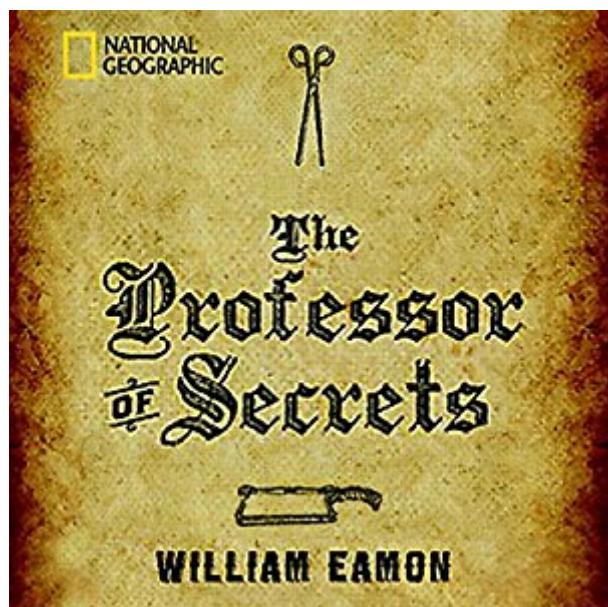


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# The Professor Of Secrets: Mystery, Medicine, And Alchemy In Renaissance Italy



## Synopsis

In the tradition of Galileo's Daughter and Brunelleschi's Dome, this exciting story illuminates the captivating world of the late Renaissance - in this case its plagues, remedies, and alchemy - through the life of Leonardo Fioravanti, a brilliant, remarkably forward-thinking, and utterly unconventional doctor. Fioravanti's marvelous cures and talent for self-aggrandizement earned him the adoration of the people, the scorn of the medical establishment, and a reputation as one of the age's most colorful, combative figures. Written by Pulitzer-prize nominated historian William Eamon, The Professor of Secrets entices readers into a dangerous scientific underworld of sorcerers and surgeons. Meticulously researched and engagingly written, this gripping narrative will appeal to those interested in Renaissance history, the development of science, and the historical thrillers so popular today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Imagine this: you are sitting in a hall together with many other people anxiously waiting for the show to start. All of you have paid an entry fee. At one end of the hall stage there is one famous doctor, and at the other end stands another doctor. Both physicians have different views about many medical issues. Then, when everything is ready, three cadavers are introduced to the audience. The bodies belong to criminals who were convicted either of murder or theft. The show is about to begin. Here another doctor shows up, and he will perform an anatomical dissection live. He asks the audience to be quiet and all the jokes and chats stop. This kind of thing actually took place in Italy during the sixteenth century, when Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius arrived in Bologna to

perform a series of anatomical demonstrations. Among those who attended one such show was Leonardo Fioravanti, 23 years old and the subject of this fascinating volume. He was disgusted by what he saw, and the whole affair reminded him of a butcher's shop. He concluded that doctors might know a lot about the various body organs, but when it comes to knowing the reasons for so many diseases, their knowledge is almost nil. The times were hard: devastating plagues were rampant, corsairs were abundant prowling the Mediterranean Sea, violence was everywhere in Italy, murders were committed en masse in Rome, and barbers bled their patients along with giving them a shave. Fioravanti believed, like many others, that it was the duty of the doctor to find a miracle cure for each disease. He asserted that all diseases stem from one of two causes: either the bad quality and indisposition of the stomach, or "the alteration and putrefaction of the blood". The solution: purgatives, emetics, and other strong drugs concocted by him and his colleagues. This mode of thinking was an alternative, counter-Galenic way to look at the afflictions which attacked the body. His many and different remedies and talent for self-aggrandizement earned him with the admiration of the people, the derision of the medical establishment and the reputation as one of his era's most colourful and combative figures. The book reconstructs the life of not only a fascinating character lost to history, but the whole concept of the alternative medical thinking during the Renaissance. Fioravanti roamed Italy and other parts of Europe seeking for the *Magna Medicina*—the Great Medicine. In short, he was looking for the philosopher's stone. Alchemy was the superstar of Europe and Fioravanti did not intend to be left out. In the eyes of the common people he was a man of miracles but in the eyes of the establishment he was just a quack, and the result was that at the end of his life he spent some time in prison because he was accused of poisoning some of his patients. Even centuries after his death, he continued to be remembered, through his many books which he wrote. His many treatises and books were compiled, abridged and translated into many languages. Some of these were still used during the 19th century. His writings were especially popular in Spain. He was also a genius of advertising and used brand names, published remedies in print rather than face-to-face, and took care to publish personal testimonies from his patients. *Precipitato*, a powerful emetic he invented, was his best-known cure for fevers and earned him most of his fame. He was among the first to advise the use of "magic bullets", that is: agents, pills, concoctions which would be targeted at the agent causing the disease. Was he indeed a charlatan? It depends, according to Professor Eamon, on who is being asked. After all, Fioravanti held a medical degree from the University of Bologna, which was one of Italy's most respected medical colleges. The establishment was full of envy and considered him as a fraud. By our contemporaray standarts, he probably was not. His untrammelled curiosity and naive sense of

wonder about the marvelous properties of things put him at odds with the medieval tradition. For the Renaissance people, experiments were more important than theories. The book is extremely well-researched and documented, and contains many examples and intrigues from the daily lives of the Italians and Fioravanti in the sixteenth century. The historical context is splendidly rendered to the reader and the book reads like a first-rate thriller. This is popular history at its best!

Very interesting read, sheds light on Italian culture and politics during the same period as Henry VIII and Elizabeth I in England. The main theme of the book is to follow the path of the physician and surgeon, Leonardo Fioravanti who continued to learn many differing approaches to scientific knowledge and progress in the efficacy of medical practices of the period. He was accomplished in many fields while at the same time was an unabashed showman and self-promoter. Reads almost like a novel, very entertaining.

This was a really fun read. Dr. Leonardo Fioravanti was a man of many talents. As I read through this book, I kept thinking that he was the Dr. Oz of Renaissance Europe. You don't have to be interested in history of medicine to enjoy it.

Nicely detailed historical account of the Renaissance period in Italy pertaining to early medicine and healing.

excellent book....

The book came in excellent condition exactly as advertised. It was a fascinating true story of an early doctor. After I read it I gave it to one of my doctors and he loved it as well.

I was expecting a much more cohesive view of Medieval practices along this line and was really not impressed here. The focus is on one person who made the rounds in Europe and was an impressive (for that time) "doctor", but there seems to be a lot of glorification for this fellow that his deeds did not really deserve. Contrast this with Enguerrand VII, Lord of Coucy, the subject of Barbara Tuchman's excellent book (I've read it 3 times). Coucy too was there it seems at a pivotal period of time in Europe during the Middle Ages. He was involved in all the important battles and diplomatic schemes and his legacy spoke for itself. The "Professor of Science" is no Coucy, to quote Benson on Quayle. In short, the book is just not as wide-ranging a dive and flight into/over the

expanse of those times. Perhaps I was looking for too much here.

I sat in a graduate seminar for three interminable hours with professor Eamons and 15 other history students to discuss this book. While some anecdotal information contained within was interesting or humorous, I failed to understand how Bill could have spent so much time and energy developing this microhistory, until I learned how many unsold volumes he is in possession of. Now I am wondering about National Geographic's interest. Of the 1000 History titles I read over the past six years, this was one of the first to be traded at the local used book store for something of interest.

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