

NEDWILL

New Zealand's Outstanding Public Health Pioneer

A Biography by Geoffrey W. Rice.

Paperback 368 pages ISBN 978-0-473-62932-8

COURTNEY NEDWILL was once Christchurch's most admired and most reviled doctor. He was admired as a caring GP and a careful surgeon, but mainly for his work as Medical Officer of Health, 1879-1885, getting rid of cess-pits and other 'nuisances' while the sewers were being built. He saved many lives by helping to halve the city's typhoid death rate. His detailed reports are a mine of information and establish him as New Zealand's outstanding public health pioneer of the nineteenth century.

But he was also notorious for his disagreements with other doctors. A fearless man of high integrity, he often called out incompetence by others, and one such quarrel over the death of a patient led to the 1886 Medical Libel Case, in which his enemies blackened his name until it was shown in court that he had been right all along. His other complaints resulted in no fewer than three official inquiries at Christchurch Hospital.

Nedwill led a full and active life, leaving a rich trail of evidence in the daily newspapers, here revealed for the first time. His medical career is particularly interesting as it straddles the transition between the traditional era of blood-letting and miasmas to the modern era of bacteria and aseptic surgery. Some of his operations were reported in detail in *The Lancet*, which also praised his reports as medical officer for Christchurch.

Nedwill was a co-founder and president of the Canterbury Medical Society, which later became the New Zealand Medical Association and the New Zealand branch of the British Medical Association.

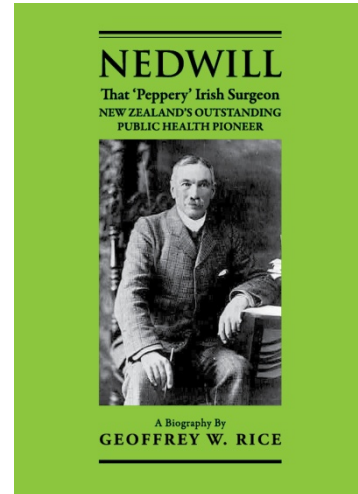
He also played tennis with Frederick Wilding, father of the Wimbledon champion Anthony Wilding, and was a long-serving president of the Canterbury Lawn Tennis Club and the Canterbury Tennis Association.

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DR GEOFFREY RICE was Professor and Head of History at the University of Canterbury until his retirement in 2012. He is now Professor Emeritus and secretary of the Canterbury History Foundation. Known internationally for his research on the 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand, he has written or edited twenty books, along with numerous short essays and academic articles. He was appointed ONZM in 2021 for services to historical research and tertiary education.

NEDWILL is published by HAWTHORNE PRESS with
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or direct from the author (free postage)

RRP NZ\$30

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