

William Beaumont (1785–1853)

Experiments and observations on the gastric juice, and the physiology of digestion Plattsburgh, 1833

J Dallas

Rare Books Librarian, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland

This book is one of the most important works in physiology. In 1822, William Beaumont was a United States Army surgeon stationed at a lonely outpost on the northwest frontier. He was called to treat a French-Canadian scout for an accidental shotgun wound. The blast had blown a hole in the man's side and Beaumont did not expect him to survive more than a few hours. The patient, however, recovered but his wound left him with a permanent gastric fistula. Beaumont wrote, 'When he lies on the opposite side, I can look directly into the cavity of the stomach, and almost see the process of digestion.' For over 8 years Beaumont carried out experiments and observations with his patient before publishing his findings in the above book. It revolutionised the prevailing theories of the physiology of digestion and Beaumont became famous throughout the scientific world. Sir William Osler called him 'the pioneer physiologist of the United States, and the first to make a contribution of enduring value. His work remains a model of patient, persevering research.'



This engraving represents the ordinary appearance of the left breast and side, the opening being with the valve; the subject is in an erect position.
A A A The circumference and edge of the opening, within which is seen the valve.
B The attachment of the cellular portion of the stomach to the superior part of the spleen.
C The spleen.
D The anterior portion of the breast.
E The mark where the opening was made with the scalpel, and the cartilage taken out.
F F F The position of the original wound, viewed from the exterior. D

An illustration from Beaumont's work showing the gastric fistula through which he observed the process of digestion

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