

THOMAS WILLIS 1621–1675: HIS LIFE AND WORK

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Thomas Willis 1621–1675: his life and work is the most up-to-date and comprehensive biography about the 17th century British physician, Thomas Willis. A mention of the good doctor's name today might bring to mind the *circle of Willis*, *chordae Willisii*, *nervus ophthalmicus Willisii* and *nervus accessorium Willisii*, anatomical structures so aptly named. It is noted that Willis intended a career as a clergyman, but eventually chose a profession in Medicine. Throughout his career, Willis was instrumental in the advancement of medical knowledge in a period of scientific enlightenment. This book details his life from its start to end, including his major publications and achievements, as well as his family and associates.

Thomas Willis, so named after his father and grandfather, was born in Great Bedwyn, Wiltshire, England. He attended school at Oxford after a family relocation and subsequently graduated with a B.A. and M.A. from Christ Church, University of Oxford, in 1639 and 1642, respectively. There were a few incidents which occurred during this period, which probably had a cumulative effect on Willis so as to prompt him to be a physician instead. Willis began his medical studies immediately after graduating, but was interrupted by the Civil War where he enrolled in an auxiliary regiment. A few months after the Civil War ended in 1646, Willis received his M.B.B.S. Being an untrained novice, he visited small markets around Oxford to practise while conducting scientific research during his leisure, and it was there that his foundations in research grew. A few years later, Willis and a fellow scientist, at that time the leading medical scientist in Oxford, gained fame for an incident of resuscitation. The fellow scientist then left town soon afterwards, leaving Willis as the town's top scientist. Willis made significant progress in medical practice, research and teaching from then on, eventually moving to London in 1667 to further extend his career, until his death in 1675.

“He became so noted, and so infinitely resorted to, for his practice, that never any physician before went beyond him, or got more money yearly than he.”

– Anthony Wood (1632–1695)

Articles on the life and publications of Thomas Willis are few and far between, most of which have been published separately. Prior to this publication, the last substantial biography on Willis went a few decades back. Hughes has managed a book containing the most comprehensive information on Thomas Willis in both these aspects, compiling details from countless sources dating several hundreds of years back. Willis had seven major publications in all, one of which was published posthumously. A third of the book was dedicated to details of these publications and his numerous contributions to the anatomy and physiology of the brain. Although the book dedicates whole chapters to fully describing his acquaintances, I would occasionally get confused over the sheer number of names used in the book.

When reading Willis's life story, I felt that Hughes' succinct and crisp writing style, so reminiscent of medical writing, has made Willis's life seem less eventful than it might have been, had a different style of writing been employed. More importantly, however, this book serves to constantly remind us of a research scientist who was a pioneer in the modern understanding of the nervous system; a doctor who sought to redefine the anatomical parts last identified by Galen; and a teacher whose superior teachings produced students more illustrious than he was.

I thoroughly benefitted from reading this book, which was written very objectively. However, the book would have been more enjoyable had more flair in the writing style been used when telling Willis's life story. The illustrations, numerous throughout the book, are indeed helpful in imagining his life as it was in the 17th century.

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