Unrecorded Vesalius first edition discovered at Queen's University

In this 500th anniversary of the birth of Vesalius, it is fitting that at least one unrecorded copy of the first edition of his *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) should be uncovered. This happened here at Queen's University while we were examining books from the St. Mary's Cathedral collection, now on permanent deposit in the W.D. Jordan Special Collections and Music Library. No finding aid existed for the collection, and the famous engraved title-page of De fabrica was not present in the book. The volume was also bound in blue paper boards, not a form one associates with 16th-century books.



How this copy of Vesalius got into the St. Mary's Cathedral Library is still a mystery. There are a few indications of provenance, however. Indeed, there is a remarkable inscription.

M. D. XLII. I am a Didor the I to be small ters I am a Opetor This is the Bagness I am a Opetor This is the Bagness I am (n'o Than his to Read remich Greetor) The poor mains of the Fisitor's fautrich Doctor The poor mains of the Fisitor's fautrich Doctor M.D. Bobals Dec." rgt 111111111111

The inscription reads:

I am a Doctor tho' I take small Fees I am a Doctor tho' with ! Degrees I am (no thanks to Academick Proctor) The poor man's & the widow's fav'rite Doctor.

This humorous poem is dated December 1794, and signed "W.D. Roberts, on Board The Favourite Nanny". The book is also signed by "William D. Roberts" at the foot of two leaves of text. We have not yet been able to identify this William D. Roberts, but The Favourite Nanny was an actual ship of the British fleet, a "tender", or cargo ship, plying the waters between Dublin and Southhampton in the 1790s and 1800s. Perhaps Roberts was the ship's doctor? We are hopeful that further research will help resolve this mystery. We have no other documentation to show how this book came to Kingston.

The volume is quite imperfect, lacking many leaves, and showing old tidal lines of damp and mold. Many leaves are damaged and/or are very fragile. Yet this is a remarkable survivor and will repay further study once it has received conservation treatment.

Alvan Bregman

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