Digby, Sir Kenelm

(1603–1665)

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Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–1665)

by Sir Anthony Van Dyck, *c.* 1640

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Digby, Sir Kenelm (1603–1665), natural philosopher and courtier, was born on 11 July 1603 at Gayhurst, Buckinghamshire, the elder son of Sir Everard Digby (*c.* 1578–1606), later executed for involvement in the Gunpowder Plot, and his wife, Mary (*c.*1581–1653), only daughter and heir of William Mulsho. The Digbys were an ancient gentry family. They had held the manor of Tilton, Leicestershire, since the thirteenth century and the manor of Stoke Dry, Rutland, since the fifteenth. However, Sir Everard's bride brought him the richer manor of Gayhurst and there Kenelm and his brother, Sir John Digby (1605–1645), spent their childhood.

Early years and education

Mary Digby did not remarry after her husband's execution. She remained a steadfast Roman Catholic and lived at Gayhurst with a companion, Dorothy Habington, devoting herself to religion and good works. Wisely, Sir Everard had entailed his manors of Stoke Dry and Tilton on Kenelm while Gayhurst

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was in the hands of trustees, so all were secure from permanent appropriation. Under the *Recusancy Act* of 1606 Mary's two children were required to be brought up by relatives who conformed to the established church but the act was seldom enforced with full rigour. The boys were mainly taught by Jesuits, probably including John Percy, though Kenelm, as the heir, is likely to have had instruction from Richard Napier (known to Kenelm as Parson Sandy), rector of Great Linford near by and a learned medical man and astrologer. Napier remained a good friend and probably started Kenelm's interest in medicine and astrology.

Digby had as a childhood playmate the beautiful Venetia (1600–1633), daughter of Sir Edward Stanley and his wife, Lady Lucy Percy, daughter of the Roman Catholic Thomas Percy, seventh earl of Northumberland [*see* Digby, Venetia, Lady Digby]. When his wife died young, Sir Edward left Venetia and her sister Frances to be brought up by a devout Roman Catholic not far from Gayhurst. Later, when he inherited Eynsham Abbey, near Oxford, the girls went to live with their father and the relationship was broken off. In 1617–18 Digby visited Spain with his distant Anglican cousin, Sir John Digby, who had been appointed ambassador. When he was fifteen, then not an unusual age for entry, he entered Gloucester Hall, Oxford, to the care of a humanist don with Roman Catholic sympathies, Thomas Allen, a well-known manuscript collector, mathematician, and astrologer and one of Sir Thomas Bodley's main collaborators in founding the Bodleian Library. Allen had been a friend of Sir Everard's stepfather, Sampson Erdeswicke, the Roman Catholic antiquary, and at Gloucester Hall a Roman Catholic might attend the university without damaging his faith because there was no chapel and conformity in religion was not enforced. The tall, handsome, and precocious Digby impressed Allen: he was to call him, according to John Aubrey, 'the Mirandola of his age' after the Renaissance prince and philosopher Pico della Mirandola (*Brief Lives*, 1.225).

The grand tour, embassy to Spain, and marriage

Digby left Gloucester Hall in 1619 for the grand tour: his mother hoped in this way to end the infatuation he already felt for Venetia, a girl of high birth but small fortune. They had met again and fallen in love at a house party held by a friend of Mary Digby; later Kenelm gave Venetia a diamond ring in exchange for a long lock of her chestnut hair. Before he left London for Paris on 31 May 1620 Digby sent a manuscript of elections (horoscopes) to Parson Sandy for safe keeping. An outbreak of plague drove him from Paris to Angers where the queen mother, Marie de' Medici, was living with her court. Here, according to '*Loose Fantasies*' (his early private memoirs), he attended a court masque, where a lady-in-waiting whom he had met in Paris invited him to dance and he caught the eye of the middle-aged queen. The next day a messenger brought him to the lady's lodgings and escorted him to a bedchamber where to his amazement the queen declared herself desperately in love and implored him to go to bed with her. Appalled, Digby made his politest excuses, said his heart was committed elsewhere, and contrived nimbly to escape. The queen at the time was at war with her young son, Louis XIII; there was fighting around Angers and many were killed. Digby gave out that he was dead and fled south, taking ship to Leghorn; he was established at Florence by November 1620. Digby wrote to Venetia to reassure her but his first letter miscarried and the rest were suppressed by his mother. During two years in Florence he survived an attack of smallpox, became fluent in Italian, and collected books and manuscripts. He also gave three addresses to the Accademia dei Filomati in Siena; a master-of-arms dedicated a military textbook to him; and an aged Carmelite gave him the recipe for his famous 'powder of sympathy'.

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Digby's cousin John Digby, now earl of Bristol, hearing that he was alive after all, summoned him to Spain to join the negotiations for the marriage of Charles, prince of Wales, to the Spanish infanta. Digby arrived in Madrid in the spring of 1623. Here he and his kinsman Lewis Dvye were involved in a dangerous affray and, at the suggestion of Henry Rich, Lord Kensington, he paid court to Donna Anna Maria Manrique, sister of the duke of Maqueda. He also found time to collect books and make some lifelong acquaintances, including the courtiers Toby Matthew and Walter Montagu and the letter-writer James Howell. More important, he made an excellent impression not only on the earl of Bristol but also on Prince Charles. The marriage negotiations failed but on returning to England, Digby was knighted on 28 October 1623 and became a gentleman of the privy chamber to the prince.

Living alone in London, grief-stricken by the news of Digby's death, and unaware of his survival, Venetia had embarked on a disordered life of pleasure. According to John Aubrey, she became the mistress of Sir Edmund Wyld and Richard, third earl of Dorset, who had one or more children with her and settled on her an annuity of £500. But Wyld was dead by April 1620 and Dorset's will of 1624 shows no sign of a settlement or children. '*Loose Fantasies*' suggests that both Dorset and his brother Edward Sackville pursued Venetia, the latter imploring her to 'marry' him, but since Sackville had been married since 1612 Digby here as elsewhere retouched the true picture. In any event Sackville began pursuing another beauty and Venetia broke off the ‘engagement’. The lovers made contact on Digby's return to court but only gradually became reconciled. Venetia had been overjoyed to hear that he was alive but the lack of letters had convinced her that she had lost his affection, while gossip about Venetia's relations with Sackville, who had succeeded his brother as the fourth earl in March 1624, made Digby chary of marrying her. However, in the summer of 1624, while Mary Digby was abroad, Venetia arranged to stay with her sister Frances, who had married John Fortescue and lived at Linslade, near Gayhurst. Digby and Venetia went riding together and became deeply enamoured. In December Digby accompanied the duke of Buckingham to Paris to make arrangements for the marriage of Prince Charles to Princess Henrietta Maria and Venetia sacrificed most of her jewellery and plate to pay for his expenses. This so moved Digby that he determined to overrule his mother's objections. Probably in January 1625 the lovers were secretly married. Digby had come of age, and into a rich patrimony, in July 1624, but Venetia's father was disposing of some estates to Venetia and since he was quarrelling with Mary Digby it seemed prudent not to reveal the marriage until the will was made. The couple's eldest son, Kenelm, was born on 6 October 1625.

The voyage to Iskenderun

Charles had ascended the throne the previous March and Lord Bristol advised Digby to advance himself in the king's service. Since England was at war with France and Spain he now determined on a privateering voyage to the Mediterranean to attack and plunder French and Spanish ships and eventually to seize French ships in the rich Venetian port of Iskenderun (Scanderoon) at the junction of Asia Minor and Syria. Despite his wife's tearful protests and the duke of Buckingham's opposition, Digby finally obtained letters of marque on 13 December 1627. He commissioned two ships, the *Eagle* (400 tons) and the *George and Elizabeth* (250 tons), with as principal officers Captain Milborne, an experienced seaman, and Sir Edward Stradling, a Glamorgan gentleman. Before Digby set sail on 6 January Venetia gave birth to a second son, John, and Digby told her to make their marriage public.

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Digby kept a day-to-day log of the voyage. He passed Gibraltar on the night of 19 January but his crews sickened in a severe epidemic. After an action with seven Spanish ships, on 15 February he reached Algiers, where he stayed six weeks, buying the freedom of forty to fifty captive English sailors to replace his dead crewmen. He took several prizes before passing the Strait of Messina. Digby suppressed a mutiny in April and visited Zante to buy provisions in May, arriving off Iskenderun on 10 June. He attacked the following day, cannonading the Venetian galleasses guarding the port because they fired on him. After a three-hour battle, according to Digby, the Venetian admiral asked for a ceasefire. This he agreed provided he could take the French vessels in port. In the event there was no plunder since the French crews had taken their goods ashore and, at the English vice-consul's plea, he did not damage the ships for fear of a heavy fine on the English merchants. Digby lost no men killed, according to his account, while the Venetians, according to theirs, lost one man killed and two wounded. On 16 June Digby left, exchanging salutes with the Venetians. Subsequently the English merchants in the Levant complained to the privy council and the Venetian ambassador lodged a protest in London.

On the return journey, on 16 August 1628 Digby reached the island of Milos, where he stayed a week and wrote out '*Loose Fantasies*'. Elsewhere in the Cyclades he collected antiquities and then careened his ships and bought provisions at Zante. He captured two prizes off Sardinia on 10 December but allowed the crews, with two ships, to go to Leghorn. He passed Gibraltar on 1 January and anchored at Woolwich on 2 February 1629. The court of admiralty then had to consider claims brought by foreign merchants against him. There was little trouble over his French and Spanish prizes (he had already disposed of most of the ships) but all Italian captures, including a ship, were returned to their owners. Meanwhile the English merchants of Aleppo were severely fined. Nevertheless the audacious voyage, with its booty and the battle at Iskenderun, made Digby a hero at court.

The Navy Board, family life, and the 'tribe of Ben'

Digby could now launch his career on a favourable tide, just as Lord Bristol had recommended. As Edward, earl of Clarendon, was later to recall:

> he was a man of a very extraordinary person and presence, which drew the eyes of all men upon him, which were more fixed by a wonderful graceful behaviour, a flowing courtesy and civility, and such a volubility of language that surprised and delighted.
>
> G. D. Boyle, *Characters of the Great Rebellion*, 1889, 294

In 1630 Digby found employment with the Navy Board and in October was made a junior principal officer of the navy. The Venetian ambassador reported on 27 December that 'moved by ambition, he has recently abandoned the Catholic Faith and become a Protestant' (*CSP Venice*, *1629–32*). John Aubrey said more accurately that he 'received the sacrament in the chapel at Whitehall and professed the Protestant religion' (*Brief Lives*, 1.227). Appointment to office made the oaths of supremacy and allegiance virtually inescapable and Digby was following the example of other crypto-Catholic courtiers. He became friendly with Sir John Coke, one of the secretaries of state, and various further appointments came his way, including membership of the Council for New England in 1632.

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At this time the Digby family lived in Charterhouse Yard in fashionable Clerkenwell while a new home was built in Aldwych Close, Holborn, from the profits of privateering. Digby commissioned his friend Van Dyck to paint a portrait of Venetia, his two sons, Kenelm and John, and himself in 1632; other portraits followed and Peter Oliver painted miniatures. Meanwhile Venetia lost another son, Everard, after childbirth and twins in a miscarriage; a fourth son, George, was born in 1633. Digby was deeply uxorious. To preserve Venetia's health and beauty he introduced edible snails into the grounds of Gayhurst and concocted 'viper wine'. Ben Jonson, the court poet, celebrated the Digbys' domestic bliss in a collection of verses and called Venetia his muse. Digby was Jonson's patron and one of the 'tribe of Ben' who dined in the ‘Apollo room’ of the Devil tavern in the City. Digby himself was a competent lyric poet and it was he who later prepared the manuscript material of the 1640 folio of Jonson's poems for printing. But the 'tribe of Ben' included several rakes, and Digby was not above temptation. Letters acknowledge several extra-marital 'escapes' and one prolonged liaison which made him later wonder 'what devil reigned in my blood' (Letter book, 9.146, 448). Venetia, on the other hand, given the security of matrimony, became a model wife and mother. Careful and vigilant in managing her household, she joined a group of court ladies who were Franciscan ‘tertiaries’. But Digby was becoming disillusioned with official life: he dreamed of retreating to the library of his new house in Holborn. Late in 1632 his Oxford friend Thomas Allen died and left him a huge collection of manuscripts—some of immense value and antiquity—and all the printed books he fancied, apart from special bequests. Digby therefore added to his new home a library wing.

Death of **Venetia**, reconversion, and life in France

Suddenly everything was utterly changed. On the night of 30 April / 1 May 1633 Venetia had a cerebral haemorrhage. As Digby was sitting in his drawing-room after breakfast, discussing literature with a recusant friend, Sir Thomas Hawkins, she was found dead in bed. It was a thunderbolt from heaven: God had taken her to punish his sins. Digby was grief-stricken. On 2 May he had Van Dyck make a death-mask for a deathbed portrait and on 3 May Venetia was buried in Christ Church, Newgate. To his brother John, Digby wrote, 'This torment must never have an end while I live … I can have no physician but death' (Letter book, 9.137). But gradually the frenzy burned out: the wife so suddenly snatched away by providence he now idealized. He had been fortunate to possess this angelic creature: having reached perfection she was ripe for heaven. In a long letter addressed to his children when they were older, he recorded all Venetia's virtues and urged them to emulate her. After receiving a cluster of funeral verses from Ben Jonson, Aurelian Townshend, William Habington, and others from the 'tribe of Ben', Digby gathered the drafts of forty-five letters he had written to relatives and friends after her death and added five memoranda, entitling the whole collection, copied on vellum, '*In Praise of Venetia*'. Despite the advice of a friend to remarry and the entreaties of a youthful maid of honour with whom he had had a long liaison and who was herself resisting the importunity of the earl of Dorset, he resolved to remain faithful to Venetia's memory. In a memorandum of 23 June 1634 he concluded that Venetia was 'either in glory or in the way to it'. He would offer up 'masses, prayers, penances and other devotions … to expiate … any human infirmity in her'. 'I ought to … make an entire renunciation … and pass the remnant of my sad days … where I may be free from all worldly cares' (ibid., 10.96–102). He never remarried.

Late in 1633, having handed over his two older sons to their grandmother and put the youngest to nurse, Digby, as Aubrey noted:

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> retired into Gresham College at London, where he diverted himself with his chemistry and the professors' good conversation. He wore there a long mourning cloak, a high-crowned hat, his head unshorn—looked like a hermit—as signs of sorrow for his beloved wife.
>
> *Brief Lives*, 1.226–7

He had Van Dyck paint him in black, bearded and bare-headed, with his right hand touching his breast in plaintive repentance. The college had become an important research centre and Digby had had scientific interests for many years. He had dabbled in experiments since 1624 and his earliest medical recipe dates from 1625. In making his 'viper wine' he bred vipers from the egg, dissected them, and made observations about the movements and fibres of their hearts. When Venetia died he took detailed notes of the results of the post-mortem dissection and examination.

Digby had a large laboratory at the college and engaged a Hungarian alchemist, Johannes Hunyades, as his instructor. Among his experiments Digby investigated the theory, revived by Paracelsus, that a bird could be reconstituted from its own ashes. Henri IV's court physician, Joseph Duchesne, had claimed success for such experiments in 'palingenesis'. Digby's failed, but he reckoned that he succeeded with baked crayfishes. He also produced a recipe for making silver into apparent gold through mercury, nitric acid, heating, and a powdering process: the result was yellow but could not have passed a goldsmith's assay. It was from Gresham that he negotiated with Archbishop Laud his famous donation in 1634 to the Bodleian Library, Oxford, of more than 200 manuscripts inherited from Thomas Allen, together with about 100 of his own, all magnificently bound in 233 books. They were to be followed by thirty-six Arabic manuscripts in 1640–42.

However, Paris, the capital of northern European culture, became Digby's objective. Here Gallican Roman Catholicism allowed scientists and natural philosophers to exchange ideas in freedom. On 29 September 1635 he informed Sir Francis Windebank of his arrival. Digby took rooms in the Collège de Boncourt, a hostel in the Quartier du Jardin du Roi, near the University of the Sorbonne and the royal chemistry laboratory. He collected books for a second library and obtained rare volumes for friends like Sir Edward Conway and John Selden. On the bindings of his books that survive is embroidered the loving monogram 'KDV'.

Digby had confessed to Archbishop Laud in March 1634 his doubts of the validity of Anglican claims to catholicity, and now thought it time to make his reconversion public. On 22 October 1635 his friend James Howell disclosed his defection in a letter to Thomas Wentworth. On 15 February 1636 Digby wrote to his old patron, Sir John Coke, to thank him for his sympathy, saying that he had written to Laud. The archbishop replied on 27 March, deeply pained by Digby's decision 'to enter again the communion of the Church of Rome, in which you had been born and bred, against that semblance of good reason which … made you adhere to the Church of England'. Nevertheless he praised Digby's letter as 'full of discretion and temper and so like yourself … Most sorry I am that a man whose discourse did so much content me should thus slide away'. But he said he retained 'all the love and friendliness' which Digby had won from him (Wharton, 610–16).

Late in 1636 Walter Montagu, a recent convert to Rome, took Digby to an Ursuline convent at Loudun where an outbreak of diabolical possession was believed to have occurred among the nuns. Digby acquired a manuscript describing the events but considered them of psychological, not spiritual, significance. What fascinated him, unlike Montagu, were the phenomena of collective hysteria and *folie à deux*. At a time when witches were put to death he denied the possibility of possession by evil spirits.

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(He was later prepared to participate in séances with John Dee's medium, John Evans.) After many months of theological study, Digby's last intellectual difficulties were resolved by a Carmelite lecturer in theology, Father Hilary, whom he visited with Montagu for ten days in January 1637. Two controversial works on religion announced unequivocally his return to Rome. One was a letter to an intending convert, Lady Purbeck, the other a treatise in French on the question of which faith was the true one. The preface to a little book on 'infallibility in religion', published fourteen years later and addressed to Lord George Digby (son of the earl of Bristol), related how in the summer of 1638 they enjoyed a 'long discourse' about religion. The ensuing correspondence was published in 1651.

Digby now formed a lifelong association with Thomas White, a philosopher and former professor of theology at the English College at Douai. Owing to unorthodox ideas, White had fallen from favour at Rome but he confirmed the Aristotelian cast of Digby's thinking. An introduction to Marin Mersenne, a Minim friar who corresponded with all the leading scientific thinkers and whose convent was a scientific and philosophical rendezvous, linked Digby to the new philosophical world of the continent. He became friendly with Thomas Hobbes, who was in Paris in 1635–6, and they corresponded during 1636–7. Digby adopted the 'atomist' and 'mechanical' ideas of the new philosophers but, like Gassendi in France, sought to integrate them with the Aristotelianism that was currently reviving in the universities. Mersenne introduced him to the works of Descartes and in 1637 he read the newly published *Discours sur le méthode*, of which he sent a copy to Hobbes, greatly praising it. In 1638 Digby wrote to Descartes, enclosing a refutation of the philosopher's proof of the existence of God, almost certainly written by White. In 1640 he went to the Netherlands to meet Descartes and they enjoyed a week's conversation. The philosopher evidently took to him because after the publication of Digby's *Two Treatises* in Paris in 1644 they met again at the Collège de Boncourt. According to Descartes's seventeenth-century biographer, Baillet, their conversations were concluded in mutual esteem. Descartes became the main influence on Digby among the new philosophers, though he never accepted Descartes's basic principle that everything must be rejected unless it could be proved beyond doubt. Digby accepted the substantial validity of Thomist metaphysics and his citing of authorities, ancient and modern, was precisely what Descartes most objected to; nor did he question so carefully the foundation of his own knowledge.

Civil war and the *Two Treatises*

Digby returned to England late in 1638 and was soon involved in a scheme of the queen to raise money from Roman Catholics to aid her husband's campaign against the Scottish covenanters. On 17 April 1639 she issued an appeal, covered by a letter from Digby and Walter Montagu. The response was meagre. Digby himself seems unlikely to have contributed materially since on 6 December 1639 he had to mortgage his estates at Stoke Dry and Tilton to pay a debt of £10,000 to Eliab and Daniel Harvey of London. But the Long Parliament, which opposed the Scottish war, called Digby and Montagu to account on 28 January 1641. On 16 March the Commons resolved to petition the king to remove all 'Popish recusants' from court, including Digby, Montagu, and Sir Toby Matthew. Removed they were, but Digby was called before the Commons again on 22 June. He spoke at length with great eloquence, making no secret of his loyalty both to his faith and to the king and the laws. The Commons were mollified but he thought it prudent to leave for France. Later that year he challenged a Baron Mont le Ros to a duel for calling Charles I 'the arrantest coward in the world' at a dinner party, and killed him. Duelling incurred the death penalty in France but Louis XIII excused him, provided he left the country.

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The Commons, however, were offended by a tract recounting the affair, *Sir Kenelm Digby's Honour Maintained* (1641), which concluded, 'May more such Noble Digbies increase … Then shall the enemies of our gracious King be scattered'. Now a suspect character, having returned to England, Digby was arrested on 7 August 1642 but was released after a week at the instance of the House of Lords.

The civil war broke out in August 1642 and Digby was rearrested on 12 November. He was detained by parliament at Winchester House, a former episcopal palace in Southwark, for almost a year, but took to imprisonment with zest. At the earl of Dorset's request he wrote in twenty-four hours a critical commentary on Sir Thomas Browne's recently published *Religio medici* (and after a courteous exchange of letters with the author, later editions were often printed with Digby's commentary annexed). He also wrote out the first draft of his treatise '*On bodies*' (as early as 24 February 1640 he had told Mersenne that he had fully thought out a work '*On the soul*').

Digby's combined work, the *Two treatises, in the one of which the nature of bodies, in the other the nature of man's soul is looked into: in way of discovery of the immortality of reasonable souls*, is on a massive scale. The essential design was to trace the course of nature and to demonstrate immortality from the basic facts of physical existence. '*On bodies*' was much the larger and more significant treatise, much of its thought derived, as Digby confessed, from White. In thirty-eight chapters he took all natural phenomena for his subject and onto an Aristotelian framework built concepts selected from current thinkers. Digby adopted the two dominant ideas of the time—the atomist theory, that everything in nature consists of atoms, and mechanical explanations, that every physical effect has a physical cause. Digby's own experiments provided part of the evidence leading to his conclusions. In three chapters on the embryology of animals, for example, his experiments upheld Aristotle's theory of epigenesis against the prevailing theory of pre-formation and led him to the modern conception of embryonic development. Medical historians are agreed that Digby deserves a very high place among seventeenth-century biologists: indeed he has been called the father of modern embryology. The much briefer second treatise, '*On the soul*', contains no explicit reference to Christian revelation or even the existence of God. Digby sought to prove immortality from ordinary experience: only the life of the body could be proved to end at death. But despite complex argument, how and where the soul subsists after death seems unsatisfactorily explained.

'*On bodies*' for a time made Digby's reputation as a natural philosopher. It was the first comprehensive synthesis of the new philosophy with the Aristotelian thought then current in the universities and one of the first fully developed atomist systems of the seventeenth century. Thus Isaac Barrow of Cambridge in 1652 picked out Digby among those, like Descartes, Bacon, and Gassendi, who had renewed ancient thought and struck out new paths in natural philosophy. When John Webster recommended reform of the university curriculum in his *Academiarum examen* (1653) he took for granted the importance of Digby and White, as well as Descartes. John Wallis, the Oxford mathematician, dedicated his *Commercium epistolicum* (1658) to Digby and included in it a letter praising Digby and White. Thomas Barlow, a friend of Robert Boyle and later bishop of Lincoln, in his *Library for Younger Scholars* (*c*.1655) cited Digby and White, along with Descartes, Gassendi, and Bacon, as modern natural philosophers. The first edition of the *Two Treatises* was published in Paris in 1644. Four further English and two Latin editions were printed by 1669, though none since.

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Embassies at Rome and dealings with the protectorate

Publication had become possible when Digby's imprisonment ended. Having undertaken to do nothing directly or indirectly prejudicial to parliament, he was released on 30 July 1643 and left for France. There in the following year, after the defeat at Marston Moor, Queen Henrietta Maria set up her household and made Digby her chancellor. She had him in mind for a further, more desperate, exercise in raising cash, this time from the pope. By the end of February 1645 Digby left Paris with his two older sons, Kenelm and John; George was left at school. Evidently, like his royal master, Digby attached little weight to a promise to a rebel parliament. White accompanied them to help press the case for two additional bishops for England and formal recognition of the status of the dean and chapter of the secular clergy. When Digby left Rome at the end of 1645 he had obtained an advance of 20,000 crowns. He was back in Rome in October 1646, offering to lead a fleet against the Turks in return for greater financial support but the curia prevaricated, knowing the weakness of Charles's cause after the crowning defeat of Naseby the previous June. Digby had no more luck even in persuading the curia to recognize the dean and chapter. After a year's frustration Digby addressed a long memorandum to Pope Innocent and in an audience on 30 November 1647 'he grew high and hectored with His Holiness' (*Brief Lives*, 1.225–6). He left Rome in February 1648 never to return. His only consolation was the friendships formed with Luke Holstenius, the Vatican librarian, and Cassiano dal Pozzo, a fellow art patron and book collector.

In the summer of 1647 Digby had joined an abortive scheme to persuade the puritans, now in power in England, to rescind the penal laws against Roman Catholics in return for a guarantee of obedience to the state. The plan, mainly devised by Henry Holden, a professor at the Sorbonne and vicar-general of the Paris diocese, was to have English bishops ordained in France who would be independent of the pope except as 'chief pastor' and to provide an oath of allegiance omitting any reference to the pope. The scheme collapsed because neither the English chapter nor the French authorities would support it.

From then on Digby's main concerns were to return to England and to raise money from his estates. These had been confiscated and all or most were mortgaged and burdened by further debts. He petitioned the central committee for compounding, appealed to the barons of the exchequer, petitioned both houses of parliament, and in 1653 even appealed to the protector, Cromwell, himself. In November 1653 and January 1654 orders in council finally permitted Digby to return to England and freed his estates from sequestration, and he seems to have been granted a pension. He acted as intermediary between Cromwell and the ruler of France, Cardinal Mazarin, in 1654–6 and was occasionally keeping company with high officials—even the protector. But he was a middle-man, not an informer. During 1654–5 he lived for a while at Gayhurst with his surviving son John, who had inherited the use of the estate (the younger Kenelm had been killed in action on 7 July 1648 and George had died at school the same year). In 1654 Digby published a translation of Albert the Great's mystical treatise, *Of Adhering to God*, and he sent a gift of about forty, mainly theological, books to Harvard University the following year.

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After *Two Treatises* was published Digby set himself the task of examining on mechanical principles the concepts of current Paracelsian chemistry, especially alchemy and the 'universal spirit' giving life to all things. In Paris he studied chemistry under the Scottish royal physician, William Davidson. John Evelyn visited Digby at his laboratory on 7 November 1651 and was given his 'powder with which he affirmed that he had fixed mercury before the late King' and 'a dissolvent of calx of gold' (Evelyn, *Diary*, 3.20, 48). Digby's experiments often involved faulty observation and conclusions that went further than the facts allowed. A prime example was the celebrated 'sympathetic powder'. Made from dried green vitriol, this was a variant of the well-known Paracelsian 'weapon salve' which cured wounds by being applied, not to the patient, but to the offending weapon. He offered a complex mechanical explanation in a lecture to a congress of French virtuosi (*A Late Discourse Made ... at Montpellier*, 1658). Digby had cured his friend James Howell, then the duke of Buckingham's secretary, of a sword-cut in the hand by dissolving some powdered vitriol crystals in water and plunging into the mixture a cloth stained with blood from the wound. The pain in Howell's hand, some yards away, immediately ceased. Many were convinced by Digby's evidence, including Joseph Glanvill, later a Royal Society fellow, and Nathaniel Highmore, a distinguished anatomist and friend of William Harvey. In fact the cure lay in washing and bandaging the wound. There were four editions in English of Digby's oration, three in German, and at least seven in French.

On the restoration of Charles II in 1660 Digby returned to England. He remained the queen mother's chancellor, continued to support Thomas White, and unsuccessfully petitioned the king for toleration for Roman Catholics. On 14 June 1661 a warrant for payment to him of £1325 was issued in respect of his ransoming captives in Algiers in 1628; on 6 December bonds for £12,000, £2000, and £300 were diverted to him for the same purpose. He lived 'in the last fair house westward in the north portico of Covent Garden … He had a laboratory there' (*Brief Lives*, 1.227). His operator, George Hartmann, collected Digby's records of experiments and after his death published them as *A Choice Collection of Rare Secrets* (1682). The first section of 143 pages is devoted mainly to alchemical recipes and processes: virtually all are presented in practical laboratory terminology. A second section of 125 pages lists medical and cosmetic recipes.

Digby was not among the ten men who held the initial meeting of the Royal Society on 28 November 1660 but was among the twelve additional members elected a fortnight later [*see* Founder members of the Royal Society]. He became a member of the chemical committee. His personal distinction added lustre to the new body, whose patron, Charles II, was himself a chemist in the Paracelsian tradition. Digby's paper on the vegetation of plants, read on 23 January 1661, was the first formal publication authorized by the society, entitled *A Discourse Concerning the Vegetation of Plants* (1661). It described Digby's detailed observation and experiments and attempted to draw wider conclusions, among them that a nitrous salt in earth 'attracteth a like salt that fecundateth the air … a hidden food of life' (p. 64), echoing Paracelsus, Duchesne, Seton, and Sendivogius. Never one of the central core of members, Digby's attendance at the society's meetings decreased with time, perhaps owing to ill health and the increasingly obvious divergence of his thinking from that of Robert Boyle and his associates. Digby's paper was his last publication. Increasingly he turned to medicine and collecting recipes for cookery and wine-making.

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Burdened by debts and suffering from gout and the stone, Digby prepared a will in January 1665. He expressed the wish to have his 'dust lie by hers who was my greatest worldly blessing' (TNA: PRO, PROB 11/325, fol. 130). He succumbed to a violent fever and died at home in Covent Garden on 11 June of the same year, aged almost sixty-two. He was buried in the elaborate tomb of black marble and copper which he had prepared for Venetia in the crypt of Christ Church, Newgate. By his direction no inscription was added.

Assessment

The extraordinary intelligence, courage, and ambition that carried Sir Kenelm Digby through so many adventures in his youth and made such an impression at court inspired him to take part in the philosophical and scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. His pioneering work in integrating mechanical philosophy with traditional Aristotelianism was soon superseded. Credulity mingled with precise observation in his wide-ranging, receptive mind but some of his research, especially in embryology, made positive contributions to scientific progress. All in all, Digby was one of the most remarkable thinkers and scientific enquirers of his day.

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Wealth at Death

apart from small annuity to Thomas White and other small bequests, Charles Cornwallis was sole beneficiary; Digby's sole surviving son, John, received nothing: will, TNA: PRO, PROB 11/325, fol. 130; Aubrey, *Brief lives*, 1.228–9

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See also

Digby, Sir Everard (c. 1578–1606), conspirator

Digby, Sir John [alias John Salisbury] (1605–1645), soldier

Digby [née Stanley], Venetia, Lady Digby (1600–1633), gentlewoman and celebrated beauty

Founder members of the Royal Society (act. 1660–1663)

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