what can still be behind AFDIA seems to have felt a

to censure and to praise. That such lips and such pens should employ equivocation, or other artifice, to turn aside the wrath of ignorance, is degrading to themselves and mortifying to their admirers. The late amiable and enlightened teacher, Thomas Brown, of Edinburgh, whose masterly exposition of old and new truths, and exposure of modern as well as ancient errors, has so advanced the science he professed, is yet chargeable with this weakness. After inculcating the leading principles, the whole of his beautiful system, he condescends to soothe the prejudices which all his arguments have tended to uproot, by passing a sweeping censure on the school, whose doctrines he has borrowed and taught. We might say — how unworthy of such a mind! But we will rather say — how is it to be lamented that such a mind bears not within itself the conviction, that *all* truths are important to *all* men; and that to employ deception with the ignorant, is to defeat our own purpose; which is, surely, not to open the eyes of those who already see, but to enlighten the blind!

Here is a drawing of him:

Thomas Brown

Scottish philosopher



And [Wikipedia entry](#).

Brown set an answer to the objections raised against the appointment of [Sir John Leslie](#) to the mathematical professorship (1805). Leslie, a follower of [David Hume](#), was attacked by the clerical party as a sceptic and an infidel, and Brown took the opportunity to defend Hume's doctrine of [causality](#) as in no way inimical to [religion](#).^[1] His defence, at first only a pamphlet, became in its third edition a lengthy treatise entitled *Inquiry into the Relation of Cause and Effect*, and is a fine specimen of Brown's analytical faculty.^[2]

In 1806, Brown became a medical practitioner in partnership with [James Gregory](#) (1753–1821), but, though successful, preferred literature and philosophy. After twice failing to gain a professorship in the university, he was invited, during an illness of Dugald Stewart in the session of 1808–1809, to act as his substitute, and during the following session he undertook much of Stewart's work. The students received him with enthusiasm, due partly to his splendid

[rhetoric](#) and partly to the novelty and ingenuity of his views. In 1810 he was appointed as colleague to Stewart, a position which he held for the rest of his life. Brown was elected a member of the [American Antiquarian Society](#) in 1815.[3] He wrote his lectures at high pressure, and devoted much time to the editing and publication of the numerous poems which he had written at various times during his life. He was also preparing an abstract of his lectures as a handbook for his class. His health, never strong, gave way under the strain of his work.

He was advised to take a trip to London, where he died in 1820 aged 42. His body was returned to Kirkmabreck for burial.[4]

Interesting criticism of Erasmus Darwin:

Dr. Darwin seems to consider the animals of former times, as possessing powers, much superior to those of their posterity. They reasoned on their wants: they wished: and it was done. The boar, which originally differed little from the other beasts of the forest, first obtained tusks, because he conceived them to be useful weapons, and then, by another process of reasoning, a thick shield-like shoulder, to defend himself from the tusks of his fellows. The stag, in like manner, formed to himself horns, at once sharp, and branched, for the different purposes of offence, and defence. Some animals obtained wings, others fins, and others swiftness of foot; while the vegetables exerted themselves, in inventing various modes of concealing, and defending their feeds, and honey. These are a few of many instances, adduced by Dr. Darwin, which are all objectionable, on his own principles; as they require us to believe the various propensities, to have been the cause, rather than the effect, of the difference of configuration...

If we admit the supposed capacity of producing organs, by the mere feeling of a want, man must have been greatly degenerated, or been originally inferior, in power. He may wish for wings, as the other bipeds are supposed to have done with success; but a century of wishes will not render him abler to take flight. It is not, however, to man that the observation must be confined. No improvements of form have been observed, in the other animals, since the first dawnings of zoology; and we must, therefore, believe them, to have lost the power of production, rather than to have attained all the objects of their desire.

Noteworthy, Brown's criticism of the Darwinian thesis, like that of [Rudolf Virchow](#), did not come from any religious feeling.