

## Book Reviews

fellow who wears the shoe always knows”.

We learn little about Whitman’s specific illnesses during this time, but we can presume there was little therapy other than general advice, recognizing Whitman’s attitude and Osler’s famous therapeutic nihilism. We are indebted to Professor Leon for bringing to us the previously unpublished draft graduation talk which Osler was preparing about his relationship with Whitman, written just before Osler died. He also brings to us previously unpublished marginal notes in his presentation copy of Whitman’s *Leaves of grass*, and Osler’s correspondence with an unusual group of English gay radical socialists who called themselves the Bolton College, and who regarded Whitman as their spiritual leader.

Although the Whitman–Osler relationship has been known to Oslerians, this is the first extensive documentation of the five years they knew each other. The new information is helpful and interesting, particularly as it gives us a different view of the famous bedside manner of Osler, viewed from wise, ageing eyes that saw him as brilliant but annoyingly cheerful, over-confident and perhaps somewhat brash. All of this would have been adequate for a journal article had not Professor Leon expanded his canvas to a patchwork of all those people who in some way related to them both. The result includes Richard M Bucke; the Philadelphia neurologist S Weir Mitchell and his son; Edith Wharton; artists Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent; literati Edmund Gosse, the Brownings, Swinburne, and the Rossettis; and the interesting group of Bolton College.

There were some unsatisfying things about the book, but historians are limited by the amount of material available and Professor Leon has searched widely for information on the relationship. The format he uses is sometimes repetitive and he writes as though he is uncertain of his audience. He begins as if he is writing for those who know neither Whitman nor Osler, but the portrait of each is faint and inadequate. Oslerians will be more satisfied by the picture of Whitman, who really seems to interest Leon, than Whitman admirers

will be by what they learn of Osler. I think it unlikely that anyone would read the book and not wish to know more about a third character lurking in the background, the psychiatrist, mystic and “Whitmaniac” Richard Bucke. Those so inclined will find it in S E D Shortt’s *Victorian lunacy: Richard M Bucke and the practice of late nineteenth-century psychiatry* (New York, 1986), or in the more recent biography by Peter A Rechnittzer, *R M Bucke: journey to cosmic consciousness*, (Toronto, 1994).

Over the years, Osler grew in his admiration of Whitman but he never quite understood his poetry. At his first reading of *Leaves of grass*, Osler understood little of the poems. Later he commented on their greatness, but did so by constantly quoting what Bucke thought of Whitman’s poetry and his place among the great prophets. Therein probably rests the difficulty between the doctor and patient. Osler brought his medical skills and brilliance to the bedside, but Whitman wanted someone like Bucke, who had a sensitivity and an understanding about him as a person and what he was. Osler is often quoted as saying one should try to understand the patient who has the disease rather than the disease the patient has. In this instance one has the feeling that Osler struggled but did not fully understand the person, at least as Whitman wished to be understood.

Despite the patchwork approach, this book adds important information to the scholarship of two important personages of the Victorian era.

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**David Innes Williams**, *The London Lock: a charitable hospital for venereal disease 1746–1952*, London and New York, Royal Society of Medicine Press, 1995, pp. x, 166, illus., £16.00, \$32.00 (1-85315-263-3).

Historians of institutions face the challenge of telling a detailed chronological story of specific people and places, whilst avoiding charges of triumphalism, lack of

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contextualization or—perhaps worst of all—dullness. Williams in many respects meets this challenge. He has written the first comprehensive history of the London Lock Hospital in an accessible style, and with a clear awareness of its changing social and medical environment. The hospital's ever-precarious status as a charitable enterprise lies at the heart of his account; and the importance of the Church, aristocratic benefactors, and government intervention in dictating the Lock's fortunes is perhaps its most interesting theme. Besides this central story, a succession of further episodes emerge: the use of the hospital as a base for the Clapham Sect of evangelical preachers; the apparently hypocritical antagonism of Lock surgeons to rival specialist hospitals; the benefits reaped from the Contagious Diseases Acts; and the impact of changes in social and political responses to venereal disease following the 1916 Royal Commission report.

Williams portrays the hospital's ultimate failure to survive as the defeat of a tradition of strong leaders by encroaching impersonal factors such as government policy and advances in science and education. Certainly the first part of his history is filled with a succession of vivid characters—from ambitious surgeons to charismatic preachers—whose activities dominate the story of the Lock. Here the patients themselves remain shadowy figures, much as the chaplains and physicians involved in the hospital keep their Objects of charity—often comically—at arms' length. Perhaps this one-sidedness simply reflects the fact that the foundation itself was perceived as more important than the patients within; Williams notes that clinical sources are scanty compared with administrative sources.

Nevertheless, it would have been satisfying if more could have been extracted from the records about the patients themselves, and perhaps about the popular view of the service the Lock was providing. As the history moves into the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a tendency to scientific triumphalism emerges: charismatic leaders are not replaced by visionary clinicians or scientists, and the author sometimes appears impatient with failures to advance research or methods of treatment. His conclusion, however, seems fair: that the hospital's very scientific conservatism and traditionalism—which had contributed to its success in earlier years—partly led to its ultimate failure to survive.

In this history the author provides primarily a chronological account of a hospital in its social and scientific setting, and is less concerned with developing historical analysis. Whilst he offers both clear social context and a wealth of detail about the hospital's activities, he often fails to draw out in detail how the latter reflects or illustrates the former. For example, we are told briefly of changes in social attitudes towards charity and venereal disease, but find no coherent discussion of the changing motivations of the Lock's benefactors throughout its history, nor how the governors attempted to appeal to these motivations. A more extensive analysis of the issues he hints at, however, is perhaps beyond the remit of the book; it is after all relatively short, and covers a time-span of two hundred years. Williams has provided a traditional account of the hospital which none the less makes vivid reading and contributes to our understanding of many aspects of London's medical history.

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