

# WILLIAM GIBSON, SURGEON-FARRIER, ON FEVERS

by

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WILLIAM GIBSON, born about 1680, was the first of a succession of eighteenth-century British surgeons to turn to the then distasteful subject of farriery as a career, or as a medium for the exercise of literary talent. Concerning his early life we have little information. Presumably he was trained as a surgeon via the usual apprenticeship route; the first notice of his public life dates to 1714, at the termination of the wars of Queen Anne, when his name appears in the Army Lists. At this time he served with Colonel Tyrell's Regiment of Foot; later he was with the 16th Dragoons under Colonel Charles Churchill, during which time he had the opportunity to observe the difficulties mounted troops had with diseases and injuries of their horses. Apparently foreseeing difficult times ahead as an ageing ex-army surgeon, Gibson seized upon farriery as a means of achieving fortune, if not fame, upon his anticipated return to civil life. That he prepared assiduously for this day is evident from the fact that in 1720, not long after his discharge from army duty, he published his first work, *The Farrier's New Guide*. The following year he published a supplement to his *Guide* in the form of a *Farrier's Dispensatory*, and a third work, *The True Method of Dieting Horses*. The conclusion is inescapable that the manuscripts for these works were planned, and probably prepared, during his later years of army duty. His *Guide*, he says, is partly the result of observations made while on army duty, and 'partly of some that have been made since', but his civil practice must have been strictly limited at this time.

While taking up the less than noble calling of the farrier would have entailed considerably less sacrifice of prestige for a surgeon than for a physician at the time, such a step could not be construed but as one down the social ladder—a fact which Gibson well understood. For more than a century a succession of genteel writers had urged attention to the diseases of horses by educated men, but to no avail, at least with regard to men with medical training taking up the tainted profession. It would seem reasonable, therefore, to accept more or less at face value certain of the higher sentiments expressed by Gibson concerning his momentous decision. In dedicating his work on the *Dieting of Horses* to his former commander, Colonel Churchill, then Governor of Chelsea College, Gibson states,

. . . the Acknowledgement is chiefly due to You, since it was from the great Esteem I had of Your Judgement, that I first ventured to engage in the Subject of Horsemanship. You was sensible of the Loss we daily sustain'd, for want of better Helps in the *Farriers* Province.

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And in the preface to his *Guide*, in referring to the Frenchman, Solleysel (*Le Parfait Mareschal*, 1664), 'who is deservedly reputed the best Author', but who had a number of faults evident to a man with medical training, Gibson asks:

. . . What can we hope from those with less Learning and Ability, who have only deliver'd Things at Second-hand? Of these, all Nations have produced sufficient Store . . . but none has been so much abus'd that Way as ourselves . . . we have hardly one who has treated of the Diseases of Horses in any tolerable Way.

THE  
**FARRIER'S**  
New Guide.

Containing, First,

The ANATOMY of a HORSE; being an exact and compendious Description of all his Parts; with their Actions and Uses: Illustrated with FIGURES curiously Engrav'd on COPPER-PLATES.

SECONDLY,

An Account of all the DISEASES incident to HORSES, with their Signs, Causes, and Method of Cure; wherein many Defects in the FARRIER'S Practice are now carefully supply'd, their Errors expos'd and amended, and the Art greatly improv'd and advanced, according to the latest Discoveries.

THE

Whole interspers'd with many curious and useful Observations concerning FEEDING and EXERCISE, &c.

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THE NINTH EDITION corrected.

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By W. GIBSON.

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LONDON  
Printed for T. LONGMAN, at the Ship in Patern-  
Noster-Row. MDCCLXXXVIII.

Fig. 1

Title page from Gibson's  
*Farrier's New Guide*,  
published 1720.

Concerning the methods of farriers, Gibson remonstrates, '. . . if one Drench or two does not make a Cure, they are at a great Loss what to do next: Having no other Notion of Medicines, but as if they work'd by a Sort of Magick'. Gibson was not far from a correct appraisal of the situation in stating, 'That this is the common and ordinary Way of Practice among Horses, every one knows.' And while he recognizes some farriers as able practitioners, '. . . yet while their Methods are not communicated to the Publick, and thereby rendred of general Use, the Art can be but little advanced'.

While much was left to be desired in the day-to-day practice of human medicine, by comparison, the practice of farriery had sunk to an all-time low. Without excusing those who, by failing to act upon their convictions, had permitted this situation to develop, that such should have been the case is at least understandable. The art of veterinary medicine, esteemed by the ancients, and practised in a more progressive manner than human medicine in the Byzantine era, had fallen into decay with the other arts and sciences during the Dark Ages. With the development of horseshoeing in the third or fourth century, however, invention had become the mother of necessity, and a new class, that of the shoeing-smith, *née ferrarius*, entered the scene. When a new medical science began to rise from the morass of the Middle Ages, the care of horses was firmly ensconced in the hands of the farrier—hands more accustomed to lifting the feet of horses than to holding aloft the torch of scientific inquiry. As the hereditary custodian of the little empirical information then extant upon the diseases of horses, the ignorant and brutal farrier had little need to fear the encroachment of more noble men upon his domain. To Gibson's time, not a single medical man in Britain had deigned to risk the stigma of writing upon animal disease, to say nothing of actually entering veterinary practice. The term *veterinary* itself was virtually unknown in the English language until about 1800.<sup>1</sup> True, a number of surgeons and physicians, at the request of the Government, had acquitted themselves well in their investigations of cattle plague, there being no others better qualified. But these men usually chose either to remain anonymous, or apologized to their fraternity for debasing the profession, excusing their actions as a patriotic duty in a time of national peril.

With this as a backdrop for an entrance into a profession of low repute, it would seem beside the point to question Gibson's motives in making the move he did. The eminent veterinary historian, General Sir Frederick Smith,<sup>2</sup> suggests a purely utilitarian motive, there being more surgeons than surgery. And in judging Gibson's early works upon an absolute rather than a relative basis, Smith is exceedingly critical of Gibson's contribution to the veterinary art at this early period. Fortunately, we have a real basis for judging the genius of Gibson, for in 1751—the year of his death—after thirty years of practice, he published *A New Treatise on the Diseases of Horses*, which Smith recognizes as 'an immense improvement . . . one which hands his name down as a careful clinical observer who added to the sum of human knowledge'.

The standards used by the medical historian in evaluating a specific contribution, however, have changed since the time (1924) General Smith voiced his criticism of Gibson's early works. Without excusing the errors, both of omission and commission, which would seem to be inevitable in an effort based upon little real experience, the proper criterion for evaluation should be whether or not a particular effort represents an improvement, or otherwise, upon the *status quo*. As Sigerist<sup>3</sup> aptly points out, it is manifestly unfair to call good that which agrees with current thought, and bad that which does not. We shall, therefore, compare Gibson's *Guide* of 1720 with the best the times had to offer, and with the most widely circulated works upon the horse. In

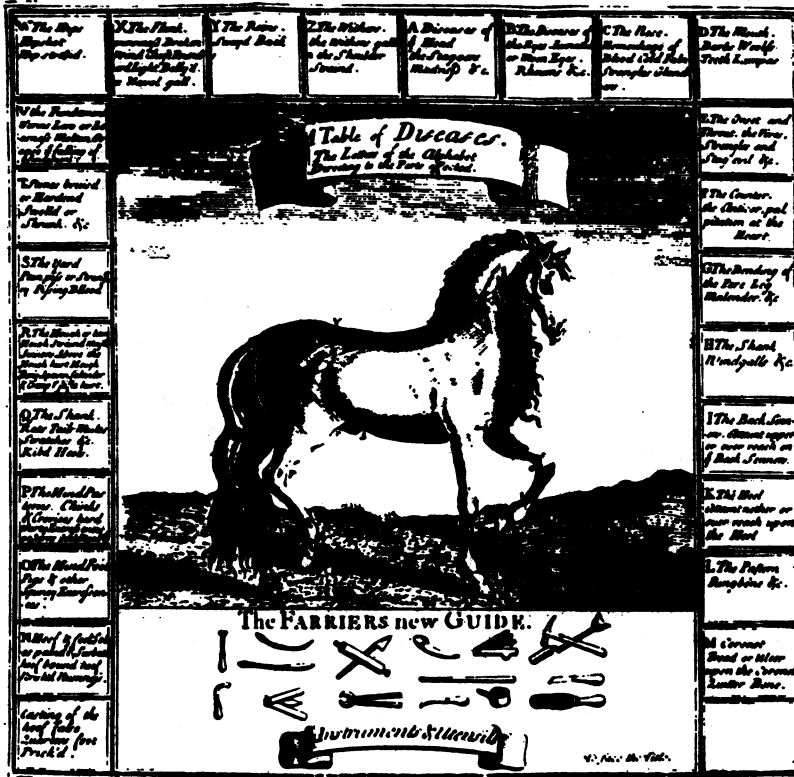


Fig. 2  
Frontispiece from Gibson's Guide.  
The parts of the body and their diseases  
are given in the margin.

many respects, 'the best were like the worst', for with few exceptions the major works then extant were all dipped from the same well—that of ignorance. For this reason, there would be little point in judging any work written for the farrier on the basis of the advances that had been made in medicine. Farriers, even those who could read, were interested in little beyond that which professed to be cures for the diseases of the horse.

Whether Gibson's failure to capitalize fully upon certain advances in medicine, which might have found application in his writing upon the horse, was due to his own ignorance, or to a realization of their impossibility of acceptance, is not wholly a matter for conjecture. On the subject of the pulse in diagnosis, Gibson states:

There might be also Signs taken from the Pulse, which is plainly enough to be felt on the Temples and Fore-legs of a Horse; but as that Method has never as yet obtain'd among Farriers, I shall therefore pass it over.

Whatever its shortcomings, Gibson's *Guide* found a large following, a third 'edition' (hardly more than a reprinting) being put out in 1722, and eight editions preceding his *New Treatise* in 1751.

The first hundred pages of the *Guide* are devoted to the anatomy of the horse, illustrated with eighteen figures on seven plates. The anatomy of a horse, Gibson avers, is 'as necessary to Farriers, as that of the human body to Physicians and Surgeons'. The *Guide* was the first work in English on the diseases of the horse to include more than a passing attempt at anatomy; as an example of the anatomical knowledge considered by most authors as being adequate for farriers, Thomas de Grey, in *The Compleat Horseman and Expert Ferrier* (1639), states, in effect, 'The head contains eyes to see with, ears to hear with . . .' etc., *ad nauseam*.

The first anatomy of the horse was the *Anatomia del Cavallo* (1598) by Carlo Ruini, a notable acquisition to veterinary science, but, as put by Gibson, ' . . . in some Measure rendred fruitless . . . having [been] writ in a Language unknown to us, and at a Time when this Art was, in a Manner, in its Infancy'. The one other anatomy in existence, *The Anatomy of an Horse* (1683) by Andrew Snape, although in English, Gibson put in the same category because it contained

nothing professedly of Diseases . . . is very rarely to be met with . . . is also so large, and incumbred with so many Things foreign to the Purpose, as makes it in a great Measure unprofitable to those for whom it was principally intended.

Actually, Snape's anatomy was well written and handsomely illustrated—but with the Ruini plates.

Gibson only indirectly acknowledges his debt in presenting an unblushing abridgement of Snape's anatomy 'in as short and concise a Manner as possible', and falls short of having not only

rectified several Mistakes in Mr. Snape, but have added many Things from the modern Discoveries which are not to be met with in that Author, and which are very necessary to the Knowledge of Diseases.

The mistakes he rectifies are chiefly in re-transposition of the plates, which Snape had shamelessly pirated from Ruini, transposing them in an all too transparent attempt to conceal his source. Gibson at least returned the viscera to their proper positions. How much concern the farrier may have had for these matters is a moot question, however. It is a safe assumption that the majority of those farriers who did give some attention to anatomy prior to the end of the century were introduced to the subject by Gibson's efforts in this direction. Only one other *Anatomy of the Horse* (1766), by the artist, George Stubbs, was published before 1800. This was an expensive folio edition, limited to 150 copies, which dealt only with the skeleton and muscles. Various editions of Gibson may still be had for a pittance; both Snape and Stubbs are quite understandably scarce and expensive.

The earlier 'original' English writers on the diseases of the horse are dealt with summarily, and for the most part with justice, by Gibson, who says:

*William Gibson, Surgeon-Farrier, on Fevers*

... for altho' we have had the Reputation of improving many Arts beyond what others have done ... yet we have hardly one who has treated of the Diseases of Horses in any tolerable Way. Blundevel,<sup>4</sup> who was the first of any great Repute amongst us, is now almost quite forgot. As for Markham<sup>5</sup> and De Grey, with others of later Date, they were only Copiers from him, as himself was also a Copier and Translator from the Italians; and what these Authors have ... added as their own, is, generally speaking, most insignificant.

The eminent Frenchman, Solleysel, whom Gibson acknowledges as the most reputable writer extant, but not always as the source of much of his own writings, was rendered in English by the nobleman, Sir William Hope, in an expensive folio edition as *The Perfect Marshal* (Farrier) in 1696. This edition sold poorly, and accordingly Hope issued a cheap emasculated version in 1702, in which such emphasis was placed upon popular cures that Hope considered it necessary to add much from the muddled writings of Markham. Gibson, perhaps for selfish reasons, makes no mention of Hope, but it was this abridged translation of Solleysel which constituted Gibson's chief competition among farriers. It is to this work, therefore, that we must compare Gibson's *Guide* in looking for what improvements in current practice Gibson may have had to offer.

The fact that Gibson soon supplanted Hope is not necessarily an indication of the superiority of the *Guide*, for the spirit of nationalism was at a high mark following the wars with France. Beginning about this time, few foreign works enjoyed much circulation in Britain. Gibson quite correctly accuses Solleysel, in spite of his 'diligent Search into the Business', of being 'himself infected with many of the Errors of his Predecessors; for he is so scrupulous as to Times and Seasons, and so much ty'd up to Custom'. Solleysel, a farrier, shared with the French medical writers, with whom he had studied, their passion for multiple prescriptions of polypharmaceutical remedies. Many of these, Gibson says, 'are so costly, that in the Process of some regular Cures, they must exceed the Price of any ordinary Horse'. While Gibson includes many of Solleysel's simpler remedies in his *Guide*, his own tend to be simpler yet,

since a Medicine of the same Intention needs only be made stronger or weaker in the principal Ingredients; or if any Alteration be necessary, that ought to depend upon a Change or Complication of Symptoms.

The abridged Hope translation devotes 150 pages to diseases, Gibson 260, of which some 20 pages are devoted to a discussion of the nature of disease—a subject which Hope dispenses with in 33 lines. On fevers, the first subject taken up by Gibson, 7 pages are devoted to 'the Fevers of Horses in general', and 20 additional pages to the several types: simple, putrid, pestilential, hectick, and intermitting fevers. Hope manages the causes and signs of fevers in 8 lines, with 3 pages devoted to cures—all for 'putrid fevers'. A typical cure offered by Hope consists of immediate blood-letting, a starvation diet, cordial waters, purgative and cooling clysters, and purges:

... but if the Fever continues three days without intermission, you may supersede all Medicines, and throw the Horse upon the Dunghill; for in that time the Liver is quite consum'd by the heat.

It should not be inferred that in Gibson veterinary medicine had found a Sydenham, but by comparison with the little Hope had to offer, Gibson's discourse on fevers at least offers a brighter prospect than the dunghill of Hope. Gibson, of course, relied heavily upon his medical knowledge. In so doing he was not the first to recognize the essential similarity of certain diseases of man and animals, but he was a pioneer in translating available medical opinion and knowledge into specific advice to the farrier. Mettler<sup>6</sup> states that medical opinion at the time was such that '... the broader aspects of the category of fever were too confused to allow the development of much specific information'. Gibson can perhaps be forgiven if he transmutes theory into dogma when we realize that farriers were more interested in cures than causes, and these in terms they could understand.

As indicated above, Gibson went far beyond a mere enumeration of cures, but on the nosology of fevers, he says:

... we shall deviate as little as possible from the Method of those who have gone before us, that such as have been used to the Writings of Solleysell, Markham, or any other of that Tribe, may not be too much bewildered by the Perusal of what they shall here find new upon the Subject.

This statement is followed, however, by an intimation that he would prefer to distinguish only between a fever 'which is simple, and of one Period only, and that which is complicated and accompany'd with some other Disease'. He hints at the idea of fever as a symptom in saying that all fevers might be considered 'more or less' simple as they are accompanied by more or fewer other symptoms. In this connection, Gibson says,

A simple Fever consists only in the Increase of the Blood's Velocity . . . whereas a complicated Fever has . . . several other symptoms; and these Diseases . . . are often the Cause of those Fevers.

The overt causes of a simple fever, Gibson states, are excesses of heat or cold, or eating or exercise, or from bleeding horses in the heat of the sun. The signs of fever are well stated, as they had been by other writers, even to antiquity, but Gibson urges the necessity for the farrier to utilize symptoms as a means of determining causes, 'whereby he will be the better able to form a right Judgement'. In treatment of a simple fever, primary attention is directed towards bleeding, but only after removal to a cool place if the weather is hot. Rather than being starved, the horse should be given a moderate diet of cooling foods, with nitre in the drinking water. Instead of advising the indiscriminate use of clysters and purges, Gibson prescribes an emollient clyster 'if the Practitioner observes the sick horse to be costive', and this only after manual emptying of the lower bowel ('backraking'). A large syringe, rather than the more common horn, should be used to administer the clyster to insure its reaching the lower bowel. Purging drenches are to be avoided for fear of superpurgation. And while Gibson urges that the pores be kept open, he condemns the practice of

placing heavy clothing on the horse to provoke sweating. The mouth should be kept clean and moist with a mixture of vinegar and honey.

How much of Gibson's treatment of simple fever was derived from medical sources and how much from veterinary practice is perhaps a moot question, but in any case, he relates his discussion to the horse with perfect fidelity. Unlike certain of his fraternity who followed him in veterinary authorship, Gibson, even at this early time, was neither an arm-chair anatomist nor only a sometime surgeon. The later surgeon-farrier, William Taplin, described diseases of the non-existent gall bladder of the horse through some fifteen editions of his *Gentleman's Stable Manual* (1788). Whatever the source of Gibson's writings on fever, the otherwise hapless horse might have been grateful for smaller favours.

On the so-called 'putrid fever', Gibson simply follows the older writings. On intermittent fevers he follows the medical literature closely, although it may be doubted that he, or any of his followers, could diagnose the several types as described for the human species. His treatment of these more complicated conditions becomes tedious, and occasionally drastic, but less so than the vagaries of Solleysel. As a matter of some interest, Gibson appears to be the first English veterinary writer to mention the use of Jesuit's bark, which was introduced into human practice in the previous century. Gibson says:

I am the more ready to introduce this Medicine into the Farrier's Practice, because I knew it given with Success to a fine young Horse . . . and I am of Opinion, had the Virtues of this celebrated Drug been known in the Sieur de Solleysell's Time, he had, without doubt, given it a Place in many of his Cures, and would have found its use preferable to that of the Liver of Antimony.

In his evaluation of Gibson's work, General Smith bases his condemnation of the *Guide* of 1720 mainly upon a comparison of this work with the *New Treatise* of 1751. On fevers in 1720, Smith insists that Gibson 'wrote nonsense', and mentions only Gibson's statement that a fevered horse was 'apt to strike at anyone going near him' in support of his contention—a contention of seemingly doubtful validity, especially in the face of a recital of the classic symptoms of fever. This, of course, is a reflection of the insistence of earlier historians upon absolute values, although it might well have been the case that a number of conditions received less rational attention in General Smith's time than that which Gibson directed for simple fevers two centuries earlier. In Gibson's *New Treatise* of 1751, Smith says, 'Fevers are well done'—primarily on the basis of the assurance that is evident from the experience Gibson draws upon. But the fundamental identity of the nature and causes of fever, and the principles of treatment underwent little change during this period. Nosology is simplified to the extent that only three major classes of fever are recognized: simple, complicated, and epidemical. In the latter category are the pestilential, or malignant, fevers, with which Gibson had had a very considerable experience in the form of several devastating outbreaks of equine influenza. His description of these outbreaks forms an invaluable chapter in the history of epizootic disease.



If it were only happenstance that Gibson should have given such a rational basis for the treatment of fever in 1720, the assurances of experience evident in 1751 vindicate his earlier writing. This is all the more obvious when it is realized that in the meantime no other veterinary writer had offered anything in the way of an improved practice. The principal refinements of Gibson's practice are in his more specific directions for fever therapy. In bleeding, he specifies that three pints be taken—a modest amount in comparison with the literally staggering ten to twenty quarts claimed by later legions of lancet wielders. He is especially strong on good nursing care, which

... through negligence or laziness ... is sometimes but ill practiced ... if a Horse in a day or two begins to eat scalded bran, and to pick a little hay, there will be no great need of any thing farther than good nursing ... hot cordials, and things of a spiritous or cloying nature ... or the drenches made with Venice treacle, Mithridate, and such like things ... often prove hurtful, and sometimes fatal ... purging clysters ... often defeat the designs of nature ... and as soon as the Horse is fit to be walk'd abroad, it will be proper to lead him every day into the open air, for nothing will contribute more to recover him to his strength and appetite.

In providing a theoretical basis for the consideration of fevers as an entity in his *Guide* of 1720, Gibson had done more than any contemporary veterinary writer in directing the mind of the farrier towards the causes and consequences of pathological states. Although lacking in actual veterinary experience, he wrote with directness, and demonstrated sufficient awareness of the economy of the horse to apply his knowledge to that animal. It is especially evident that he avoided untruthful claims to experience, a common characteristic in the muddled writings of the common farriers available to this time. His confident writing in 1751 reflects the mature judgement formed from a fruitful practice of more than thirty years. As a matter of passing interest, in a list of supplies ordered from England in 1759 for his farming enterprise in Virginia, George Washington specified 'Gibson *On the Horse*' along with 40 shillings' worth of medicines.

If Gibson had made but few real advances in fever therapy, other than a simplification of his nosology and treatment, an examination of the most reputable writings of other veterinary authors between 1720 and 1750 demonstrates Gibson to be still the master of the group. While hardly a contemporary work, a significant acquisition to the veterinary art of this period was the publication of an English translation of the work of the layman veterinary writer of the fourth century, Vegetius. Originally written as the *Books of the Veterinary Art*, a Latin edition was published at Basle in 1528, with the title *Mulo-Medicina*. This edition was much corrupted by the liberties taken by copyists of the Middle Ages, and a corrected edition was published in 1574. From this latter edition the English translation was made and published in 1748 as *The Distempers of Horses*, by the unknown translator of the work of Columella *On Husbandry* (1745). An examination of the work of Vegetius shows that had those few farriers who could read Latin followed the advice of Vegetius, their practice for two centuries might have been far in advance of the level

which actually obtained. And by comparison with most contemporary writings, Vegetius in the fourth century was in advance of eighteenth-century veterinary practice.

On the subject of fevers Vegetius is as accurate and clear on their signs as any of his successors, including those of Gibson's time. On causation, he says:

. . . this Distemper proceeds from great Labour and Fatigue, if Negligence follows upon it. Sometimes . . . from too much violent Heat, or from being exposed to a vehement Cold, or from the crudity of his Food, or from a suddenly growing Cold after being in a Sweat, or from the heat of new Barley.

The 'usual and common' method of cure, as given by Vegetius, is to let blood from the head, starve for one day, giving good food sparingly afterwards, rest with occasional periods of gentle exercise, and good housing. For 'inward fevers', which he identifies as the *Maul*, obviously a species of plague which is recognized as contagious, Vegetius advises, '. . . you shall pour into him through his Nostrils for some Days human Urine . . . and the Drenches proper in that Disease'. For three other classes of fevers, those occurring in autumn, summer or winter, a great variety of decoctions, mostly of vegetable substances, is prescribed. For a 'Fever from Indigestion', backraking is advised as an additional procedure. In bleeding for a fever, Vegetius cautions that this is of benefit only 'if a due Measure be observed in Proportion to his Strength'.

The only competent veterinary writer contemporary with Gibson was Henry Bracken, a physician as well as a surgeon. Not only was this a rare combination for the times, it is still more unusual that a physician should identify himself as a veterinary writer, especially since Bracken did not abandon his human practice. There is ample evidence from Bracken's own hand that he had taken up veterinary authorship as a sideline, apparently a lucrative one, for his five veterinary works were issued in twenty-nine editions, beginning in 1735. His medical works, *The Midwife's Companion* (1737), and *Lithiasis Anglicana* (1739), evidently were less successful, one edition of each apparently being more than adequate to supply the demand. In his *Farriery Improved* (1737) Bracken urges:

. . . let not my Brethren murmur and complain at me, as if I were debasing the Profession . . . he who cannot write sensibly about the Distempers in brute Creatures, is not fitly qualified to prescribe for Man, by reason, 'tis plain he has not studied Nature thoroughly.

Like Gibson's *Guide*, Bracken's *Farriery* achieved wide circulation, this one work going through twelve editions, and six editions of a second volume were published beginning in 1743. To the subject of fevers, Bracken devotes 14 of some 600 pages on diseases. He derides Solleysel's view that a fever is a 'fermentation' of the blood, and follows Gibson in considering it to be 'an augmented Velocity of the Blood'. The only type described is the symptomatic variety, the causes of which may be violent exercise, or excessive heat or cold. Bleeding, backraking, clysters, lowered diet and the avoidance of purgatives, as urged by Gibson, are advised. That Bracken in 1737 spoke from less experience than Gibson in 1720 may be adduced from the former's statement that the cause of

jaundice 'is often from a stone in the Gall-Bladder'. Although he later corrected this error, at this time it is evident that Bracken had not heeded his own warning that 'there is no such Thing as any Person's learning Anatomy by Theory only'. Although Bracken's works remained popular long after Gibson was forgotten, it is apparent that few men, including other surgeon-farrier authors, for example, Taplin, paid much heed to this advice, or to his urging that therapy be simplified.

An examination of the British veterinary literature of the eighteenth century leads to one irrefutable conclusion: with very few exceptions, the writings of farriers demonstrate no advances, and in a number of instances they are downright retrograde products. The relatively large body of writings of medical men, and the practice of those who turned to the veterinary art, on the other hand, constitute the first major improvements in veterinary medicine in more than a century. Despite certain deficiencies, these men were instrumental in demonstrating that veterinary medicine was not incompatible with the pretensions of a scholar. In large part, it was their insistence upon humane methods, upon simplified medical treatment, and upon causes instead of merely upon cures, that laid the basis for a veterinary profession in Great Britain worthy of the name. As the first of the several medical men to take the fateful step, William Gibson is deserving of special acknowledgement. In addition, he demonstrated himself to be the unchallenged master of the group, even long after his death.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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