

BOOK REVIEW

Fatal Evidence: Professor Alfred Swaine Taylor & the Dawn of Forensic Science

by Helen Barrell

Hardback, 240 pages
Pen & Sword Books
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The introduction bills this book as an interwoven biography of Alfred Swaine Taylor and the story of forensic science's development. It weaves a chronological path through his family and professional life, interests and hobbies. A comfortable middle-class upbringing and entry into medicine in the 1820s are adequately covered, progressing on to his entry into the medico-legal field when a teaching dissection of a female prostitute revealed a male body, engaging the interest of the Home Secretary and involving Taylor's first inquest.

Initial descriptions of family and his hobby of photography give way to an elongated litany of potentially poisoned viscera appearing at the Taylor's elegant Nash household in St. James's Terrace, advising or presenting evidence at inquests around the country, and on-going friendships and rivalries in the nascent field of forensic chemistry. Later, there are cases involving the identification of blood and fibres, such as on the boots of a suspected murderer also delivered to Taylor's door, and research into the novel use of body temperature to estimate the time of death. Many of these cases were infamous leading Taylor to become a household name.

Contemporary novelists including Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens used court transactions and Taylor's many books to inspire and inform their novels. Taylor is likely one of the characters who was subsumed into Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and he was the basis of R. Austin Freeman's scientific detective, Dr. Thorndyke.

This well researched book is presented as a factual historical work with 32 black and white plates grouped together in the centre, and at the back a handy timeline, a bibliography of relevant texts including a comprehensive list of Taylor's publications, and a section headed 'Notes', which constitutes a very thorough and extensive reference list not annotated within the main text, presumably to promote reading flow.

Fatal Evidence should appeal to the interested lay person who is not deterred by entrails in various states of decomposition, and would be of use to a historian – medical or otherwise – as an introduction to either Taylor or forensic science.

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