

world only promises more than it offers; Nature offers more and greater things than it promises" (p. 115) is baffling—but not if “yields” is substituted for “offers” (the Latin is “praestat”); then we learn that the world—that world which in Wordsworth’s words “is too much with us; getting and spending, we lay waste our powers”—comes up with less than it promises; but anatomy comes up with much from its unpromising source material.

This Prelude is followed here by an English translation of an account of the dissection Stensen then performed, written in Latin by his student Holger Jakobsen; the Latin manuscript is reproduced facsimile. The dissection extended over parts of nine days in mid-winter, and one day is omitted—presumably a Sunday. There was an admirable comparative exhibition of the gut of various vertebrates, and intriguing speculations throughout about function. The final item is a translation from a Latin essay from the last years of Stensen’s life, when he was a bishop; the scientist in him was evidently still thinking, even if not experimenting any longer. The phrase “reflex action” appears, along with diagrams of neural connections. Were the “reflex” words in this context then originated by Stensen? Not so; it seems clear that it was Willis who first used them freely (in Latin), being much preoccupied with the analogy of the reflection of light and sound, and no doubt Stensen found them in Willis’s work. The evidence is in Georges Canguilhem’s *La formation du concept de réflexe aux 17e et 18e siècles* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1955, pp. 65–8).

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William C Gibson, *Medical comets: scholarly contributions by medical undergraduates*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Alumni Association, 1997, pp. xii, 282 (0-88865-541-X).

The author, “doctor, teacher, soldier, mentor, civic leader, chancellor, academic, researcher”,

has a well known and long-standing fascination with discoveries made by medical students. His first book on the subject was published forty years ago with a title which was explicit and easily understood: *Young endeavour, contributions to science by medical students over the last four centuries*. The present more obscure title comes from a saying of Linnaeus—“a professor can never better distinguish himself in his work than by encouraging a clever pupil, for the true discoverers are among them, as comets among stars”. On the colourful front cover of the book, William Harvey is portrayed gazing from the firmament and is identified with the brightest of all stars as well as with a comet which sweeps across the sky. Between the covers at least 250 doctors merit mention as “medical comets”, qualifying on account of their youthful scholarly contributions, though in later life many gained prominence and found fame in ways which were unconnected with their early interests. The style is racy and chatty and many of the cameo sketches are full of charm. An anecdotal approach often concentrates on unusual and unfamiliar aspects of the lives and achievements of the individuals chosen. Though death was a prerequisite for inclusion in *Young endeavour*, several contemporary “medical comets” are now accommodated. Many new entries are included, and the range of chapter headings has been expanded; the new book, also incorporates the material used in *Young endeavour* with few changes, to the extent that, in some cases, errors have been transposed. Some individuals appear in more than one category. For instance, William Osler’s boyhood interests as a budding microscopist are described in the chapter on anatomy; he also finds a home in the chapter on pathology and infection. More extensive consideration is given to those who have contributed to research on the nervous system than to other specialities, with Charles Sherrington accorded the longest entry in the book. Throughout the book quotations are given as marginalia, seemingly as likely to be inserted randomly as directly relevant to the text.

Book Reviews

Many years ago Noël Poynter expressed his conviction that an acquaintance with the ways in which our present scientific and medical knowledge have originated and developed is one of the most useful contributions to preparing the young doctor for his or her life's work. Only a tiny minority of medical students have either the opportunity or the inclination to develop profound and scholarly medico-historical interests. The importance and enjoyment of biographical medical accounts and their appeal are often underestimated and the approach sometimes disparaged as likely to

engender blinkered, and exclusively doctor-orientated, romanticized and hero-worshipping notions of the past. William C Gibson concludes with the hope that "a new generation of medical comets will be further encouraged in their endeavours after reading these accounts of the pioneers who came before them". Few are likely to read all these accounts, but selective and critical sampling may enthuse, stimulate curiosity and encourage further exploration.

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