

BOOK REVIEW

Castles in the Air: a Life of Dr Thomas Sydenham *by Michael Denny*

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The author is a retired general practitioner who studied at Barts. This book, his first major biographical publication, features a key figure in British medical history.

This delightful paperback provides a life of Sydenham (1624-1689), born ten miles from Dorchester and buried in St. James's Piccadilly, a devout Christian. He suffered from gout and renal colic, common problems in his time. He became a prominent London Physician, active in the Royal College of Physicians.

Sydenham studied at Oxford from 1642 where ancient classical texts formed a large part of the syllabus. He served in the Dorset Militia from 1642 when war broke out and he supported Parliament. Much detail of the English Civil War (1642-51) is set out here. He returned to Oxford in 1646 where colleagues included Harvey, Boyle, Petty, Willis and Hooke.

Sydenham's radical scientific approach to medical theory and practice, rather than the ubiquitous four humours, impressed John Locke. In 1655 Sydenham set up medical practice in London, living in Pall Mall. The mortality of the Great Plague of 1665 reached fifty per cent. The Great Fire followed next year and the lead from the roof of St Paul's ran down the streets and the stones flew.

He wrote extensively on fevers and believed all fevers could be treated in broadly the same way using simple and humane methods: venesection, emetics, sleep, cordials, purging, diet, blisters (cupping), wine, the warmth of animals or young persons, extra bedclothes and hot drinks, quinine, change of air and doing nothing. He used trial and error, somewhat reminiscent of Hunter's later "why think why not try the experiment", Sydenham being prepared to prove himself wrong, or Cicero's even earlier "Why should I listen to words when I can observe facts". He considered diseases to be similar in all patients rather than being specific to each patient, recognised acute and chronic disease and he favoured vegetable remedies and the cooling of fevers. He considered time a good healer. He described St Vitus' Dance (chorea) and became a member of The Royal Society.

This book summarises his works and is a good read, informative, well-illustrated (by Susan Jenkins) and adorned with enlightening quotations. It is a worthy addition to the library of physicians and medical historians.

Christopher Gardner-Thorpe
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