

## Book Reviews

come to have an almost mechanical view of the world based on physics and chemistry, and later on biology. The period 1870–1910 was the Society's hey-day: it embraced these changes wholeheartedly, set up new sections, took on new members, grew to be a national institution, shared in the economic revival of the Netherlands and of Amsterdam in particular, and was a true reflection of science at large in the Netherlands, which produced a good handful of Nobel prizewinners and could hold its head up internationally, even if not at the very top levels. In the twentieth century, however, the expansion and fragmentation of science proceeded too rapidly for the Society to maintain any claims to stewardship. Through a series of reorganizations, by the 1950s the Society had become a merely titular umbrella-organization linking a federalized set of independent disciplines. The unity of science was lost, and the Society reflected that too.

All this is accompanied by some incidental illustrations, an index, and full set of references. This attempt to make a straightforward commemorative publication rather more universal in scope is commendable, and generally succeeds in its aims without too much stretching of the material, or of the image of "reflection".

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MARGARET PELLING and RICHARD M. SMITH (eds), *Life, death, and the elderly: historical perspectives*, Studies in the Social History of Medicine, London and New York, Routledge, 1991, pp. xvi, 252, £45.00 (0-415-05742-6).

The introduction to these essays provides an invaluable critical survey of historical writing on definitions of old age since ancient times, on the health of the elderly and its treatment, on their family and household relationships, the limited role of institutions, work and retirement. Smith analyses the retirement contracts whereby some ageing property-holders in late medieval England attempted to ensure security for their final years. Pelling uses a unique census of the poor in sixteenth-century Norwich for some original observations of the expedients whereby older people survived, emphasizing the greater importance of work, for as long as it was physically possible, and of re-marriage to a younger and/or fitter spouse than of poor relief or of extensive support from equally impoverished families, even where they existed. Wright explores similar themes for the majority female town of Ludlow in the eighteenth century.

Von Kondratowitz interestingly surveys the conceptualization of old age in German medical dictionaries and encyclopaedias from the late eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, though he seems sometimes insufficiently aware of the very long history of some of the ideas he discusses. Charles Webster contributes an essentially gloomy assessment of the fate of the elderly in the first decade of the National Health Service.

David Thompson emphasizes the very long history in Britain of public responsibility for the elderly (through the Poor Law and more recent forms of welfare services) and the equally long absence of an expectation that the family should be central to their care. This is marred by a tiresome tone of embittered polemic. His assault on the supposed unrepentant "Whiggishness" of "welfare historians" is far removed from what serious historians have been writing for quite some time, as his lack of reference to actual examples suggests. His statement that "The accepted view of the Victorian Poor Law is that in all times and in all places it was harsh and miserly, vindictive and authoritarian" is bizarre, as a glance at the most widely used textbooks will indicate (e.g. M. E. Rose, *The relief of poverty 1834-1914*, 1972, 2nd edn, 1986 and M. A. Crowther, *The workhouse system, 1834-1929*, 1981). In his determination to destroy a supposed consensus (which exists on a popular but not on a scholarly level) that in "the past" families really cared for their old folk, Thompson is less measured than his editors, who comment that, "It would be prudent for historians to regard community-funded and family-provided support as complementary rather than as alternative modes of assistance".

Mead Cain concludes with an interesting study of what happens when the family is, indeed, the only expected source of support for the elderly (not much good for the poor especially if childless) based on small rural samples in present day India and Bangladesh.

This is a valuable volume above all for warning us against seeing neat patterns or simple trajectories in the past.

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