

William Harvey's seminal classic dramatically changed Western medicine

William Harvey, *Exercitation Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus*. Frankfurt: William Fitzer, 1628. 7 1/4 inches x 5 7/8 inches (184 x 150 mm), 72 pages.

This work is one of a handful of unquestionable classics in the history of Western scientific thought. Its full title, *Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus*, means “Anatomical exercise on the motion of the heart and blood in animals,” where “exercise” has the sense of a formal academic argument. The publication of *De motu cordis* in 1628 marked the overthrow of a tradition of scientific explanation that had endured for almost 1,500 years, inaugurating within the biological sciences a practice based on close observation and direct experimentation that has continued to this day.

The prose of Harvey's masterpiece is concrete, straightforward, and sometimes even personal; the work was reprinted ten times within three decades of its publication. Because it is brief, well-argued, and relatively non-technical, *De motu cordis* is very probably the one and only great classic of Western science written before 1800 that is still widely read today: by undergraduates in courses in the history of science, by medical students and practitioners, and by students of the physiological sciences.

William Harvey wrote his masterpiece in the midst of a successful career as a highly respected London physician. Unlike many of his medical colleagues, Harvey was not overwhelmingly interested in how the human heart functioned, but rather in the broader, more Aristotelian question: “How do hearts in general function?” This led him to dissect, and to introduce into evidence, an astonishingly wide range of animals: from the more common cats, dogs, and pigs to snakes and frogs, shrimp, and flies. Because he was interested in the action of the heart, and not just the details of its anatomy, Harvey was led to carry out numerous vivisectional experiments.

Harvey's logic aimed to be rigorous and convincing, and it proved so. As a

result, there is remarkably little that one can point to, even 375 years later, that is factually wrong. *De motu cordis* remains a marvelous example, not only of a statement of the epoch-making scientific discovery of the circulation of the blood, but of how an investigator should conduct experimental inquiries, and of how to construct a maximally persuasive argument.

Only fifty-eight copies of the first edition of Harvey's *De Motu Cordis* are recorded in the latest census. This particular copy, now in the Warnock Library, was sold at Christie's in London on June 28, 1995. At that time, it was bound in late nineteenth-century cloth-backed boards (an unworthy binding for a book of this stature) and bore the lithographic book label of the Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich (1859–1919), a grandson of the Tsar Nicholas I. The book has since been re-bound in modern chestnut brown goatskin with gilt decorations. The spine is flat and undecorated with titling running from tail to head.

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