

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Bare-knuckle Surgeon**

***By Nick Black***

Grosvenor House Publishing, Paperback, 305 pages  
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The book starts in the middle of a fight – a real fight. The young Thomas Wakley, an apprentice apothecary, is in a makeshift ring fighting for prize money. He wins. He’s learned how to fight and has come to believe that “however bit and strong an adversary might look, you’d have to believe you’d win.”

In this way, Nick Black sets the stage for his biographical fiction of Thomas Wakley (1795–1862), the founder of the *Lancet* and fighter for reform. It gives him a way to create a three-dimensional character for a man for whom, despite his importance to modern medicine, there is no authoritative biography.

Nick Black carves out the period in Wakley’s life from 1811 to 1823, taking him from the apprenticeship to a dubious apothecary in Devon to London in his quest to become a doctor, then a surgeon. The bankruptcy of the apothecary frees him from his articles. He’s determined to train as a surgeon, but first with no position, he has to return home. Black fills in a sense of what Wakley’s family life was like, a harsh father and competitive brothers but a supportive mother and sister.

When ultimately, Wakley gets to London, he’s an outsider in the medical world. Through Black’s narrative we see how his initial excitement and dedication to learning become tinged with disappointment and then indignation at the way medicine is conducted. He’s also surprised at how poorly developments in medical knowledge are disseminated.

We see Wakley’s growing determination, supported by other reformers like William Cobbett, to take on the establishment, and how he does so. Nick Black also conveys his hesitations and concerns for his family. *The Lancet* is an immediate success, and Wakley’s anger at cronyism, corruption and injustice leads him to take other fights, described briefly in an epilogue.

His character comes over as one which is tough but open. He has friends and despite a precarious professional situation is able to marry the daughter of a successful merchant. He survives an assassination attempt. These aspects of Wakley’s life, which might be small mentions in a conventional biography, are fleshed out credibly with narrative and dialogue in modern language. There is a good role for Wakley’s wife Elizabeth – not an anachronistic heroine but a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman who supports her husband and discovers that she also has talents.

Sir Nicholas Black had the encouragement of several of Wakley’s descendants, and his fictionalisation is effective and credible. This book will appeal to anyone interested in the character of Wakley, the background of early 19<sup>th</sup> century medicine and that of reformers more broadly.

**Lee Coppack**  
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