

Book Reviews

R W McConchie, *Lexicography and physicke: the record of sixteenth-century English medical terminology*, Oxford Studies in Lexicography and Lexicology, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. xii, 448, £60.00 (0-19-823630-1).

Language use is even more central to the practice and theory of medicine, or indeed any other kind of healing, than it is to other sciences and activities that require a specialized lexicon. As the author of this valuable study remarks, in medicine, "language is both tool and product simultaneously". As psychosocial and psychoneurological explanations become ever more persuasive within orthodox Western medicine, historians, sociologists and anthropologists of medicine need to engage in more precise analysis of the linguistic practices of patients and practitioners. Roderick McConchie's purposes in this study are rather more restricted, but his work offers both tools and salutary advice for scholars engaged in explanatory work.

The title, *Lexicography and physicke*, indicates the two main directions in which this study faces. On the one hand, the author provides a telling analysis of both early vernacular lexicography and the failings of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which historians all too often take as authoritative in such matters as the earliest usage of a word or the scope of the lexicon. On the other hand, he makes a considerable contribution to discussion of the role of vernacular writing in English medicine, the evolution of the technical vocabulary, and the problem of medical authority. In both respects, this substantial study cannot be taken as the last word, but should rather be seen as indicating important areas for further research and as providing a useful methodology.

Even more striking than some of McConchie's discursive sections is his careful analysis of some representative texts, locating vast numbers of antedatings, new senses, and unrecorded usages, for both technical and non-technical terms. As one might expect, Shakespeare is frequently supplanted as first recorded user of a word, as is the anatomist

Helkiah Crooke. Botanical, chemical and medical terms are frequently identified for the first time or antedated by as much as three centuries, as a result of the way the *Oxford English Dictionary* was originally produced. Even a cursory reading of this book should prevent historians from making incautious remarks about the introduction of new terms or the limits of the vernacular lexicon. Since there is now a widespread desire to avoid terminological anachronism in the history of medicine, lexicographical analysis is clearly essential.

Although this book has much to say to historians, it is not the work of a historian of medicine, so there are some odd judgements, minor factual errors, and curious omissions. It is hardly surprising that McConchie is unaware of many relevant biographical details, especially concerning religious and political loyalties, since he is often dependent upon dated secondary sources, which have failings of which he is well aware. For example, as a Member of Parliament, the early Paracelsian propagandist Richard Bostocke is not quite as obscure as McConchie supposes. Moreover, he has not always taken into account studies that would be pertinent, such as Vivian Nutton's essay on humanist surgeons. Nevertheless, his unusual perspective and painstaking research enable McConchie to make a host of stimulating comments which have implications for all who study the theory and practice of medicine in the past.

David Harley, Oxford

Thomas M Daniel, Frederick C Robbins (eds), *Polio*, University of Rochester Press, 1997, pp. viii, 202, illus., £20.00, \$29.95 (1-878822-90-X). Distributed in UK by Boydell & Brewer Ltd., P.O. Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF.

Kathryn Black, *In the shadow of polio: a personal and social history*, Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1996, pp. ix, 307, illus., \$12.00 (0-201-15490-0).

Both these books on poliomyelitis are a mixture of personal, social and medical history; one consists of essays by several hands and the other is the work of a single author. On the cover of the latter is a 1950s black-and-white photo of an attractively leggy young woman sitting on the branch of a pine tree high up on a hill—the very image of airy freedom. The jacket illustration of the book of essays, by contrast, resembles a fluffy globe, or map of the world, done in blue and various shades of brown wool. It is, in fact, an artist's rendition of an electron micrograph of the poliovirus. The covers accurately reflect the bias of each book: whereas Kathryn Black's *In the shadow of polio* is a memoir of her polio-stricken mother fleshed out with socio-medical history, Daniel and Robbins's *Polio* is a scientific and clinical account of the disease leavened by three personal accounts of surviving polio.

Good doctors do not necessarily make good writers, alas. In his contribution to the volume of which he is co-editor Frederick C Robbins, one of the trio of Harvard microbiologists headed by John Enders who were awarded the Nobel Prize for their path-breaking discovery that poliovirus would grow in non-nervous tissue, acknowledges Enders' greatness and his generosity in ensuring that his two junior colleagues shared in the Nobel award. But his account adds nothing to what is already known and conveys little sense of drama or insight into Enders' intriguing personality.

The other essays by medical professionals are equally disappointing. Martha Lipson Lepow, for instance, tells us that her father became an assistant to Dr John A Toomey of Cleveland and that Toomey took water samples from the Cuyahoga River and Lake Erie which, when injected into monkeys, produced paralysis, suggesting "that fecal-oral spread was the predominant mode of transmission of poliovirus" without so much as hinting that at that time Toomey's was a lone voice crying in the wilderness. In the 1930s in the United States polio was regarded as an airborne disease: you breathed in the virus rather than swallowed it: hence the development of nasal sprays which did nothing to prevent polio but

robbed children of their sense of smell. Toomey was right, but his message failed to get across not only because it challenged received wisdom but also because his research methods were regarded as insufficiently rigorous. None of this is in Lepow's essay.

The book is sloppily edited, too. The opening essay gives a brief history of polio and rightly emphasizes the part played in its "conquest" by Franklin D Roosevelt and his friend and one-time law partner, Basil O'Connor, who ran the hugely powerful National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, yet in two later essays O'Connor's name is misspelt—once and it might be a misprint; but twice does look like carelessness. What saves *Polio* are the survivors' stories, which have an immediacy and vitality lacking in the physicians' accounts. Here, for example, is an incident from Michael W R Davis's memoir of the 1944 Kentucky polio epidemic: "Male patients wore only cotton g-strings, and every evening we were given cooling sponge baths and 'changed'. My most embarrassing moment, perhaps ever, came when I suddenly developed an erection during this process. Aside from acute early adolescent shame at this unwanted display, I remember thinking, 'Well, there's at least one muscle that still works' . . . This involuntary action may have been the first step in my recovery."

Kathryn Black's book is an altogether more substantial piece of work. Her mother contracted polio in 1954, when Kathryn and her brother Kenny were very young children. The virus wreaked more than its usual havoc and left Virginia Black a respirator-dependent quadriplegic; she was transferred from hospital to a National Foundation respiratory centre in Seattle where she stayed for several months, surrounded by others in a similar condition, before being sent home to Colorado. Her mother and father, rather than her frequently absent husband, took over the burden of her care for the remainder of her short life.

Black intersperses her fragmentary childhood reminiscences with chapters dealing with the history of polio in the United States. Occasionally she gets things slightly wrong.

Warm Springs, for instance, did not come “to be called the Little White House”: FDR built the house that did in the extensive grounds of the Warm Springs spa which he had transformed into a polio rehabilitation centre. It is a bit harsh to call John A Toomey a “not particularly well-informed doctor” (see above) on the basis of one insignificant article. The bald statement that, apart from humans, the “only other creature susceptible to the disease was the monkey” is not true: monkeys were not *naturally* susceptible to polio; they could only be infected *experimentally*, i.e., by artificial means (as Black seems to recognize when she says a few pages later that “animals don’t get the disease naturally”). Chimpanzees, in fact, are the only animals known to have caught polio from humans and suffered epidemics as a result. Finally, the precise cause of the failure of the Cutter-manufactured Salk vaccine is known, *pace* Black: it was the failure of virus-inactivation due to a phenomenon known as “clumping” (when stored virus fluids tend to congeal) and this was corrected by an extra filtration process.

All this is incidental, however, to the main thrust of the narrative, which Black sums up in a single sentence: “My family’s polio story is a tale without heroes and without victory”: The importance of this perspective can hardly be exaggerated. Those who go under do not write books, but their point of view is a vital corrective to the triumphalist slant of so many survivor stories. Troubled by failures in her own life, Kathryn Black searches for the source of her discontent and finds it in the silence surrounding her mother’s illness and death. She, too, became a polio victim—though she was hardly aware of it—in that polio destroyed her family: “With mother’s death, we lost her, our father, and, in a way, our grandparents, too. They couldn’t be ‘grand’ to us, indulgent and playful. Instead, in the wake of their great loss, they became our disciplinarians, saddled with child rearing again.”

The question of why her mother died young, when several other similarly disabled men and women have survived to a ripe age, naturally torments Kathryn. The physical cause may

have been pneumonia or something else, but the most likely explanation, as one doctor tells her, is that “she lost the will to live”. With her illness her family had become dysfunctional and she was helpless to do anything about it.

Insofar as there is a villain in the story, it is Kathryn’s father. He simply could not face life with a woman as totally disabled and dependent as his wife had become, so he turned to drink and other women for consolation; and in that state he was no use to the children either. Ignoble, perhaps, but hardly incomprehensible. “Adversity”, his daughter writes, “brought out the worst in him”. A harsh judgement, but she adds: “I believe him when he says no one could judge him more harshly than he has judged himself”. He was yet another casualty in the polio epidemics.

And Kathryn herself? She has found contentment in a second marriage and having children of her own, but also, interestingly, in doing what so many polio survivors have done when faced with the late effects of the disease, commonly called post-polio syndrome: that is, in searching out other survivors and comparing notes. “Are you one of us?” a correspondent wants to know; she replies that she is and, if long experience of pain and isolation are the hallmarks of disability, so she is. Her book is a major contribution to the literature on polio.

Tony Gould, London

Ove Hagelin (compiler), *Old and rare books on materia medica in the library of the Swedish Pharmaceutical Society [Apotekarsocieteten]: an illustrated and annotated catalogue*, Stockholm, Swedish Pharmaceutical Press, 1997, pp. 223, illus., SEK 625.00 (EU), SEK 500 (outside EU), orders to: Swedish Pharmaceutical Press, P.O. Box 1136, SE-111 81 Stockholm, Sweden.

In recent years, the Swedish Pharmaceutical Society’s library has been much enlarged by the substantial collections of two Swedish pharmacists, Ernst Matern (1879–1954) who was particularly interested in pharmacopoeias,