

Book Reviews

In some instances, the appearance of unity may be illusory. For example, little is said of the relationship between the Royal College and the College of Family Physicians of Canada. The latter group also certifies the attainment of higher educational standards by a large group of Canadian physicians, and the CFPC, unlike the Royal College, insists upon periodic re-examination. The fact that this is done by a separate group suggests a flaw in unity. One suspects that this and a small number of similar subjects received less attention than they might because this history of the Royal College was commissioned by the College. Certainly, the book has an aura of uninterrupted accomplishment that makes the College seem almost too good to be true; every officer and every member, or almost everyone, seems to strive towards the sensible, rational, unified goal. We know that human nature isn't like that, but institutional history is. No one would expect an official historian to fill his book with scandal and disruption, even if they existed, and in the case of the College I suspect they do not.

A cliché of historical writing is the near impossibility of making institutional tomes interesting. Shephard comes commendably close, far closer than most writers of similar works, though ultimately even he founders on the necessary profusion of names, dates, committees, and so on. Nevertheless, the section on reorganizing the College to eliminate the two-tier system of membership is handled with great skill and manages to present a complex subject with clarity and insight. Similarly, the dispute about the ultimate direction of the McLaughlin Examination and Research Centre becomes genuinely exciting and one senses the emotions that such decisions can generate (although at the end one is left wondering about the fate of the dissidents).

The fundamental problem with institutional history is that institutions are innately self-protective. The emotions of the individuals who compose institutions, their foibles and idiosyncrasies, rarely creep into the records upon which a historian relies. Yet it is these very peculiarities that could give life to the account. This is exemplified nicely in Shephard's book when, in narrating the origins of the McLaughlin Centre, the author quotes a delightful account of an officer of the College presenting the concept of the Centre to Col. McLaughlin and an adviser, both extremely deaf. A veritable shouting match finally conveys the message, after which, with no hesitation or discussion, a quarter of a million dollars is pledged to the task! No researcher, in any discipline, can fail to respond to such an anecdote. Unhappily, the historian cannot invent these whenever he senses a need to invigorate a chapter. We must await, hopeful but not expectant.

Shephard's book documents an important span in the life of an important institution in Canada. The usefulness of the book may lie particularly effectively in some future role as part of a comparative study of similar bodies in various parts of the world. It is well-written and readable, displaying not only the life of the College but also the varied interests of the author: medical history, medical editing, medical education, and speciality practice.

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WOLFGANG GENSHOREK, *Wegbereiter der Chirurgie, Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach—Theodor Billroth*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1983, 8vo, pp. 252, M.19.80.

This volume is part of the series 'Humanisten der Tat'—a series of short biographies of people who, according to the editor, could be claimed to have lived according to high humanitarian principles, professionally or otherwise. Whether or not this is a valid claim, the biographies of the two surgeons Dieffenbach (1792–1847) and Billroth (1829–94) could be interesting for various reasons. Their lives cover together a century in which surgery developed as a profession, readjusted its position within the medical spectrum, and branched out into its different specialities. Second, their medical education and career patterns could serve as examples of the twining and changing roads medical men followed at the time. And their practical or scientific activities could be set against the background of contemporary medical and surgical debates, in which both these men held prominent positions. In this volume we get a little of everything—a not unusual difficulty with publications intended for "a large interested public". The unproblematic approach of the author, however, does not prevent the material itself from

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raising all kinds of interesting questions. How did surgeons fight to establish their position, especially since the “German” context is rather different from the English? How did the relations between the various German states affect the pattern of moving around of medical men? Could we, through the biographies of these two men, learn something more about the differences between Berlin and Viennese practice? How did these German surgeons place themselves in the international discussions on problems like hospital fevers, epidemics, etc.?

Billroth, especially, was a prolific writer and has left us an enormous correspondence, part of which was published in German in 1895, but much of which is still widely scattered. Both the biography by Absolon in English in 1979, and the present author make ample use of these letters. Much of the biographical work on Dieffenbach, which Genshorek quotes from, dates back to before World War II. It seems to me that biography as a genre is far from having reached its limits, and if this volume makes anything clear, it is that a lot of work can still be done.

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THOMAS J. DEELEY, *Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen—his life and the new kind of rays*, Cardiff, Tenovus Cancer Information Centre (11 Whitchurch Road, Cardiff CF4 3JN), 8vo, pp. 79, illus., £2.50 (including postage).

Röntgen’s discovery of X-rays in late 1895 has had a profound effect on the history of medicine. Within a few weeks of the discovery, X-rays had been applied to diagnosis and, shortly after, to therapeutics. Today, it is virtually impossible to imagine medicine without X-rays. Such an impact has stimulated interest in the discoverer of X-rays, and a small industry in Röntgen biographies has emerged. The Wellcome Institute Subject Catalogue of the History of Medicine lists seventy-six articles and books on Röntgen, and this is not complete. Deeley, however, notes (correctly) that the majority of the *major* works are out of print. He hopes to remedy this, and to perpetuate the memory of Röntgen. Given the numerous articles on Röntgen that have appeared in recent years, he is not alone in these objectives.

The problem with Deeley’s pamphlet is that it is academically too lightweight to compete with the older biographies of Röntgen. Indeed, it offers but the barest outline of Röntgen’s life, and an inadequate history of X-rays. The section on radiation hazards is only eight lines long! Neither does Deeley hit the popular market. The text is often dull and laboured, and at times is little more than a child’s guide to X-rays.

Over half the pamphlet comprises ten appendices, including English translations of Röntgen’s discovery accounts, and contemporary reactions to them. The other appendices cover the *British Journal of Radiology*, Röntgen on postage stamps, and Röntgen, an eponym. Inexplicably, about half of the last appendix comprises a preface explaining how the English language has been enlarged, and exemplifying eponyms!

The discovery and subsequent use of X-rays certainly can accommodate another book. Unfortunately, Deeley’s account is not it.

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JAMES D. HARDY, *The world of surgery 1945–1985. Memoirs of one participant*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, 8vo, pp. xi, 385, illus., £29.95.

These detailed memoirs are drawn from James Hardy’s recollections, notebook, files of letters, and a war diary, and are written in this manner rather than a formal medical history so that the reader may appreciate the special perception of the author at the time, as thus recorded. He recalls his early years in Alabama; his medical career at the University of Pennsylvania, and later in the University of Tennessee Medical College. His service in World War II caused him to transfer from medicine to surgery.

Isidor Ravdin, an outstanding surgeon, greatly influenced Hardy in his outlook by stating that “in the surgery of the future the individualist will be left by the roadside; for after all surgery