

Book Reviews

The Life of William Harvey. GEOFFREY KEYNES, K.T. Oxford. Clarendon Press. London. Oxford University Press. 1966. Pp. xviii + 483. Price £4 10s.

So often is the name of William Harvey on the lips of all who are in any way connected with science or medicine that he is sometimes taken for granted. Nevertheless, it is surprising that no definitive biography of the greatest English doctor has been written since 1897. Sir D'Arcy Power's short book in the Masters of Medicine series is and must remain a delight for all who are interested in the 'founders and benefactors' of British medicine. Like Shakespeare, who was his near contemporary, Harvey is a man about whom we have many small bits of information but not enough to build into a picture sharp enough to reveal the complete man. In Harvey's case this is undoubtedly due to his self-effacing habits. He eschewed publicity in any shape and, for a man who was in the thick of things in one of the most eventful periods of our history, he was unbelievably successful in avoiding the limelight. Yet in whatever he attempted he came to the top, and held every position which was open to him in his profession, except the presidency of the Royal College of Physicians which he refused to accept on account of his advancing age. Since Power wrote much new material has come to light and Sir Geoffrey has made full use of every scrap. In piecing them together, he has drawn on his deep understanding of the people and of the literature of the Stuart times, and has produced a masterpiece which must remain the standard work for many years. What interesting characters they were those Cavaliers and Roundheads, how learned, how wonderfully they could weave a sentence with a richness that has never been surpassed—witness Sir Thomas Brown, the Verneys, old Sir Kenelm Digby, Lady Dorothy Osborne, Anthony Wood and dear, gossip Aubrey. It is one thing to make a discovery and quite another to be able to present it in a manner which can be understood. In *De Motu Cordis* Harvey showed that a scientific treatise could be written with the greatest economy of words in a form easy to comprehend. As was the custom in treating of things medical Harvey wrote in Latin and he was no doubt helped by the cold logic of that language, but there is no better example of how a scientific treatise should be presented than this and it should be read by all students at least in translation. Sir Geoffrey's summaries, abstracts and annotations are helpful in appreciating the impact of *De Motu Cordis* on his generation.

Many will wish to possess this book which is cheap for its size, and with its short, self-contained chapters it is an ideal book in which to browse, and it is generously illustrated.