

“All Manner of Industry and Ingenuity”: a Bio-Bibliography of Dr Thomas Willis 1621 – 1675

by Alastair Compston

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Alastair Compston is Emeritus Professor of Neurology at Cambridge University.

This long and comprehensive book is in several parts. A short introduction outlines the development of the book, the plan for the chapters and the scope. The eighteen chapters are arranged in four sections. Chapter one provides a well illustrated biography of Willis with excellent accounts of Willis's rise to prominence in Cambridge and his role in the fascinating episode of 'half hanged' Anne Greene. Willis's part in the early activities of the Royal Society and his move to London are included. The annual commemoration of Willis at Fenny Stratton, inaugurated by his grandson Browne Willis and still extant, is also described in great detail, including the occasions where the mis-directed Fenny 'poppers' damaged the church clock tower and partially demolished the roof of the Bull and Butcher, and the address by William Osler on the occasion of the 183rd festival. Chapters two to four provide background information to Willis's published works including a historical account of the London and Oxford printing trades, short biographies of all the English and European printers and booksellers involved with Willis's publications, a detailed account of all the illustrations included and an introduction to bibliography. Chapters five to fourteen (328 pages) give a bibliographical account of Willis's treatises published in Latin.

The final four chapters explain the importance of Willis's work and provide the historical context required to fully appreciate his contributions to a variety of disciplines, especially neuroanatomy and 'neurologie'. For the medical historian, this final section will be of particular interest, explaining how Willis was able to draw inspiration from the likes of Harvey and Paracelsus but then develop new iatrochemical theories based upon clinical experience and extensive anatomical and experimental research.

This book is a work of great scholarship that deserves a place in all serious medical libraries as a valuable reference work. It is beautifully illustrated and annotated, though the small font used in some notes and tables will challenge readers. However, it is a fitting tribute to the life and work of Thomas Willis.

Bryan Rhodes
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