

## Book Reviews

This tribute of friendship is both appropriate and well deserved.

**Vivian Nutton,**  
The Wellcome Trust Centre for the  
History of Medicine at UCL

**Gerald D Hart, *Asclepius, the god of medicine***, London, Royal Society of Medicine Press, 2000, pp. xx, 262, illus., £17.50 (paperback 1-85315-409-1). Orders to: Hoddle, Doyle Meadows Ltd., Station Road, Linton, Cambs CB1 6UX, UK.

Hart's book is a work of enthusiasm by an "amateur" historian of ancient medicine—but a far from amateur doctor. An impressive array of credentials in medicine are augmented by his publication of works on haematology, oncology, palaeopathology, numismatics and the history of medicine. As such, he, like all historians of medicine, brings a particular angle to the diverse material he has collected in this book, which I can easily recommend as a starter to those unacquainted with ancient medicine, with one caution. Hart's work does not necessarily belong in the main stream of historical studies that (rightly, on the whole) problematize the specific nature of ancient evidence, and treat it in its cultural context: but I am not sure that it is supposed to.

The book contains a useful, and wide, range of evidence from the ancient world dealing with Asclepius, including coins, the myths and various depictions of the god. An overview of Asclepius and medical treatment through the (ancient) ages is pursued, from the first mythical signs of the god, through antiquity, and into the Christian period: it culminates in a discussion of "Asclepius and medical practice today". This includes a brief history of the somewhat over-emphasized Hippocratic Oath, whose position in antiquity is rightly said to be obscure and quite possibly extremely marginal.

Hart's reasons for writing the book become clear in this final chapter: the ethics of medicine

is discussed in a historical context, with reference to the Pythagoreans, modern abortion and suggestions for "updating the Hippocratic Oath and new guidelines for medical practice", where we discover, amongst other things, that "an experienced physician of today using the methods of the Hippocratic school is able to diagnose 88 per cent of cardiac, pulmonary, gastrointestinal and certain other diseases" (p. 230). Further, Hart cites various studies that seem to indicate success in "religious" and other "alternative" treatments: as he dryly notes, these "will no doubt generate a great deal of discussion".

Hart closes by arguing that there is a direct continuity between the medicine of the modern and the ancient worlds—including the Asclepian—and that the sense of historical continuity with Asclepius should, and will, continue to thrive. Of course it is possible to see instead the *lack* of continuity, the particular problems that no longer apply, the particular culture-laden treatments of ancient medicine, and these are rightly handled in most historical studies of ancient medicine and Asclepius. But I am not sure that this was ever Hart's intention.

Hart seeks to emphasize the similarities rather than the differences but goes beyond that, to use the ancient material as a basis for discussion of what he perceives to be current concerns within modern medicine. *Asclepius, the god of medicine* is a doctor's, not a classicist's, history of Asclepius. And this "hands-on" approach is revealing in many ways: it not only restores those concerns—students of ancient medicine are perhaps too used to dealing with a rather far-away world where nothing can now be done for the long-lost patient—even though it does so with some anachronism; it also belongs in a tradition that persistently reinvented itself for the present in the mirror of the past. Pliny the Elder would have approved.

**Jason Davies,**  
The Wellcome Trust Centre for the  
History of Medicine at UCL