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978-1-108-07594-7 - Biographical Memoirs of Medicine in Great Britain: From the Revival of Literature to the Time of Harvey

John Aikin

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION.

THE History of Medicine and of Medical Practitioners in this island during those dark ages which so long overshadowed the countries of Europe, affords very little to interest the curiosity of those who have not already acquired the habit of valuing antiquity for its own sake. At a period when all merit, even in the most celebrated schools of physic, consisted in understanding and commenting upon the fanciful reveries of Arabian writers, who debased all the knowledge they had received from purer sources, what improvements could be expected among the ignorant and illiterate professors of a country, remote from the cen-

B tre

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 INTRODUCTION.

tre of science, and sunk in barbarism beyond its neighbours? Or what biographical memoirs, either instructive or amusing, can be collected from the obscure accounts of persons void of all spirit of rational enquiry, and untinged with the elegancies of polite literature?

THE learned and ingenious Dr. Freind has, indeed, thought it worth while in his *History of Physick* to give a view of some of the writings still extant of our earlieft medical ancestors, by way of specimens of the doctrines and practice of the times. This he has done in so judicious and agreeable a manner, that it would be equally presumptuous and unnecessary to attempt executing it after him. To his well-known work, therefore, I refer for information as far as his plan leads him; contenting myself with mentioning as the general result, that the greatest part of their writings, particularly all the *rationale* of diseases, was a compilation from the Arabians and their copyists; and that the rest consisted of a heterogeneous collection of receipts and directions

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I N T R O D U C T I O N . 3

directions, drawn from the copious stores of empiricism and superstition.

SOME accounts of the lives of several other early practitioners and writers, whose works are not come down to us, are extant in the memoirs of our literary biographers, Leland, Pits, and Bale. These, though very jejune and dry, are yet worthy of a perusal, as serving to give the best insight into the education, character and course of studies of physicians in those ages. I shall therefore select from the above writers such of these articles as may sufficiently answer the purpose of the present *Introduction*; which is, to give a general idea of the state of physic in these countries, till the dawning of a more enlightened period, which will offer more valuable and interesting objects to our enquiries.

THE first English medical writer recorded by these authors is named

RICHARDUS ANGLICUS. He flourished about the year 1230. He is said to have studied first at Oxford, and then at

B 2

Paris.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 INTRODUCTION.

Paris. As a proof of his general reputation we find him mentioned by Simphorianus Champerius in his treatise on medical writers, as one of the most eminent of his profession. The following ample list of his works is given.

| | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>De Crift.</i> | <i>De Phlebotomia.</i> |
| <i>Summa de criticis diebus.</i> | <i>Anatomia, Galenimore.</i> |
| <i>De Pulsibus.</i> | <i>Correktorium Alchimie.</i> |
| <i>De Modo conficiendi & medendi.</i> | <i>De Febribus.</i> |
| | <i>Speculum Alchimie.</i> |
| <i>Tra&ctatus de urinis.</i> | <i>De Re medica.</i> |
| <i>De Regulis urinarum.</i> | <i>Repressiva.</i> |
| <i>De Signis morborum.</i> | <i>De Signis februm.</i> |
| <i>De Signis prognosticis.</i> | |

LELAND says he wrote other works, which were not preserved.

NICOLAS DE FERNEHAM was educated at Oxford, where, we are told, he exhibited early proofs of uncommon genius, and attained to great proficiency in the learning of the age. Having a particular inclination to botany and physic, he pursued these studies, first at Paris, and then at Bologna, under the best masters; and applied diligently to the works

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I N T R O D U C T I O N . 5

works of Hippocrates, Galen, and Dioscorides. After a long absence, he returned to England, and was held in high estimation both as a physician and a scholar. He was called to court by King Henry III. and entertained as his domestic physician at a large salary. At length, when (as Pits observes) the good old man was entirely attached to reading the scriptures, and meditating on spiritual things, after having refused the see of Chester, he was made bishop of Durham, by the interest of Otho, the pope's legate. In this city he died in the year 1241. Matthew Paris mentions him with particular applause. His medical works were, *Practica Medicinæ*, lib. I. *De viribus herbarum*, lib. I. and several others of which the titles are not recorded.

JOHN GILES, in Latin JOANNES ÆGIDIUS, or *de* SANCTO ÆGIDIO, was born at St. Alban's, and flourished in the thirteenth century. He was educated at Paris, and became physician in ordinary to Philip king of France, and a professor of medicine in the universities of Paris and Montpellier. He was afterwards created a doctor

B 3 of

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John Aikin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 INTRODUCTION.

of divinity, and was the first Englishman who entered among the Dominicans, with whom he became a celebrated preacher. In his old age he was famous for his divinity lectures at Oxford. Matthew Paris relates, that Robert Grosthead, the famous bishop of Lincoln, lying on his death-bed, sent for Master John Giles, learned in physic and divinity, that he might receive comfort from him both for body and soul. This prelate died in 1253; and it is probable Giles was of an advanced age at that time.

HE left behind him two medical pieces, entitled *Practicæ Medicinales* and *Futurorum Prognostica*; some commentaries on Aristotle; and a number of theological treatises.

HUGH OF EVESHAM, OR HUGO ATRATUS, was born at Evesham in Worcester-shire. After perfecting himself in philosophy, mathematics, and the other liberal arts in both our English universities, he travelled through all the celebrated seminaries of learning in France and Italy in pursuit of medical knowledge. In this he made so great a proficiency,

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[More information](#)

I N T R O D U C T I O N . 7

ficiency, as to become, we are told, the first of his profession, not only in his own country, but of the age he lived in, which was the thirteenth century. He was also very eminent for mathematical and astronomical knowledge; and according to the custom of the age, united the clerical character with the medical, being a prebendary in the cathedral of York, procurator for the archbishop of York at the court of Rome, an archdeacon of Worcester, and rector of Spofford in the diocese of York. In consequence of his high reputation, he was sent for to Rome in the year 1280, by pope Martin IV. to assist in the decision of certain newly promulgated and difficult questions in physic. What these were, we are not informed; however, our countryman acquitted himself so much to the satisfaction of the court of Rome, and excited so great an admiration of his learning, that the pope, in the year 1281, created him a cardinal priest, by the style of Cardinal of St. Laurence in Lucina. From that time he applied himself solely to theological studies; and at length, in the year 1287, he died of the plague with several other cardinals in the

B 4

conclave

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 INTRODUCTION.

conclave held after the death of pope Honorius IV. Bale, who seldom allows a pope or cardinal to die a natural death, says he was poisoned; and this report is also adopted in the *Annal. Vigorn.* Pits relates that many important remains of this person were extant in his time at Rome, especially in the church of St. Laurence, or Lorenzo, in Lucina, where he was buried, and a splendid monument erected for him. He was a benefactor to this church, as appears from the following passage in the *Roma antica e moderna, tom. I. p. 434*, under the description of this edifice. “Ugo Cardinal Inglese, e Innico Avalos, Spagnuolo, fuoi titolari, gli fecero in diversi tempi vari ristori ed abbellimenti.”

He is said to have published the following works.

Super opere febrium Isaac. Problemata quædam.
Medicinales canones. De Genealogiis humanis.

GILBERTUS ANGLICUS is placed by Bale (who calls him *Gilbertus Legleus*, and says he was physician to Hubert, archbishop of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION. 9

of Canterbury) in the reign of king John, about the year 1210. But Leland makes him more modern; and from some passages in his writings it appears that he must have flourished towards the end of the thirteenth century. The memoirs of his life are very scanty; and he is chiefly known as the author of a *Compendium of physic*, still extant, and which is the earliest remaining writing on the practice of medicine among our countrymen. This is one of the books commented on by Dr. Freind; who, with great impartiality, while he is obliged to take off somewhat from the high character given of the author by Leland, yet allows him a share of merit which may place him on a level with the medical writers of that age. To Dr. Freind's History I refer for the particulars worthy of notice in Gilbert's works; as likewise for the very entertaining and well-written account of

JOHN OF GADDESSEN, author of the famous *Rosa Anglica*. He flourished towards the beginning of the fourteenth century, and seems to have had very extensive and lucrative practice; and was the first Englishman who

was

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 INTRODUCTION.

was employed as a physician at court. The ignorance, superstition and low quackery which appear throughout his practice, and which are painted with much life and humour by Freind, do no great honour to the character of the profession in that age, and shew with how much abatement we are to take the high-flown panegyrics contained in the accounts of our biographers. On perusing the *Rosa Anglica*, I found one passage not noticed by Freind, which may be worth attention. My readers will probably be surpris'd to find that the method of producing fresh from salt water by simple distillation should be familiarly mentioned by an author of this remote period. In a chapter of John of Gaddefden's on sweetning salt water, he gives the four following methods of performing it.

- 1st. Repeated percolation through sand.
- 2dly. Boiling salt water in an open vessel, and receiving the steam on a cloth, which, when sufficiently impregnated, is to be wrung out. (This, in fact, is a kind of distillation.)
- 3dly. *Distillation in an alembic with a gentle heat.*
- 4thly. Setting a thin cup of wax to swim in a vessel of salt water, when the sweet water