

10 “Careful” John Barrow (fl. 1735–1773?)

John Barrow, whose life is at best shadowy, published his *Dictionarium medicum universale: or, a new medicinal dictionary* in 1749. The ODNB offers a perfunctory account of Barrow which shows that, having begun life as a mathematics teacher, he subsequently compiled many reference and historical books working as a publisher’s hack. Taylor (1966: 169) suggests a last floruit date of 1774, and the will of a John Barrow, described as “Gentleman of Fleet Street”, who died in 1773, lodged in the National Archives (PROB 11/991/260) may identify our author. Barrow’s description of himself on the title page of his *Dictionarium medicum universale* is as a “chymist”, which does not quite square with the generally accepted account of him as a mathematics teacher and expert in navigation. It seems possible that he knew Robert James, since he may be the chemist who was on the panel deputed to determine the composition of James’s fever powder when the patent for it was challenged, and may have been a patient of James in 1747 (Anon: 61; James 1748: 14).

Barrow’s name was associated with a number of reference works, histories, and other compendia through the middle of the century. For some he appears to have been the compiler and for others an editor. These works included the *Dictionarium polygraphicum* (1735) and *Navigatio Britannica* of 1750, and *A new and universal dictionary of arts and sciences* (1751).

¹⁶⁹ His background in mathematics is often mentioned, as is the care he takes over his work. The brief introduction to the *Dictionarium polygraphicum*, probably by Barrow (Yeo 2001: 64), takes up the familiar notions of the practicality of the dictionary format and the desire to obviate the need for a much larger number of books: “We have cast this work into the form of a Dictionary, because we have judged such a disposition the most methodical of any” (Preface). Barrow also appreciates that such a text must be concise and to the point: “and as we are sensible that clearness of expression is essential ... we have always endeavoured to treat our subject with ... perspicuity” (Preface). Thus he points out that his material has been “digested into ... an easy and regular series of instructions” and that “the expence of purchasing, and the tedious fatigue of consulting a vast number of volumes on these subjects will be rendered unnecessary” (Preface).

10.1 The *Dictionarium medicum universale*

The sub-title of Barrow’s medical dictionary, “a new medicinal dictionary”, signals its close relation to the earlier dictionary by Robert James. The preface claims that James’s dictionary is the only such work to have explained the meaning of both

169 Loveland takes a somewhat more skeptical and cautious view of his career; see 2007: 172.