

Book Reviews

WILLIAM B. BEAN, *Walter Reed. A biography*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1982, 8vo, pp. xiv, 190, \$12.95.

I enjoyed reading Dr Bean's life of Walter Reed. Its style and content fall somewhere between the writings of Paul de Kruif and Gwyn Macfarlane's life of Howard Florey. In fact, there are striking resemblances to Macfarlane's book, as the author has been to enormous trouble to seek out the letters from Reed to his wife Emilie and to quote from them. Unfortunately, Reed was more reserved than Florey, and so there is less to glean from these letters.

This book gives an account of Reed's life from his childhood in the Virginia of 1851 through the Army Medical Corps on the American frontier and the Sioux wars to his training as a bacteriologist and his work on typhoid and on the aetiology of yellow fever in Cuba at the turn of the century. The story of the scientific discovery is interspersed with personal material about the lives of the team members in Cuba and their relationships with their families, contemporaries, and senior officers. This type of treatment conveys quite effectively the atmosphere surrounding the research but detracts from the description of the studies themselves, which must effectively be the climax of the story – since the rest of Reed's life does not appear to have been especially distinguished. His experiences were those of others in the Army Medical Corps of that era – interesting as a description of a fascinating period of history.

It is very difficult to get a clear picture of the research that proved the transmission of yellow fever by *Aedes aegypti* from this account. It seems probably that Lazear collected some *Aedes* from the camp, where it was thought that the yellow fever cases might in fact be suffering from malaria. The book does not explain why the team suddenly became converted to Carlos Finlay's theory – disregarded for so long – and proceeded to infect mosquitoes and feed these mosquitoes on themselves and volunteers – while Reed was in Washington.

These studies, which led to the death of Lazear from the bite of a stray insect and the near death of Carol from one being fed to keep it alive, were suggestive but not conclusive, and so when Reed returned to Cuba, volunteer studies were undertaken that ultimately proved the *Aedes* transmission theory to be correct. The original studies by the members of the commission were more accident than design, but the later work was one of the most remarkable stories of bravery ever undertaken for the sake of medical knowledge. When one considers the far-reaching consequences of this work and the fact that it would not be allowed today, one realizes how lucky we are that problems like this were solved before ethical standards changed.

To decide the significance of this book it is necessary to compare it with H. A. Kelly's *Walter Reed and yellow fever* (1906). Kelly gives a much clearer account of the life of Reed and his work in Cuba. Bean's account does not appear to add anything new except some sentimental details about Reed's relationships to his family and the jealousies between the various parties. Nevertheless, we must thank Dr Bean for reviving this epic story in a very readable form.

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JOHN LYON and PHILLIP R. SLOAN, *From natural history to the history of nature. Readings from Buffon and his critics*, Notre Dame, Ind., and London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 8vo, pp. xiv, 406, illus., [no price stated].

This scholarly and conscientious book makes an important and timely contribution to the study and interpretation of Buffon, and so, too, to the Enlightenment generally. What Lyon and Sloan have done is present English texts under four headings, so that we have successively: a selection from Buffon's writings prior to the first (1749) volumes of his *Histoire naturelle*; pieces from these first volumes of 1749; immediate responses by the earliest critics, writing about the 1749 texts, and finally Hérault de Séchelles' essay on Buffon, *Voyage à Montbard*. Much of the material is in translations made by Lyon and Sloan themselves, and in many cases the texts are ones not previously translated into English. Moreover, at every turn Lyon and Sloan have provided highly informative notes and commentary. In a substantial and original introduction, they have discussed the nature of Buffon's natural history especially from an epistemological point of view.