**BOOK REVIEW**

**Andreas Vesalius: the Making, the Madman, and the Myth**


Stephen Joffe has done an admirable job of resurrecting the late Dr Vesalius for me and bringing him back to life. Perhaps my choice of words is not ideal, as Vesalius himself was not averse to digging up the recently deceased in order to dissect the body for the benefit of knowledge, but I now understand so much more about this important Renaissance anatomist – compliments of Dr Joffe.

I already knew the basic tale of the young anatomical upstart from Brussels who was thrown out of the University of Paris for daring to say that the ancient Galenic anatomy texts were inaccurate. What Joffe has done for me is to fill in the context. Vesalius wasn’t thrown out of Paris because of his statements, but because he was a foreign national in the war between the Low Countries and France. He was hired by Padua because the city fathers of Padua wanted foreigners to add to the intellectual flowering that was happening elsewhere in the region under the influence of Venice. His first publication, the *Tabulae Sextum*, was actually intended to be a visual aid during dissection, and the great publication, the *Fabrica*, was a tour de force greater than I had imagined. I have always envisioned it as a book of illustrations, but it ran to more than 400 pages and was an anatomy text like none other before it. Interestingly, the original woodblocks for the illustrations survived until World War II, when they were destroyed during the bombing of Munich. Joffe also took me past the publication of the *Fabrica* in 1543 and continued the story of Vesalius into his latter years as a clinician. One of the things that I was unaware of was that Vesalius burned all of his anatomical notes when he left Padua in 1544. He lamented his hasty decision in his latter years, but by then it was too late to bring back all that was lost.

If you are interested in the history of anatomy, then I do recommend this work. There are better books on Vesalius, but they tend to be detailed academic histories, and what makes Joffe’s work valuable is its accessible style. I have always envisioned it as a book of illustrations, but it ran to more than 400 pages and was an anatomy text like none other before it. Interestingly, the original woodblocks for the illustrations survived until World War II, when they were destroyed during the bombing of Munich. Joffe also took me past the publication of the *Fabrica* in 1543 and continued the story of Vesalius into his latter years as a clinician. One of the things that I was unaware of was that Vesalius burned all of his anatomical notes when he left Padua in 1544. He lamented his hasty decision in his latter years, but by then it was too late to bring back all that was lost.