

Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library

John Evelyn's Tables of Veins and Arteries: A Rediscovered Letter

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Three daies after this, I tooke my leave of *Venice*, and went to *Padoa* to be present at the famous *Anatomie* Lecture, lasting almost the whole Moneth, during which I saw three, a Woman, a Child, & a Man dissected, with all the manual operations of the Chirurgeon upon the humane body: The one performed by Cavaliere *Vestlingius*, & Dr. *Jo. Athelsteinus Leoncenus*, of whom I purchased those rare Tables of *Veines & Nerves* & caused him to prepare a third of the *Lungs, liver & Nervi sexti par*: with the *Gastric* vaines, which I transported into England, the first of that kind had ben ever seene in our Country, & for ought I know, in the World . . .¹

John Evelyn's description of his visit to Padua in 1645–6 is perhaps the episode in his diary best known to medical historians. He had left England in late 1643 following a half-hearted attempt to enlist in the Royalist cause in the Civil War. Evelyn spent the next few years continuously abroad. In 1645 he matriculated at Padua primarily to hear the month-long course of anatomical lectures by the Professor of Anatomy, Johann Vesling. After attending lectures in the mornings Evelyn visited local hospitals in the afternoons to observe medical and surgical cases, an opportunity available to the student and the merely inquisitive traveller alike.²

At Padua Evelyn acquired the preparations of human arteries, veins and nerves dissected out in the anatomy theatre by Vesling's assistant, the surgeon Giovanni Leoni. Dried and mounted on four panels—the “tables” of Evelyn's description—these preparations were shipped to England by a circuitous route, and reunited with Evelyn in 1649. He records that he showed them to “Moulins the greate Chirurgeon” in April of that year.³ Finally in October 1667 Evelyn presented the tables to the Royal Society, having some years previously declined Dr Charles Scarburgh's invitation to donate them to the College of Physicians.⁴

Evelyn's decision to favour the Society, which he does not elaborate on in his diary, can be explained by his own personal interest in the success of the fledgling Royal Society, and its newly-established role as a collector of scientific specimens. The collection of “rarities” that was assembled from about 1665 onwards became England's most important

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¹ *The diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E S de Beer, 6 vols, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1955, vol. 2, p. 475.

² A brief resumé of Evelyn's medical career is given by C D O'Malley in 'John Evelyn and medicine', *Med. Hist.*, 1968, 12: 219–31.

³ *The diary*, op. cit., note 1 above, vol. 2, p. 553.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 77–8.

public museum until the foundation of the British Museum at the end of the eighteenth century. From its inception, the Royal Society had a special interest in human anatomy, having acquired the right to receive bodies of executed criminals for dissection.⁵ Evelyn's tables were displayed in the "repository" or museum at Gresham College, London, after the Society's return to those premises in 1674, following its enforced exodus to Arundel House after the Great Fire.⁶ An order of the Council of the Royal Society of July 1678 instructed Nehemiah Grew, then one of the Society's secretaries, to prepare a catalogue, which duly appeared in 1681.⁷ The following year Grew was formally appointed to take charge of the museum and enter additions in his catalogue.⁸

While Evelyn's tables were still in the west gallery of Gresham College, those of the arteries and veins were the subject of a paper read to the Royal Society by the surgeon William Cowper, on 21 January 1702.⁹ Evelyn does not seem to have attended the meeting, but on the same day he wrote to Cowper with an account of the provenance of the tables. When Cowper's description and drawings, engraved by M van der Gucht, were published later that year in *Philosophical Transactions*, a copy of Evelyn's letter prefaced the article.¹⁰ This was the high-point of the Evelyn tables' career. In his paper Cowper could claim that the "figure of the veins differs so much from any extant, as would incline one to suspect all of the subject hitherto published are fictitious, not excepting even those of Vesalius".¹¹ Subsequently the increasing use of the technique of injection in the preparation of anatomical specimens, particularly of the arteries and veins of the viscera, rendered the tables obsolete for scientific purposes, leaving them as objects of merely antiquarian interest.¹²

In 1710 the Royal Society was obliged to vacate Gresham College, and two houses in Crane Court, off Fleet Street, were purchased for new premises. A new "repository" was built there for the museum, for which Richard Waller, the Society's secretary, was paid

⁵ *The record of the Royal Society of London*, 4th ed., London, Frowde, 1940, pp. 34–6.

⁶ It was not in fact until the winter of 1675–6 that the west or white gallery of Gresham College could be made ready to receive the Society's "rarities", John Ward, *The lives of the professors of Gresham College*, London, 1740, p. 178. This gallery seems to have been about 90 feet by 13 feet, *The record*, p. 6.

⁷ Nehemiah Grew, *Catalogue and description of the natural and artificial rarities belonging to the Royal Society and preserved at Gresham Colledge*, London, Royal Society, 1681. The tables are described as follows: "All the Principal Veins, Arteries, and Nerves, both of the Limbs and Viscera. The generous Gift of John Evelyn Esquire. He bought them at Padua, where he saw them with great industry and exactness (according to the best method then used) taken out of the body of a Man, and very curiously spread upon four large Tables, whereon they are now preserved", *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *The record*, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, p. 165.

⁹ *The diary*, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 5, p. 487.

¹⁰ 'An account of divers schemes of arteries and veins, dissected from adult human bodies, and given

to the Repository of the Royal Society by John Evelyn, Esq., F.R.S. . . .', in *Philosophical Transactions*, vol. 23, no. 280 (July–August 1702), pp. 1173–201. The article and engravings were reprinted by John Harris in *Lexicon technicum*, 2 vols, London, D Brown, 1710, vol. 2, under the title 'A description of the veins and arteries of a humane body in the two plates annexed, as presented to the Royal Society in London, by that generous promoter of all useful learning, John Evelyn, late of Say's Court in Deptford, Esq.' and explained and illustrated by that accurate anatomist and surgeon, Mr William Cowper'.

¹¹ *Phil. Trans.*, vol. 23, no. 280, p. 1179.

¹² The two tables of the nerves had long ceased to excite much interest, Grew commenting as early as 1681 that the "nerves have been much more truly and fully represented to us of late by Dr Richard Lower", in Thomas Willis's *Cerebri anatome cui accessit nervorum descriptio et usus*, first published in 1664, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Some of Cowper's other illustrations of arteries and veins accompanying those taken from Evelyn's tables were drawn from specimens filled with wax, then dried.

£300.¹³ Evelyn's tables were presumably displayed there, until virtually the entire contents of the repository were made over to the British Museum in June 1781, following the Royal Society's move to more restricted accommodation in the recently completed government building, Somerset House.¹⁴ Held in store by the British Museum for a number of years,¹⁵ the tables were eventually presented to the Royal College of Surgeons in 1809, together with a miscellaneous collection of mainly medical and anatomical objects deemed "unfit to be preserved in the Museum".¹⁶ Here they survived the Blitz and the subsequent rustication of the Hunterian Museum collections, and are today displayed in the Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The existence and whereabouts of Evelyn's original letter to Cowper were well known at the turn of this century.¹⁷ The document was in the collection of Alfred Henry Huth (1850–1910), of Fosbury Manor near Hungerford. Huth, sometime President of the Bibliographical Society, inherited his father, Henry Huth's, celebrated library in 1878.¹⁸ Following his death without issue on 14 October 1910 the bulk of his library, his autographs and engravings were auctioned at Sotheby's, the autographs alone realizing £13,081 in June 1911.¹⁹ Evelyn's letter was lot number 75, offered on the first day of sale, 12 June 1911. It was apparently purchased by Henry Wellcome, and subsequently disappeared from sight, for all practical purposes. When C J S Thompson, formerly curator of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, published his description of the Hunterian Museum collections in 1929, which included a plate of Evelyn's tables, he did not mention the letter.²⁰ Geoffrey Keynes, who published the definitive Evelyn bibliography in 1937, referred to the letter but did not know its current location.²¹ The whereabouts of Evelyn's original letter were still unknown to Evelyn scholars after the opening of the Wellcome Historical Medical Library to the public after the Second World War.²²

¹³ *The record*, op. cit., note 5 above, p. 141; Sir Henry Lyons, *The Royal Society, 1660–1940*, Cambridge University Press, 1944, p. 127. The real cost was £400 but Waller had to settle for the reduced sum owing to the precarious finances of the Royal Society.

¹⁴ D C Martin, 'Former homes of the Royal Society', in *The Royal Society at Carlton House Terrace*, London, The Society, 1967, p. 6.

¹⁵ There appears to be no record of the tables ever having been displayed while at Montagu House, the former home of the British Museum.

¹⁶ Edward Miller, *That noble cabinet: a history of the British Museum*, London, André Deutsch, 1973, pp. 114–15.

¹⁷ The letter is mentioned in Leslie Stephen's article on Evelyn in the *Dictionary of national biography*, London, Smith, Elder, 1889, vol. 18, p. 80, and by H B Wheatley in his edition of Evelyn's diary, *Diary of John Evelyn*, 4 vols, London, Bickers, 1906, vol. 1, p. xxviii, note; Wheatley adds that Mr Huth, the owner, had allowed a reproduction to be made, but it is not present in his edition.

¹⁸ The letter was in the Huth collection before 1880, *The Huth Library. A catalogue of the printed books, manuscripts, engravings and autograph letters*, 5 vols, ed. F S Ellis, vol. 5, London, Ellis and White, 1880, p. 1687. Its earlier provenance is probably not recoverable.

¹⁹ *Dictionary of national biography*, 2nd supplement, vol. 2, London, Smith, Elder, 1912, article by Alfred William Pollard.

²⁰ C J S Thompson, *Guide to the surgical instruments and objects in the historical series*, Museum, Royal College of Surgeons, England, London, printed for the College, 1929, pp. 85–6.

²¹ "This manuscript, signed by Evelyn and intended for Cowper's use, was still extant in 1906", G L Keynes, *John Evelyn: a study in bibliography*, Cambridge University Press, 1937, p. 280.

²² Neither Dr de Beer, who produced the definitive edition of Evelyn's diary in 1955, nor Sir Geoffrey Keynes, the second edition of whose Evelyn bibliography was published in 1968, were aware of it.

The letter had been added to Wellcome's collection of autograph letters, which accumulated at the same time as the Historical Medical Museum and Library were built up in the early decades of the century. From the first, a distinction was made by Henry Wellcome and his curators and librarians not only between manuscripts and printed books, but between manuscript books on the one hand and letters and documents on the other. Wellcome's Autograph Letter collection was devised to accommodate the latter, and was a fairly late, but prodigious example of an activity described by A N L Munby as a "cult of staggering dimensions".²³ Munby characterized the two poles of "autographomania" as "a wearisome series of signatures of Members of Parliament cut from letters or from franked covers" at worst, but "the preservation and logical arrangement of research material of great value and importance" at best.²⁴

Wellcome's collection shared something of both extremes. Certainly it was quite unlike the meticulously select Huth autograph collection from which it had come.²⁵ Nor was it a mere assemblage of signatures pasted into an album, like so many lesser personal collections. As with Wellcome's entire historical enterprise, the Autograph Letter collection was distinguished above all by more or less indiscriminate accumulation on an industrial scale; there may have been as many as 100,000 individual items in the collection at its peak, besides large quantities of unsorted material awaiting inclusion.

The contents comprised examples of many types of document from lengthy memoranda to calling cards, written, signed by or merely associated with figures both great and small in British and continental science and medicine, mainly of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The arrangement of the collection would hardly have impressed Munby, if he had known of it.²⁶ The contents were roughly distributed among an alphabetical sequence of files normally according to the name of the letter-writer, a procedure which, though crude, was often time-consuming as archival groups of papers were broken up and correspondence sorted for transfer to the Autograph Letter collection. Little more was done by way of arrangement and storage, many letters even remaining within dealers' folders, although it is difficult to imagine what more could have been reasonably achieved in the face of such huge quantities. A card index to the collection of variable quality was compiled from the early 1950s onwards, which is today still the principal finding aid.

In these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that John Evelyn's letter to William Cowper has been lost to view for so many years. The Wellcome Autograph Letter collection is today considerably smaller than it once was, having lost to the series of Western Manuscripts many groups of correspondence which could be restored to their original form, as well as large and unwieldy accumulations of letters by indefatigable

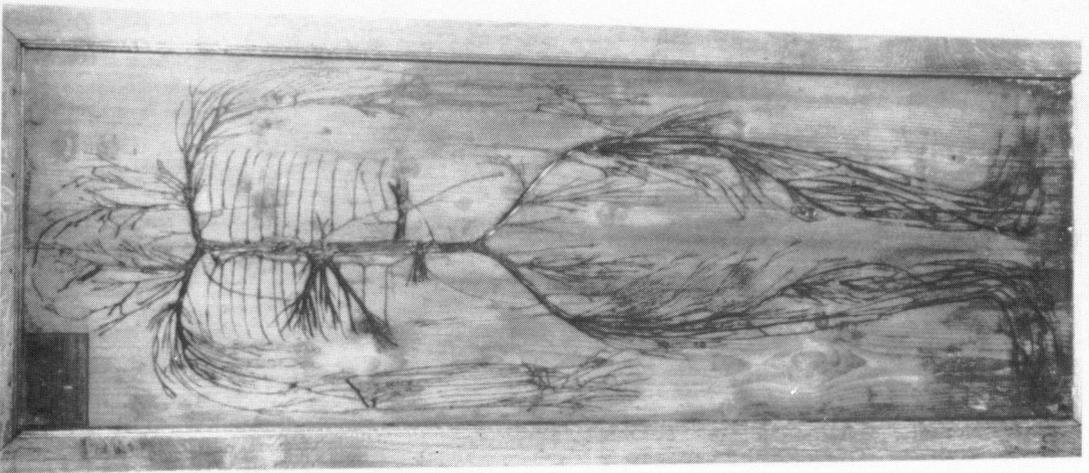
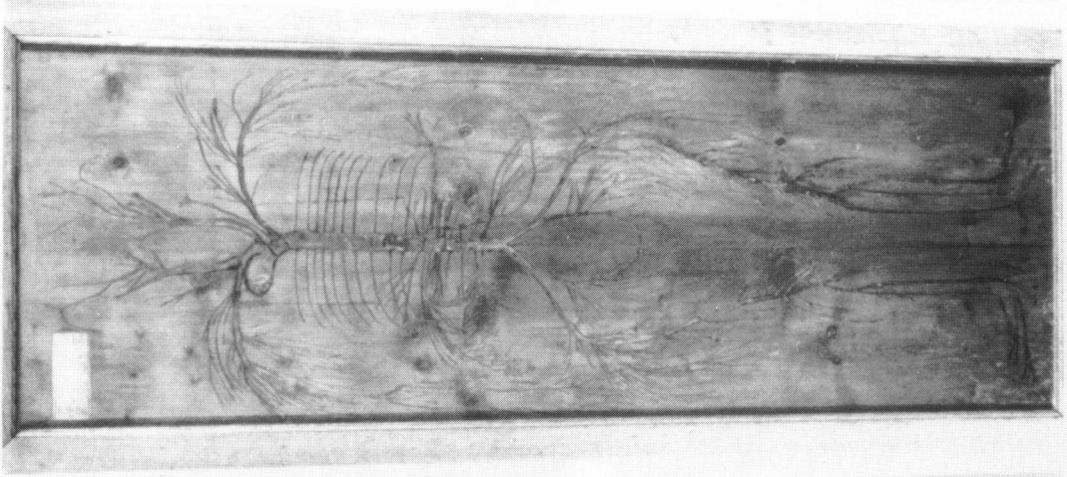
²³ A N L Munby, *The cult of the autograph letter in England*, London, Athlone Press, 1962, p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

²⁵ The Huth autograph collection auctioned on 12/13 June 1911 consisted of 231 letters and documents, mainly of literary or national historical interest. The only other significant medical item was a letter from John Hunter to Edward Jenner of 6 Nov. 1777 (lot 114), now in the William Welch Medical Library, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore; cf. *Letters of Edward Jenner*, ed. Genevieve Miller,

Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983, p. xxviii, note 4.

²⁶ Munby does not mention the Wellcome collection in his book, where he lists some surviving autograph letter collections formed before the end of the nineteenth century, *op. cit.*, note 23 above, pp. 93–9. Is it possible that he would have ignored a collection as vast as Wellcome's, albeit one formed in the early twentieth century, if he had known anything about it?



Plates 1(a) and (b): John Evelyn's tables of veins (a) and arteries (b), acquired at Padua in 1646. They are now displayed in the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, London. (Reproduced by permission of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.)



John Evelyn Esq^r.

*Bonx Mons: de La Quintenay.
recomende a Mon: d'Armenbourg*

EVELYN:
1671

Evelyn:
1671

*His Autograph from an Original in the Possession of
W. H. H. H.*

Plate 2: John Evelyn from a line engraving by Swaine and two examples of his signature. (Wellcome Institute Library, Iconographic Collections, London.)

correspondents like Florence Nightingale. These are described in published catalogues,²⁷ and occasionally listed in detail in typescript handlists available in the Wellcome Institute Library and via the National Register of Archives of the Historical Manuscripts Commission. Intellectual access to the Autograph Letter collection remains unsatisfactory, but is now being addressed by means of an automated cataloguing programme, which will eventually provide a database for on-line searches via the Wellcome Library's WILDCat system. By such means it is hoped to ensure that the often surprising riches of the Autograph Letter collection are brought to wider notice.

APPENDIX

Transcript of John Evelyn's letter to William Cowper

The letter is held in the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, Western Manuscripts Department, Autograph Letters Sequence. It is written on both sides of a single sheet of paper measuring 254 x 180 mm, but has clearly been cropped, presumably for inclusion in an album; it bears the remains of a blue-grey paper guard along the inner margin of the dorse, partially obscuring the words "Mr Cooper" in Evelyn's hand. Although signed by Evelyn, the number of excisions and interpolations in the text, together with slight differences with the version as published in *Philosophical Transactions*, strongly suggest that the letter is a draft from which a fair copy was presumably made and sent to Cowper. Evelyn's insertions are given in brackets thus < >.

Dover Strete: 21 Jan: 1701/2²⁸

For Mr Cooper

Hearing Sr, That you are Causing the Tables of Veines, Arteryes &c which I some years since brought out of Italy, to be accurately delineated, & Ingravn, ass more Correct than any yet extant, or to be found among the Figures in Books of Anatomy; and desirous to Understand how they came to my hands, I send you this little History of it for your Satisfaction:

TABULAE EVELINIANAE

Being some yeares since in Italy, and curious of see<ing> the many-repeated dissections at the Anatomy^a-Theater at Padoa; Cavalier Veslingius²⁹ being then professor, and Reading on divers Bodys severall Days during the Lent: Dn Jo: Athelsteinus Leoncena³⁰ (who was then dissector)^b by

²⁷ At the time of writing, Richard Palmer's *Supplementary catalogue of western manuscripts in the library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine* London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1989, covering MSS.5120 to 5641, is shortly to be replaced and extended by the same author's published catalogue of manuscripts up to MS.6790.

²⁸ The place-date is written on the dorse of the document, followed by the introductory address, which is repeated in somewhat abbreviated form along the inner margin of the face. For clarity and convenience the former version is given here and placed before the principal text.

²⁹ Johann Vesling (1598–1649), German anatomist and botanist. Trained at Leiden and Bologna, he was

appointed professor of anatomy and surgery at Padua on 30 December 1632.

³⁰ De Beer is surely correct in identifying this person as Joannes Leonius Atestinus (i.e. from Este), *The diary*, op. cit., note 1 above, vol. 2, p. 475, note 4; on 9 November 1644 Leonius, a pupil of Vesling's, was appointed as his assistant (adjutor), J Facciolati, *Fasti Gymnasii Patavini*, Padua, 1757, vol. 2, p. 391. Wheatley's erroneous identification of Vesling's assistant as Fabritius Bartoletus is a confusion with Fabrizio Bartoletti (1585–1630), Vesling's teacher, a confusion apparently originating with Grew, Wheatley, op. cit., note 17 above, vol. 1, p. xxvii; Grew, op. cit., note 7 above.

TABULAE EVELINIANAE.

For Mr Cowper
Hearty that you are coming to see me at my house in the City of London
of July 17th 1727
I am glad to hear that you are coming to see me at my house in the City of London
I am glad to hear that you are coming to see me at my house in the City of London
I am glad to hear that you are coming to see me at my house in the City of London

Being some years since in Italy, and curious to see the many-
repeated Dissections at the Anatomy & Theatre at Padua; Cavalier
Veslingius being then professor, and reading on Divers Bodies several
Days during the Lent: Dr J: Atholstine Leconera (who was
then Director) ~~was~~ by extracting the Veines & other Vessels
which contains the blood, & spirits, out of humane bodies, (the rich
the many Hospitals & Infirmeries in that City afford plentifully)
and apply them on Tubles according to these medicinal pro-
position & formation; as seen Improvement which might be
of Use in Anatomy: Some of these Tubles being finished, with
the Direction & publick approbation of the professor, and several
other Physicians & Anatomists present at those Lectures & Operations;
and understanding that Leconera was going shortly (I think)
into Poland) and was willing to dispose of his Tubles before
his Journey; I desired Dr Geo: Rogers (Cousin then at Padua
for the Student of our Nation) to purchase them for me, which
he did, for, as I remember, 150 Scudi, with condition that
he should add a Table more, ^{namely} that of the Liver, & Geesie
Kidney & other Vessels: When these were perfected, I im-
mediately sent them to Venice, whence they were shipped for
England; but upon what Accident or Occasion I know not,
the Vessel was carried into Holland, and lay there a year
or two, ^{making up the loss} what was done of my Leconera, being my father's at Paris
Muzon ^{of the} ^{second} finding by some papers & lett^{ers}, with Directions on
the Cover & other Papers, of Books & other things (wh I had been
Collecting in Italy, that they belonged to my father, took care to recover
them all safely conveyed to me at London. Dr Scarborough was one
of the first I shew'd the Tubles to, who would have tempt'd
me to part with them for a very considerable sum, as I remember
for my L: Marques of Dorchester; but refusing ^{to}, he desired I
would send them to the College, where he read upon them, and
kept them about a year; and then ^{sent them} ^{to my}
house at Stuy- Cant^{on} Deptford, where they remain'd till they
Restoration, when his Ma^{ty}: Charles the 11th hearing of them
was pleas'd to see us & see them himself, with great satisfaction:
The R: Society ^{for the promotion of experimental & natural knowledge}, instituted by that Prince,
and meeting at Gresham College; I made a present of the Tubles
to the Repository:

Richard Evelyn

John Evelyn's letter to William Cowper (Wellcome Institute Library, Autograph Letter Collection, London).

John Evelyn's Tables of Veins and Arteries

extracting the Veines & other Vessels which containe the Blood,^c spirits <&c> out of humane bodies (<&> which the many Hospitals & Infirmaries in that City <plentifully> afford^d) <began to distend> and^e apply them on Tables according to their natural proportion & situation^f; as an Improvement which might be of Use in Anatomy: some of these Tables being finished, with the direction & publique approbation of the professor, and severall other <learned> physicians & Anatomists present at those lectures & Operations; and understanding that *Leoncena* was going shortly (I think) into Poland, and^g willing to dispose of his Tables before he^h <tooke his> journey; I desird <the late> Dr Geo: Rogers³¹ (Consul then at Padoa for the students of our Nation <there>) tu purchase <& procure> them for me, which he did, for as I remember, 150 *scudi*, with condition that he should add a Table more, <namly> that of the *Liver*,^j *Gastric nerves*^k & other vesseles <to compleate the foure>: When these were perfected, I immediatly sent them to Venice, whence they were shipt for England; but, upon what Accident or Occasion I know not, the Vessel was caryed into Holland, and lay there a yeare or two, <without any tidings what was becom of my Concern, being my selfe then at *Paris*> til coming <at last> to be unladen Sr: Richd Foord³² (afterwards Ld: Mayor^l) finding by some papers & Lettrs with directions on the Cases &^m <severall> Bales, of Books & other things (wh I had been Collecting in Italy, that they belonged to me) tooke care to have them all safely conveyd to meⁿ at Lund:—Dr: Scarbrogh³³ was one of the first I shewd the Tables to, who would have tempted me to part with them for a very Considerable sune, <&> as I^p <supposd> for my L: Marques of Dorchester^q;³⁴ <which I> refusing^r, he desird I would lend them <^s a little while to the Colledge>, where he read upon them, and kept them above a yeare; and thence^t <sent them> to my house at Says-Court <near>^v Deptford; where they remaind 'til the hapy Restauration, when his Mte: Charles the IId hearing of them was pleasd to come & see them himselfe, with greate satisfaction: The *R:Society* <for the Promotion of experimentel & natural knowledge> instituted by that <curious> Prince, and meeting at Gresham-Colledge; I made a present^w <my> the Tables to the Repository:

[signed] J Evelyn

^aist superscribed.

^bbegan crossed out.

^c& crossed out.

^dplentifully crossed out.

^eto crossed out.

^fposition superscribed.

^gwas crossed out.

^haltered from *his*.

^j& crossed out.

^kveines crossed out.

^lof Lond crossed out.

^mother crossed out.

ⁿillegible word(s) superscribed and crossed out.

^premembr crossed out.

^qbut crossed out.

^rit crossed out.

^sindecipherable word crossed out.

^tI brought them crossed out.

^vin crossed out.

^wof crossed out.

³¹ George Rogers (1618–1697), an English student at Padua (MD 1646), later President of the Royal College of Physicians (1688).

³² Richard Ford (1613–1680), a prominent London merchant, knighted in 1660, Lord Mayor from 1670–71. Ford spent time in Holland during the Civil War period and maintained close commercial links with the Dutch after the Restoration. He knew the language and was a useful source of information for English government officials like Samuel Pepys; see *The diary of Samuel Pepys*, eds R Latham and W Mathews, 11 vols., London, Bell and Hyman, 1970–83, passim.

³³ Charles Scarburgh (1616–1694), physician (MD Oxon 1646), friend and colleague of Harvey, knighted in 1669. Scarburgh borrowed the tables in November 1652. He presented Dorchester to the College of Physicians as a Fellow in 1658.

³⁴ Henry Pierrepont, 1st Marquess of Dorchester (1606–1680), became interested in medicine as a result of his own health problems in about 1650. Fellow of the Royal Society and of the College of Physicians, he bequeathed his library to the College.