

BOOK REVIEW

No Ordinary Surgeon: The Life and Times of William Binley Dickinson by Dorothy Bentley Smith

Hardback, 624 pages
Amberley Publishing
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Little has been written about William Binley Dickinson (1789-1870), a surgeon who practised in Macclesfield, was involved in establishing infirmaries, and who was a founder member of the Numismatic Society of London. Dorothy Bentley Smith, who has written extensively about the history of Macclesfield, sets out to correct this by writing an exhaustive account of Dickinson's life during the 19th Century.

The book is well illustrated and contains much detail obtained mainly from the Macclesfield Courier. Amongst the narrative there are some interesting medical achievements by Dickinson, a notable example being of a female patient suffering from introversion of her uterus whom he successfully treated. Further detail is also provided of riots in Manchester, Napoleon's death, along with descriptions of the Reform Laws and the Irish Question, which provides historical background, although how they relate to Dickinson's life is unclear.

However, for all Bentley Smith's fluent style, there are problems with the book. Most notably, a large part is devoted to the sculptor Thomas Thornycroft (1815-1885) who produced, among other statues, the Queen Boudicca Group located on the Embankment, London, and who remained a lifelong friend of Dickinson. Thornycroft's story is an interesting one, although, reading the number of pages dedicated to him, it is impossible not to feel that the book might have been better named "The Life and Times of Dickinson and Thornycroft".

A more serious problem, however, occurs with the book's idiosyncratic take on footnotes. The author states: "*In order to avoid the necessity for annoying footnotes or tiny numbers throughout the text... (they) have been listed under each chapter*". However, this is not the case: the list provided at the end of each chapter is the complete primary or secondary source without reference to the text and it is impossible to identify the quotes or statements and to see to whom they are attributed.

Ultimately, this book is a tribute to Dorothy Bentley Smith's industry and commitment and will be of clear interest to historians in the Macclesfield area. For the medical historian, however, it is not a definitive account of the life and works of William Binley Dickinson. With no real analysis of the surgeon's life or his contribution to medical history, Dickinson remains buried under a swathe of facts.

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