

Book Review

The Case Books of Dr John Snow. R. H. ELLIS, ed. London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1994. *Med. History*, suppl. 14: lvii + 633. ISBN 0 85484 061 3.

Readers of this substantial tome expecting to obtain a graphic account of Snow's pioneering observations in epidemiology will be disappointed; this text is almost entirely devoted to a transcription of his anaesthetic notes (Case Books) – from 1848 to 1858 – which are presently housed at the Royal College of Physicians of London; his notes on general medical practice also gain coverage.

John Snow (1813–58) hailed from humble origins in York and was apprenticed to a surgeon/apothecary in Newcastle; he studied at the Hunterian School of Medicine at Windmill Street, London, and qualified as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries in 1838. Later he obtained the University of London's MD and became a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians of London. Starting with ether inhalation(s), he rapidly switched to chloroform – a compound not without significant cardio- and hepato-toxic properties. His anaesthetic practice included the great and good of the land – including Queen Victoria at the birth of Prince Leopold (7 April 1853), and again at her ninth confinement of 14 April 1857. He later turned to amylene. But it was the dentists who first utilized this major advance in health care, and this becomes abundantly clear.

The individual case-notes vary from a few words to a page or more; many comprise a good deal of surgical detail; the book therefore contains much information on surgical procedures of the mid-nineteenth century. The editor has contributed an excellent introduction which sets Snow's achievements in context – including the Broad Street pump work – for which he is probably better remembered. The indexes are exceedingly detailed and include full lists of dentists, surgeons, and 'other medical men', patients 'and others', medical conditions, and places.

This then is a labour of love which will be of especial interest and value to students, especially those researching the history of anaesthesiology! But it is not a book to be read from page 1 to the end, and I doubt whether anyone will wish to digest it all!

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