

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Liddel, Duncan (1561–1613), *astronomer and teacher of medicine*

by Charles Platts, *rev.* George Molland

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Liddel, Duncan (1561–1613), astronomer and teacher of medicine, was born in Aberdeen, and received his early education there, perhaps including a spell at King's College then its sole university. In 1579 he travelled to Germany and enrolled in the University of Frankfurt an der Oder, where he came under the tutelage of a fellow Scot, John Craig, and studied mathematics, philosophy, and a little medicine with him. In 1582 Craig returned to Scotland and became physician to James VI, and Liddel moved for a while to Breslau, where he made the acquaintance of the famous humanist Andreas Dudith and the noted astronomer and mathematician Paul Wittich (1555?–1587). After another spell at Frankfurt he went on to Rostock, and acquired there the degree of master of philosophy. He also formed firm friendships with Henrich Brucaeus (professor of medicine), Johannes Caselius (professor of rhetoric), and Cornelius Martini (a young protégé of Caselius). In 1590 Caselius moved to the University of Helmstedt, established fairly recently by the duke of Brunswick, as professor of Greek and practical philosophy; after a further brief stay in Frankfurt, Liddel, in company with Martini and some noble Livonian pupils, followed him there. Quite soon both Liddel and Martini gained chairs—the former in mathematics and the latter in logic.

During his time at Rostock, Liddel had made the acquaintance of the great Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, and at least twice visited him at his observatory on the island of Hven. Later the friendship thus established turned to enmity when Brahe came strongly to suspect Liddel of plagiarizing his astronomical system, in which the sun rotated annually around the earth but the moon and the other planets circuted the sun. Caselius reported that, so far as he knew, Liddel was the first in Germany to teach astronomy according not only to the theories of Ptolemy and Copernicus, but also to Brahe's outline. Liddel always claimed that he gave Brahe full credit for his system, but he clearly added his own mathematical details, which was probably the source of the confusion.

In Helmstedt, Liddel continued his study of medicine, a more lucrative occupation than mathematics, and in 1596 received the degree of doctor of medicine. Although he did not formally become a medical professor until 1600, he was teaching the subject and presiding over disputations in it from at least 1597. Theses for the disputations, which may be taken to be the work of Liddel himself, were printed, and were later to form the basis of his two principal medical works, the *Ars medica* of 1607 and the *De febribus* of 1610. Another medical work, the *Ars conservandi sanitatem* (1651), was completed after Liddel's death by Patrick Dun, a former pupil who became principal of Marischal College, Aberdeen. These works were highly regarded but do not appear markedly original, although the first two give quite a sympathetic hearing to the novel opinions of Paracelsus.

In 1598 a major dispute blew up at Helmstedt, with an anti-philosophical diatribe by the conservative theologian Daniel Hoffmann, aimed particularly at Caselius and his associates. Together with Cornelius Martini, Liddel was firmly in the Caselian camp, and in 1601 he found it expedient to produce a printed open letter to the duke of Brunswick, defending himself against the charge of having calumniated Luther. In general Liddel steered clear of theological controversy, and, especially since he held high administrative offices in the university, it seems safe to assume that he at least outwardly conformed to the usually tolerant Lutheran environment at Helmstedt.

In 1607 Liddel returned to Scotland but little more is known of his activities, except for the generous benefactions that he arranged for the newly founded Marischal College. He endowed six bursaries and a chair of mathematics, and also bequeathed to it his books and mathematical instruments. Many of the books are still preserved in the library of the combined University of Aberdeen. He died in Aberdeen on 17 December 1613 and was buried there.

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Likenesses memorial brass, St Nicholas Church, Aberdeen

Wealth at death considerable benefactions: Anderson and Johnstone, eds., *Fasti academiae Mariscallanae Aberdonensis*

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Charles Platts, 'Liddel, Duncan (1561–1613)', *rev.* George Molland, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/view/article/16639>, accessed 7 Jan 2011]

Duncan Liddel (1561–1613): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/16639