

## *Book Reviews*

**Robert G.W. Anderson and Jean Jones** (eds), *The Correspondence of Joseph Black*, 2 vols (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp.1582, £270.00, hardback, ISBN: 9780754601319.

One of the faults of the discarded developmentalist-evolutionist history of medicine was that its historical object – medical progress – had eighteenth and nineteenth century chemistry bolted onto its side as a sort of auxiliary motor that helped propel medicine into modernity. Chemistry, in this view, was one of the driving forces that made medicine scientific. It sat alongside anatomy, animal experiment and post-mortem pathology as one of the promising sciences of the Enlightenment. In this reading Joseph Black was an essential cog in that motor because he isolated ‘fixed air’ from magnesia alba and taught chemistry at the Edinburgh medical school in its golden years. But starting from there misses the point. For many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century doctors and natural philosophers – such as Joseph Priestley – medicine was now modern and chemistry was its premier science in all sorts of ways: as pedagogical foundation (witness Black’s lectures), as a practical tool of medical intervention both individually and communally (see, for instance, the alkali treatments of bladder stone or scurvy prophylaxis on James Cook’s voyages) and as the research tool that every day delivered wondrous insights into the workings of the body (as for instance in Galvanism, for chemistry embraced the study of heat, light and electricity). It was the molecular biology of the Enlightenment.

For these reasons alone an edition of the letters of a man who, at the time, was already one of the subject’s heroic figures is to be applauded. If these reasons were not enough justification, Black’s involvement in the world of industrial innovation (his association with James Watt), his participation in Scottish economic improvement projects, his clubbable friendships with the famous intellects of Edinburgh (notably William Cullen, James Hutton and David Hume), his family connections with Irish protestant merchants and his own practice as a physician all make these two volumes doubly welcome.

Little of Black’s correspondence has previously been published and, according to the editors, relatively few of his letters and those to him survive – clearly obvious from the fact there are no letters at all from some years, for example 1762 and 1765. The editors state: ‘In this edition there are 355 letters which were written by Black and 408 which were sent to him’ (p. 65). The volumes also contain a further 101 items such as drafts, notes, reports, accounts and so on. The collection contains letters to nearly all the usual illustrious eighteenth-century suspects but with one or two striking omissions. The most obvious is Priestley but Henry Cavendish and Joseph Banks (a prolific correspondent otherwise) are also absent. Overall the letters reinforce the image of Black that has come down to us: reticent but active behind the scenes, a conservative who was an innovator and instrument of social and scientific change.

Scanning the index quickly reveals the breadth and variety of Black’s world. The range of people might be expected, so too the references to chemical substances, but flying machines, fossil nuts and Russian pension hint at the richness and diversity the reader will discover here. Medically speaking Black’s letters are full of expert commentary on chemical matters but also contain much evidence that he remained in practice throughout his life and in addition had concerns about his own health. Thus, for example, besides

reports by Black of his analysis of medicinal substances, there are also his comments on cases such as that of ‘an irregular tumor under the left false ribs’ (p. 1235). Black was something of a hypochondriac in the modern sense of the word and his worries about his health and diet are a rich resource for the historian of eighteenth-century bodily self-perceptions.

This is a magnificent edition, crammed with erudite footnotes and background essays. It is strange and irritating that, with fourteen appendices, there is no alphabetical list of correspondents and, more annoying, there is only one index combining persons and subjects. These volumes have been a very long time in the making (their conception long antedating digital publishing of scholarly editions) and are perhaps now dinosaurs in an electronic era. It is to be hoped that the data in them is stored in a form which will one day enable it to be easily translated to online format where material can be corrected and updated. Until then Stone Age readers will enjoy having this work on their bookshelves.

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**Paul Kopperman** (ed.), *‘Regimental Practice’ by John Buchanan, M.D. An Eighteenth-Century Medical Diary and Manual* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2012), pp. 246, £54.00, hardback, ISBN: 9780754668770.

In 1746 Dr John Buchanan, recently retired as a medical officer in the British Army, produced a manuscript entitled, ‘Regimental Practice, or a Short History of Diseases common to His Majesties own Royal Regiment of Horse Guards when abroad (Commonly called the Blews)’. Revised in several stages almost until the time of Buchanan’s death in 1767, this work was for the most part based on the author’s observations while surgeon to a cavalry regiment serving in Flanders 1742–5, during the War of the Austrian Succession. It was never published, but now, thanks to the labours of Paul Kopperman, we have two annotated modern editions of a text that reveal much about the everyday practice of medicine in the eighteenth century. The first edition is the one under review as published by Ashgate Press while the second edition is a much longer electronic version of the book with appendices available only from the author himself. Such practices may become common, as Kopperman notes, in providing a book for a press’s audience and another for readers who require extensively annotated primary sources. Cost is of course the major factor here.

Kopperman’s introduction is divided into three sections which provide a biography of Buchanan, a discussion of his medical education and, finally, an analysis of the medical practice found in the manuscript. As he notes, Buchanan’s work is rare in focusing on a single regiment and the author cites only one other example as being published in the eighteenth century. Kopperman states that there are crucial differences between that work (by Thomas Dickson Reide in 1793) and Buchanan’s: Reide’s is coloured by a forceful argument for a particular type of therapeutic approach while Buchanan’s practice of medicine generally represented the mainstream of professional practice in his theories and practices of diseases. This is the overriding thesis of Kopperman’s annotations, to demonstrate that methods used to treat diseases, wounds and injuries were essentially agreed upon in the eighteenth century. In doing this he is questioning the idea of there