

Book Reviews

SHIRLEY ROBERTS, *Sophia Jex-Blake: a woman pioneer in nineteenth-century medical reform*, Wellcome Institute Series in the History of Medicine, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, pp. x, 207, illus., £40.00 (0-415-08753-8).

Sophia Jex-Blake's battle for women to train as doctors at Edinburgh University has been told in various books about women's struggle for medical education and formed the subject of a television series some years ago. But there was more to her life than that particular battle, and as there is no contemporary biography of her this book fills a gap.

No new sources have emerged since Sophia's close friend, Margaret Todd, wrote a biography in 1918 which has formed the basis of everything that has been written about her since. Our understanding of the world Sophia inhabited has deepened, however, and it would have added substance to the story to have drawn on this. Ms Roberts has made little effort to do so. Some attempt to grapple with the crucial ideology of "separate spheres" of male and female lives would have been particularly helpful.

A snare that awaits any historian working on original source material is of uncritically thinking in the style and content of the time. When providing background on a contemporary of Sophia's, Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson, Ms Roberts writes (and she is not quoting anyone else), "During the six months that she spent in a busy surgical ward she was exposed to every situation that could frighten or offend a lady of delicate sensibility." Oh dear. When it comes to Sophia herself we may be thankful that Ms Roberts does not attempt any glib psychoanalysis of her difficult and self-destructive subject, but she goes to the other extreme in stating that Sophia suffered from neurasthenia, a word redolent of the Victorian era which sounds risible today.

Sophia's role in British women's struggle to be allowed to study and practise medicine was undoubtedly crucial. Apart from the Edinburgh fight, she was the founder of the London School of Medicine for Women (from which she subsequently severed all connection) and also started her own school of medicine in Edinburgh (from which Elsie Inglis and other disaffected students departed to form a rival establishment which forced the closure of Sophia's). She had great strength of character but an inability to appreciate other viewpoints. She did maintain some deep and lifelong friendships, but she also managed to alienate any number of her contemporaries, thereby losing the chance to enjoy the fruits of victory. It is a sad story and one worth telling.

The book is always readable, but rather plodding; it really only comes to life when dealing with the Edinburgh fight. The lengths to which the opposition were willing to go in order to keep those women out seem so extraordinary that that part of the story makes fascinating reading. It is not at all surprising that what later commentators have chosen to concentrate on is that short period of her life.

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WILLIAM WAUGH, *A history of the British Orthopaedic Association: the first seventy-five years*, London, British Orthopaedic Association, 1993, pp. xiii, 400, illus., £18 (+p&p UK £3.30, worldwide £3.50, hardback 0-9521874-0-X), presentation volume £75, available from BOA, 35-43 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3PN.

The occasion has been matched by the choice of author. Professor Waugh has already established a reputation in the history of orthopaedics, to which this volume will add lustre. At a time when it is still possible for one man to have worked with some of the great surgeons, and to have had the opportunity of speaking with many who had themselves been trained by the pioneers or their pupils, it is appropriate that there should be a record. By the centenary of the Association, no one will be left to recount the age of the giants. Giants? Indeed, for they founded, established and saw to acceptance and success, a branch of surgery previously disregarded, and did so against considerable professional opposition. It is this story which William Waugh has told skilfully, perceptively, and from within an active professional discipline, while respecting the rigour of the no less professional historian.

This reviewer has himself worked under, or met, some of those mentioned in these pages, and can confirm that the portraits given are accurate and just. Obituaries necessarily contribute to an assessment of a character and an influence, but this book is not merely a digest of funeral orations. To summarize a life is very difficult, but often necessary. The man is presented to us, with his