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Illustrations from the Wellcome Library

Joseph Fenton and his Books

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The Wellcome Library copy of Antoine Lecoq's *De ligno sancto non permiscendo*, one of the many early sixteenth-century contributions to the debate on the use of guaiacum in the battle against the *morbus gallicus*, bears a bold and distinctive signature, "Joseph Fenton", together with a motto, "Sustine abstine" (which might be translated as "Bear and forbear"). It is one of half a dozen or so books in the Library which carry the same markings, and which were once part of a sizeable private medical library of the early seventeenth century.[1] Many more books from the collection survive today in the British Library, and elsewhere. This article seeks to bring attention not only to the books but also to Fenton and his career, all of which deserve to be better known to historians and bibliographers today.

The name of Joseph Fenton may be familiar to those who have worked on the London medical scene of the early seventeenth century, though probably not as familiar as his contemporary fame and significance merit. A leading member of the Barber-Surgeons' Company and twice Master, he was for over thirty years one of the resident surgeons at St Bartholomew's Hospital, where his medical colleagues included his fellow surgeon John Woodall, author of *The surgions mate*, and William Harvey, physician at the Hospital from 1609. He was sufficiently respected by the College of Physicians to be granted a licence to administer internal medicines, and

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[1] A Lecoq, *De ligno sancto non permiscendo*, Paris, 1540, Wellcome Library 2669/B. Other Wellcome books with Fenton's marks of ownership are: L Luigini (ed.), *De morbo gallico omnia quae extant ... Tomus posterior*, Venice, 1567 (MSL, i.e. from the Medical Society of London Collection); I Parma, *Introductionis ad chirurgiam libri duo*, Padua, 1612 (MSL); J Berengario da Carpi, *Carpi commentaria*, Bologna, 1521 (MSL); H Montuus, *Compendiolum*, Lyons, 1556 (MSL); N Myrepsus, *Liber de compositione medicamentorum*, Ingolstadt, 1541 (MSL); P Severinus, *Idea medicinae philosophicae*, Erfurt, 1616 (MSL); Hugo Senensis, *In primam (-secundam Fen) primi ... canonis Avicennae ... expositio*, Venice, 1523 (MSL).

his death was recorded by Richard Smyth in his well-known obituary of noteworthy persons.[2]

He is not, however, a well-documented man today, and most published references to Fenton amount to little more than passing mention of his name in the context of other men's stories. He published no books, and his practice notes and papers have not survived, beyond a tantalizing scrap, a handwritten title-page only, of descriptions of interesting and unusual cures.[3] We have no casebook to shed light on his patients and practice, in contrast with his apprentice Joseph Binns, whose casebook survives today in the Sloane manuscripts in the British Library and which has been described in print in some detail.[4] Fenton will not be found in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, or the university lists, or any other standard biographical source. The most extensive set of published data will be found in Sidney Young's *Annals of the Barber-Surgeons of London*, where there are numerous references to Fenton carrying out duties for the Company, but here we are not helped by a confusion over the name and a mistaken proliferation of Fentons—the *Annals* refer to both a John Fenton and a Joseph Fenton, both of whom were supposedly Master within ten years of one another.[5] Examination of the original records of the Barber-Surgeons makes it clear that Young was in error here, that John Fenton is a ghost based on misreading of the documents, and that all the Fenton references in the *Annals* relate to Joseph.

Joseph Fenton was born *c.* 1565–70. He was apprenticed to the London barber-surgeon Christopher Bewter, and became a freeman of the Company in July 1590.[6] The next ten years or so were doubtless spent in establishing his practice and his place within the profession, and in 1597 he was appointed as one of the three surgeons at St Bartholomew's, filling the place of William Pickering who had gone to serve with the expeditionary forces in Ireland. Fenton too appears to have travelled to Ireland with the Earl of Essex's army in 1599, but (unlike Pickering) he returned to London and Bart's soon afterwards.[7] In the first decade of the new century he begins to appear in the Barber-Surgeons' Company records in various administrative capacities: in 1600 he was one of the auditors of the Master's accounts, in 1607 he was one of the examiners of surgeons, in 1615 he joined a committee appointed to oversee work on the repair of the Company's Hall. He was one of the Wardens in 1605, 1607 and 1610, and was twice elected Master, in 1613 and 1624.[8]

[2] W Munk, *The roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, 2nd edn, London, The College, 1878, vol. 1, p. 188; Sir Henry Ellis (ed.), *The obituary of Richard Smyth*, London, Camden Society, 1849, p. 9.

[3] British Library MS Sloane 661, fol. 31.

[4] See Lucinda Beier, 'Seventeenth-century English surgery: the casebook of Joseph Binns', in C Lawrence (ed.), *Medical theory, surgical practice: studies in the history of surgery*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. 48–84.

[5] S Young, *Annals of the Barber-Surgeons of London*, London, Blades, East and Blades, 1890. Most of the Fenton references in the Index are grouped under "John".

[6] Guildhall Library, London, MS 5265/1, Register of freedom admissions of the Barber-Surgeons' Company 1522–1664/5.

[7] Norman Moore, *The history of St. Bartholomew's Hospital*, 2 vols, London, C A Pearson, 1918, vol. 2, p. 615.

[8] This information is all recorded in the *Annals*.

His family life was flourishing also. The parish registers of St Mary, Aldermanbury, record the burial of an unbaptized child in 1590, and the baptisms of two daughters, Katharine and Winwick, in 1591 and 1593 respectively.[9] The registers for St Bartholomew the Less show the baptism of a further daughter, Anne, in 1605, and somewhere in between there was another daughter, Mary, who married the London leatherseller Richard Mattock at St Bartholomew the Less in 1616.[10] Anne went on to marry a goldsmith, Edward Greene, in 1623; Katharine married one of her father's apprentices, John Colston (freed 1605, died 1625, and, like his father-in-law, one of the resident surgeons at Bart's); and Winwick married Thomas Hill in 1609. There may have been other children who died young, and the university lists record the existence of a son, Mattathias [*sic*], who matriculated at Trinity College, Oxford, in 1616, aged seventeen, graduated BA in 1620, and was incorporated at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in the same year.[11] He is not mentioned in Fenton's will and clearly predeceased his father, as did Fenton's wife Audrey, who was buried at St Bartholomew the Less in August 1618; I have not tracked down the date of their marriage, but the baptismal dates suggest somewhere in the first half of 1589, a year before he became a freeman of the Barber-Surgeons' Company.

Fenton died on 12 February 1634 and was buried at St Bartholomew the Less on 17 February. We know that he had been ill for some time as John Pinder, who took over his place as surgeon at the Hospital, had been appointed to take duty during Fenton's illness in December 1632.[12] His will, signed on 10 February and proved on 12th at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, adds further detail to his domestic circumstances and fills out the picture of a solidly established householder with a considerable estate to distribute; as well as his house in the parish of St Bartholomew the Less (his "nowe dwelling house"), he owned property in Basing Lane in the parish of St Mildred Breadstreet, further property in East Ham, and held a lease on a house at Tottenham High Cross.[13] He was able to list numerous household goods, including gold and silverware as well as blankets and bolsters, and his monetary bequests in addition to all this exceeded £600 in value. The bulk of the estate was divided between his surviving daughters Mary Mattock and Anne Greene, and his grandchildren Joseph, John and Elizabeth Colston, and Winwick and Sibill Hill, with small monetary bequests to a range of individuals including former apprentices and people associated with the Hospital. £10 was left to the poor of the parish, and

[9] W Bruce Bannerman (ed.), *The registers of St Mary the Virgin, Aldermanbury, London*, Harleian Society, Register Series, vols. 61–62, London, 1931–32. Dates here and throughout this article are adjusted to the present-day calendar, i.e. February 1590/91 is given as February 1591.

[10] Information derived from the microfiche copy of the Society of Genealogists' typed transcript of the registers of St Bartholomew the Less, available in the Guildhall Library, London.

[11] J Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses ... 1500–1714*, Oxford and London, Parker, 1891; J and J A Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, Cambridge University Press, 1922–54. Venn explicitly describes Mattathias as the son of Joseph though his reference to a P.C.C. will of 1634 confuses father and son, as this is Joseph's own will.

[12] Moore, op. cit., note 7 above, vol. 2, p. 623.

[13] Fenton's will is in register Seager fol. 13, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 1633/34.

an annuity of £20 per annum was left to his sister Lucretia Fenton. The will opens with the usual remarks about soul and body but Fenton also gave directions for a simple funeral—"my body to be buried in the evening without any mournings or blacks to be worne"—and asked that his grave, in the church of St Bartholomew the Less, should be dug ten feet deep. His executors (his sons-in-law) were to "content the grayvemaker for such his extraordinarie paynes".

His books, and his surgical instruments, went to his grandson Joseph Colston: "my silver blood porringers with their case and all my instruments of surgerie either of silver or yron or any other things bookes or papers pertayning to surgery together with all my boxes plaisters unguents &c with my little surgeons chest standing in my surgery house Alsoe ... all my bookes whatsoever whether grammar bookes, bookes of physicke or surgery or philosophie and other bookes whatsoever, and likewise his bed and bedding and bookes that I gave him to Cambridge either here in London in his owne keeping or in Cambridge". Joseph was the family member who carried on the medical tradition; his father John, Fenton's former apprentice and then fellow surgeon at St Bartholomew's had died in 1625, and at the time of Fenton's own death Joseph had recently graduated BA from Peterhouse, Cambridge (in 1633). He had obviously expressed the intention of following a medical career and after proceeding to his MA at Cambridge (1636) he went to Padua where he became MD in 1642; he appears to have stayed on the Continent for some years thereafter but after the Restoration he became an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (1664) and was knighted in 1669, six years before his death in 1675.[14] Fenton's bequest of books and instruments ends with the personal note "I praye God to bless and prosper him in his studies: for his mothers sake I am thus kind to him", and his investment was evidently rewarded.

Such anecdotal snippets as we have regarding Fenton's working life suggest a man who was both in demand, and well regarded by medical colleagues on both sides of the surgeon-physician divide. Geoffrey Keynes, in his biography of William Harvey, mentions that Harvey quoted pathological observations made by Fenton in his own notes, and also cites a letter written by John Chamberlain in 1612, regarding the medical treatment of the ailing Robert Cecil, who "hath found most goode from the phisicians and surgeans of the hospitall [St Bartholomew's], and specially of Fenton".[15] A letter from Lancelot Andrewes to Fenton written in 1624 (two years before he died), which survives among the Sloane manuscripts in the British Library, entreats Fenton to attend him in his sickness, where he complains of looseness of bowels, dryness in his mouth and a loss of appetite.[16] Fenton must not be put off, writes Andrewes, by rumours that he is not needed, for "I am nothing well"; "I have sent myn own coach for you I pray you ... to be hear on Tuesday (I would it could

[14] The most recent source on Colston is J D Alsop, 'A footnote on the circulation of the blood: Joseph Colston and Harvey's discovery in 1642', *J. Hist. Med. allied Sci.*, 1981, **36**: 331–4; his career is also summarized in Venn, op. cit., note 11 above.

[15] Geoffrey Keynes, *The life of William Harvey*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966, pp. 56, 100.

[16] British Library MS Sloane 118, fol. 29.

be sooner)". The symptoms seem to belong more to the world of the physician than the barber-surgeon, as we commonly understand the divisions of the time, but the Bishop of Winchester was in no doubt as to who he wanted.

"Throughout this period [from the late middle ages until the eighteenth century] in most of Europe, practical surgery was a craft, learned by apprenticeship and controlled by trade guilds, its practitioners of much lower social standing than literate, Latinate, university-trained physicians".[17] This sentence from the introductory paragraph of the surgery chapter in the 1993 *Companion encyclopedia of the history of medicine* summarizes the traditional received wisdom on the class distinctions of the early modern medical world, although we have actually come to develop a more sophisticated picture, and recognize that surgeons were not necessarily second-class citizens with little formal education. Lucinda Beier's analysis of Joseph Binns' practice has shown how another surgeon of this period, albeit one very much in Fenton's orbit, could achieve a solid social and financial position, with a wide circle of medical contacts; and Margaret Pelling has written about the way in which the role of city-based surgeons developed in the late Tudor age: "many of them showed great initiative in rising to the challenges and changing circumstances characteristic of the period ... in their prompt adoption of new remedies and in their creation of a body of medical literature ... [while] the academically qualified physicians of the London College lagged behind".[18] Vivian Nutton has emphasized the important role played by printed books in this development of the role and status of surgeons, through access to a new body of surgical literature, made possible by writers, editors and publishers during the sixteenth century.[19]

It was through his books that Fenton first came to my attention, for although he was not an author himself, he certainly owned a considerable and interesting library. Many can be found today in the British Library, where they made their way as part of the founding bequest of Sir Hans Sloane. Sloane seems to have acquired a large block of Fenton's books, presumably some time after the death of Joseph Colston in 1675.[20] Items from Fenton's collection are found in other libraries also, including the Wellcome Library, the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, and Cambridge University Library; there are doubtless others awaiting discovery. Fenton's books are usually easy to recognize, as he inscribed his title-pages with a large bold

[17] Ghislaine Lawrence, 'Surgery (traditional)', in W F Bynum and R Porter (eds), *Companion encyclopedia of the history of medicine*, 2 vols, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, vol. 2, pp. 961–83, p. 961.

[18] Beier, op. cit., note 4 above; Margaret Pelling, 'Appearance and reality: barber-surgeons, the body and disease', in A L Beier and R Finlay (eds), *London 1500–1700: the making of the metropolis*, London and New York, Longman, 1985, pp. 82–112, p. 83.

[19] Vivian Nutton, 'Humanist surgery', in A Wear, R K French, and I M Lonie (eds), *The medical renaissance of the sixteenth century*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 75–99.

[20] Colston's will, proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury on 2 August 1675, has no specific mention of books. His "household stuff" was left to his widow Anne and other bequests were made to a niece and nephew; Colston had no surviving children himself though he was twice married. Sloane is not likely to have acquired the books before the later 1680s.

signature, commonly underlined, and also the motto "Sustine Abstine", sometimes in the form "Sustineo Abstineo".[21] The typical Fenton title-page reproduced in Figure 1 also shows another of his characteristic book marking habits, a number in a square box at the head of the page; numbers like this are often (though not always) found in his books and presumably relate to his personal shelving or cataloguing system. He occasionally added a note of the price he paid for the book, and it is not unusual to find marginal annotations or notes on flyleaves, evidence that he not only owned the books but that he read and used them. Many of the books surviving today have been rebound since Fenton's time but those which have not generally have straightforward, simply decorated bindings of their period with no suggestion that he had an eye, or a pocket, for the fine and fancy.

The Sloane project at the British Library has identified a little over 250 books surviving from Fenton's library.[22] This is definitely not a complete picture of the original whole, which I would guess to have been anything up to twice this size, but is enough to give a sense of its range and contents. The known books are all medical or medically-related in content, and cover the field widely, including all aspects of internal and external medicine, pharmacopoeias, and herbals; there is no limitation to surgery or anatomy. The books are almost all in Latin, with an occasional one in French, Italian or Spanish. I have traced only one English language book owned by Fenton; it seems unlikely that he would not originally have had some, but they would have formed a minority of the whole.[23] The books range in date from the beginning of the sixteenth century to 1627, and were printed all over Europe; they testify to the thriving international market in books which we know to have been in place at the time, and also to active channels in London for trading second-hand books. Authors held by Fenton ranged widely, both chronologically and geographically; he had works by contemporary writers like Caspar Bauhin and Jean Riolan as well as those of the ancients (for example, Dioscorides, Galen, Hippocrates) and most points in between. The surviving books show that the medieval Arab authors were well represented in his collection, including Avicenna, Averroes, Moses ben Maimon and Rhazes.

A few examples of Fenton's active engagement with, and use of, medical literature are preserved among the Sloane manuscripts in the British Library. Sloane 1719 is a quarto manuscript of almost 700 pages filled with texts on wounds and related matters copied from published works by Nicolaus Massa, Guillaume Rondelet and Andreas Alcazar. The first 86 leaves are copied out in Fenton's own hand, the remaining 255 in another hand, but the inscription "By me Joseph Fenton" appears at the very end of the volume. Sloane 661 is a composite manuscript put together

[21] For more information on the popular habit of this period of writing mottoes in books, see D Pearson, *Provenance research in book history*, London, British Library, 1994, pp. 25–38; another Fenton title-page is illustrated there as fig. 2.23.

[22] Alison Walker at the British Library is developing a database reconstructing the collection of Sir Hans Sloane, with details of all the individual items which can be traced from his library. For further information, contact Alison at alison.walker@bl.uk.

[23] A copy of Sir Thomas More, *A dialogue of cumfort*, Antwerp, 1573, Durham University Library BABF.B73M.

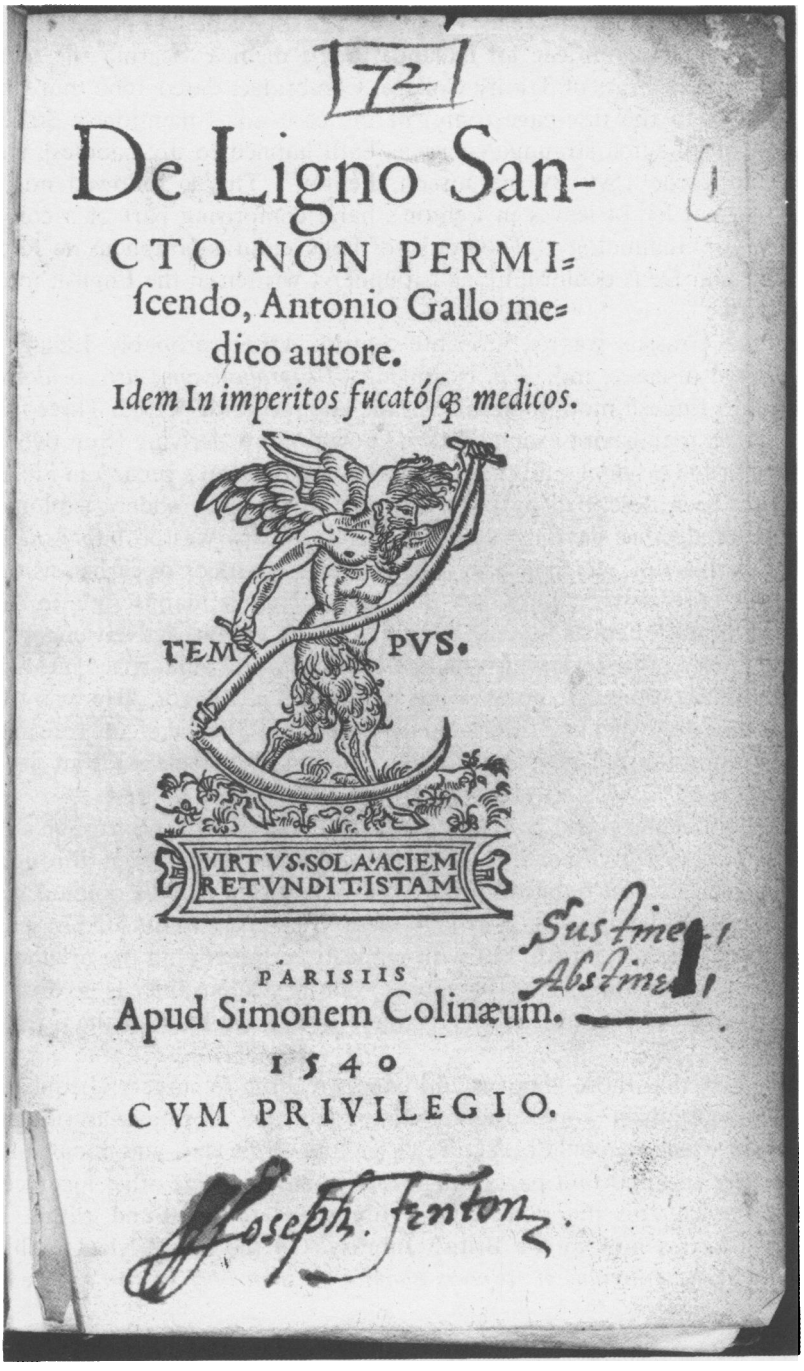

Figure 1: The title-page of Antoine Lecoq's *De ligno sancto non permiscendo*, 1540, showing the ways in which Joseph Fenton marked his books. (Wellcome Library, London.)

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artificially and accidentally, it seems, from gathered fragments; it opens with a section entitled 'Curationes empiricae an Rulandi Praxis medica' bearing the ownership inscription of John Pratt of Trinity College, Cambridge, dated 1660, but this gives way on fol. 31 to the title-page (only) of the case notes mentioned earlier, "An observation of all sutch straunge cuers, as hath hapned to my hand[es], since the yeare of our Lorde 1590 By me Joseph: Fenton". This is followed not by the observations, but by 14 leaves in Fenton's hand comprising part of a copy of an early text on ophthalmology: "The booke of Beneventutus Grapheus de Jerusalem, intituled, by him Deus oculoru[m], as I founde yt written in the English tounge, in an oulde booke".

Benvenutus Grassus was a thirteenth-century writer, probably Italian, whose treatise on eye diseases and their treatments, *De probatissima arte oculorum* was translated into English more than once in the late medieval period. Three fifteenth-century English manuscript exemplars are known today, deriving from two distinct translations of the original, and these, together with Fenton's version in Sloane 661, have recently been described by L M Eldredge in the first modern exploration of Grassus.[24] Eldredge has demonstrated that Fenton's copy was probably made from a now lost manuscript, which also served, a hundred years or so earlier, as the basis for a late fifteenth-century copy now among the Hunter manuscripts in Glasgow University Library.[25] Fenton was not merely transcribing, but actively engaging with and commenting on the text, which he laid out with a marginal space into which to put his own annotations. He notes points of confusion or error: "Here as I thincke ether my author or he that first translated the booke, have mistaken the true meaninge of the first author, for that as yt appeareth, by him, yt shoulde be made an electuarye, and not a syrupe".[26]

Fenton's commentary also contains much criticism of Philip Barrough's *Method of phisick*, a successful English medical compendium which went through eight editions between its first publication in 1583 and 1639; Fenton's opinion was that the ophthalmology passages in Barrough were lifted straight out of Grassus, with no admission of the plagiarism, but with replication of errors in the original. "This booke is most of yt published by Barrow ... but he stealeth this, as he doth all the rest of his booke ... Barrowe is verye faultye in lettinge pass all the errors as he founde them".[27]

It seems likely that those "bookes and papers relating to surgery" bequeathed by Fenton to his grandson would originally have included more manuscript material like this, from which we could build a fuller picture of his text- and document-based activity, clearly an important part of his professional life. One other instance of his interest in books, and the range of his library, is to be found within one of his surviving books now in the British Library. On the front flyleaf of his copy of *De affectib[us] externarum corporis humani partium libri septem* by Eustachius

[24] L M Eldredge (ed.), *Benvenutus Grassus: The wonderful art of the eye*, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1996.

[25] Ibid., p. 33.

[26] MS Sloane 661, fol. 42v.

[27] MS Sloane 661, fol. 32r, 43v.

Rudius, published in Venice in 1606, inscribed on the title-page in his usual way, he wrote "A note of all the bookes of chyurgerye that I have in my studye".[28] This list of 34 books, mostly identified only by author rather than title, clearly summarizes the books then in his possession which he regarded as "surgical"—the core of his working collection, presumably, embracing authors both old and new, which he had been able to obtain and which he thought worth having on his shelves.

Like Fenton's library more generally, one is struck by the range and comprehensiveness of this collection, which covers surgical writers of all periods from Hippocrates through to Fenton's own time. Besides Hippocrates, the ancient traditions are represented through Celsus, and the Byzantine authors Aetius and Paulus Aegineta. Surgical writings of other early authors such as Galen and Oribasius are included in compilation volumes. Medieval Arab knowledge is represented by Abulcasis, the most important specifically surgical Arab writer, and the western medieval tradition through Guy de Chauliac, Arnaldus de Villanova, Pietro d'Argillata. Alongside this solid core of what might be called the surgical heritage available to renaissance practitioners, the writings of that era are also well represented, right down to Fenton's own generation. It is well known that surgery remained a somewhat conservative discipline throughout the early modern period, limited in scope as regards opportunities for experimentation and new treatments by the impossibility of carrying out successful internal operations. Many sixteenth-century surgical writers, like Arceo, dalla Croce, Tagault or Vigo (all of whom were on Fenton's shelves) relied heavily on received tradition and summaries of earlier authors. But he also held works by more innovative writers and those whom we now regard as having brought new knowledge or vision to the field, most obviously Paré, but also Paracelsus, Santo, and Tagliacozzi. Comparison of Fenton's list with any of the standard histories of the development of surgery, and the milestone texts, will show that his list contains most of the significant authors down to the early seventeenth century, as well as names who are less well known today, like Etienne Gourmelen (d.1593), Pietro Rossi (fl.1607) or Cornelius Schylander (fl.1568–77). It is noteworthy that the list contains no English authors and possibly no English language works—no Bullein, no Clowes, no Gale, no Vicary.

In conclusion, therefore, it is evident from Fenton's catalogue of surgical books, and the surviving items from his collection, that he was not only a man who developed a successful reputation and practice, but also one for whom detailed text-based study and learning was an integral part of successful professional life. William Clowes commented on Paré's poor knowledge of Latin but acknowledged that he was a good surgeon nevertheless. That view of the status and accomplishments of surgeons has persisted to the present day. "Paré and Wiseman were learned to the extent that they shared the Galenic physicians' humoral framework, but like the majority of their colleagues they were less scholars than

[28] British Library 548.l.3.

craftsmen who relied on the traditional steady hand and a degree of insensitivity".[29] Fenton was doubtless a man at one end of the surgical spectrum, not typical of the rank and file, but his success was clearly built upon an educated mind as well as a practised hand. Which of these aspects his patients found more useful, we can but speculate.

[29] Andrew Wear, 'Medicine in early modern Europe 1500–1700', in Lawrence I Conrad, Michael Neve, Vivian Nutton, Roy Porter, Andrew Wear, *The western medical tradition 800 BC to AD 1800*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 215–362, p. 298.