

KAREL B. ABSOLON

INTERPRETS



THE BELLE ÉPOQUE OF SURGERY

The Life and Times

of Theodor Billroth

The Life of Billroth and his times, which Karel B. Absolon calls the "*Belle Époque of Surgery*," is a timely book published at the 100th anniversary of his death. Billroth's persona is well adapted to our times, when "*Lux et Veritas*," Billroth's "*Klarheit und Wahrheit*," "*Clarity and Truth*," is often neglected. Absolon, a scientist, practicing and academic surgeon, and historian of surgery is a writer of great clarity and eloquence, calling for morality and decency through the historical figure of Theodor Billroth. His assessment features the many-sided character and consuming absorptions of this versatile surgeon. Billroth's biographer has chosen to develop a chronological narrative, interweaving family life, schools, professional and cultural pursuits, friends, and letters of young Billroth from childhood to the very end of his life -- a sequential chronicle which portrays Billroth's progression and achievements at every stage during a busy life. The subject of the biography very clearly was a man of many moods, impatient, but resolute and persevering, fearless and outspoken in defense of his beliefs and convictions. The author has stressed particularly Billroth's friendship and association with Johannes Brahms the famed musician and composer -- all of which our biographer has deftly intertwined with the story, reflecting a firsthand acquaintance with Billroth's voluminous correspondence. Billroth was universally acknowledged as a factual and honest reporter, not explaining his failures as surgeons earlier had been wont to do. Dr. Karel Absolon hints that Billroth may have become morphine-dependent in his final years, during periods of congestive heart failure due to cardiomyopathy. The reader puts aside this engaging pursuit by Dr. Absolon of a famous surgeon with the knowledge that he has been privileged to pursue a life study of one of the truly innovative surgeons of the nineteenth century. This informative and enlightened account of an unusually talented surgeon with keen and diverse cultural interests should prove a very durable effort, and if as imperishable as its subject the name Absolon will forever be linked with that of Billroth.



Karel B. Absolon, FACS M.S. M.D. Ph.D. Dr.med. (honoris causa) was born in Czechoslovakia in 1926. He graduated from the Yale School of Medicine with an M.D. degree in 1952. He received the other degrees from the University of Minnesota, where he received his first academic appointment. Since then he was Professor of Surgery at Southwestern Medical School in Dallas, Texas and the George Washington Medical School in Washington, D.C. He is emeritus Academic Chairman and Professor of Surgery at the Illinois University Medical School in Champaign-Urbana. His main surgical accomplishments were pioneering coronary artery surgery by endarterectomy and/or bypass(1956), liver transplantation (1963), and other unique operations, for which he received the Gold Medal of Masaryk University, Czech Republic, for life-long contributions to surgery. He also received the Mendel, Palacky(Moravia) and Comenius scientific medals (Slovakia). He was visiting professor of surgery at most major U.S. medical schools, as well as European medical schools and schools in Asia. He published more that 1500 original scientific papers or reviews, and 17 books. The present book is based on his IV volume *"The Surgeon's Surgeon -- Theodor Billroth 1829-1894,"* as were the German translation *"Großmeister der Chirurgie,"* and an Italian translation. At the present time he is an author and lecturer, and member of a number of professional boards and foundations in the U.S. and abroad.

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It is surprising that a surgeon of such fame as Theodor Billroth, who with his personality dominated the last third of the nineteenth century, has not until now been evaluated in a monographic form. There are multiple reasons; the sources are voluminous, scattered, and complex.

It is for this reason that Karel B. Absolon's work deserves attention. Despite his professional obligations as both practitioner and teacher of surgery, he has devoted some ten years of painstaking labor to assemble and translate the sources and write this book.

Every page of the book emanates enthusiasm for the subject of his biography. With great intuition and an astonishing knowledge of Billroth's life milieu, the author evaluates the man and his time. The work elaborates on Billroth's surgical activity, his humanity, his artistic inclinations, his manifold involvement within the society and the historical events that made us what we are.

Dr. Absolon's work narrates a most attractive and fascinating period of European cultural history, the so-called "belle époque" of the nineteenth century. Let us hope that his book will carry on the torch of enlightenment with which Theodor Billroth, Surgeon-Humanist-Artist, illuminated the nineteenth and on into the present century.

Prof. Dr. Med. et Phil. Erna Lesky,
Direktor des Institutes für Medizin
der Universität Wien,
Währinger Strasse 25

Wien, 1978

As the grandson of Theodor Billroth, probably the only one alive who knew him, I like to tell you how well you interpreted him.

I was just a little boy when my grandfather died, my views and knowledge of him came mainly from my mother Martha and my beloved father Otto Gottlieb, who published the Billroth-Brahms correspondence. Such was his esteem for his father-in-law that he adopted his name.

Thus I became Hans Billroth-Gottlieb.

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