1. General Comment

English renaissance man: political economist, sailor, physician, academician, surveyor, inventor, Member of Parliament.

2. Chronology

1623  
Birth:
Born on Monday, May 26, in Romsey, Hampshire, England. Son of a "poor clothier;" his father left him a "good house and 8 acres of land" at his death in 1644. [IESS, p. 66].

1637-1643  
Youth:
Went to sea as a "cabin boy;" put ashore at Caen, France with a broken leg. Made some money by teaching English and navigation. Studied Latin, Greek, French, and mathematics at the Jesuit College at Caen. Did a short stint in the Royal Navy until the outbreak of the civil war.

1643-1649  
Education:
Studied medicine and anatomy in the Netherlands (Utrecht, Amsterdam, and Leyden) and in France (Paris). He befriended Hobbs here. This was also an occasion to take refuge from the civil strife in England.

1646  
Interlude in Romsey to revive his father's business.

1647-1649  
Studied medicine at Oxford; earned degree of doctor of physic (doctor of medicine).

1650-1687  
Career:
Held various professorial positions: Professor of anatomy at Oxford; Vice-Principal of Brasenose College, Oxford; Chair of Music at Gresham College in London.

1652-1659  
Resided in Ireland; served as physician to the army in Ireland.

1654-1655  
Carried out the "Down Survey" of forfeited lands of those who could not prove "'constant and good affection' to the English government during the recent troubles." [DNB, p. 999.] Received monetary and land payments for this service; he ended up with large land holdings in every county in Ireland.

1662 Knighted under the reign of Charles II.

1667 Marriage (at the ripe age of 44):

Married Elizabeth, widow of Sir Maurice Fenton and daughter of Sir Hardress Waller. They had three surviving children: Charles, Henry, and Anne. Two other children did not survive. And he had one illegitimate child.

1687 Death (at age 64):

Died on December 16 [26?] at his home in Piccadilly in London; buried in the abbey church, in Romsey, where a monument was erected to him.
3. Of Interest

1. Apparently young William was a rather precocious child: He showed an early aptitude for mathematics and mechanics; as a youngster he liked to watch artificers (smyths, watchmakers, carpenters, etc.) until he could do the job.

2. In 1650, Petty apparently played a part in the reanimation of one Hester Ann Green, "a wench hanged at Oxford for the supposed murder of her child." This event was recounted in a pamphlet, News from the Dead, published in 1650. The pamphlet, by one account, extolled "Petty's miraculous medical feat in defiance of death and the hangman." [Roncaglia (1985), p. 4.]

3. He was an original member of the Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge founded on April 22, 1662. It is reported that he rather continuously took part in ad hoc associations for literary and scientific discourse prior to the founding of the Royal Society. After its founding Petty participated rather fully in its program, attending meetings and presenting papers. He was also elected Fellow of the College of Physicians in 1655, an organization "with a view to the improvement and more orderly practice of the art of physic, and the repression of irregular, unlearned, and incompetent practitioners of that faculty." [Hull, v. 1, p. 27, n 1.] He was as well a charter member of the Dublin Philosophical Society.

4. After the completion of the "Down Survey," Petty was continuously involved in property rights litigation which occasionally led to conflict. For example, around 1676 he was "the victim of the assaults of one Colonel Vernon, a professional brav[assassin] of the school of Blood." And in about the same year he was "challenged to fight a duel by one Sir Alan Brodrick; but having the right, as the challenged party, to name place and weapon, he named a dark cellar and an axe, in order to place himself, being short-sighted, on a level with his antagonist. He thereby turned the challenge into ridicule, and the duel never took place." [DNB, p. 1001.]

5. Petty either invented a number of devices or presented papers to some society describing sundry inventions. One such invention was "a double-keeled vessel which was able to cross the Irish Channel and defy wind and tide." [DNB, p. 1001.]

6. Samuel Pepys, a contemporary diarist, found Petty, "the most rational man that ever he heard speak with a tongue."
4. **Selected Works**

1. Treatise of Taxes and Contributions (1662).
2. Verbum Sapienti (1665).
3. The Political Anatomy of Ireland (1672).
4. Political Arithmetick (1676).
5. Quantulumcunque concerning Money (1683).

5. **Sources**


