

Book Reviews

The Life of Hugh Owen Thomas. DAVID LE VAY, M.S., F.R.C.S., Orthopaedic Surgeon S.E. Metropolitan Region. Edinburgh: E. and S. Livingstone Ltd., 1956. Pp. 136. 13 plates (one coloured). 13 figs. 25s.

There are still some who think that Hugh Owen Thomas was an unqualified bone-setter like his father. This is largely because in his lonely and self-imposed isolation he behaved like one. He was never on the staff of a hospital and never appended his medical degrees to the title-pages of his publications.

He was a small, slight, pale figure, only a few inches over five feet, with a moustache and beard, wearing thick glasses, always in a black frock coat buttoned up to the chin, a peaked sailor's cap pulled down over one eye so that he very much resembled the Captain Kettle of fiction, and always with a cigarette in his mouth. He worked under immense pressure for thirty years, every day for seven days a week with not a single holiday, entering whole-heartedly with his frail body and anxious mind into his patients' troubles and sparing no effort in his struggles on their behalf. The only occasions when he left his house, other than on professional errands, were the three times each year when he visited his mother's grave.

At five or six in the morning he began his rounds in the high phaeton, built in his own workshop to his own design, painted scarlet so that it resembled a fire-engine, carrying at night a flaming torch at each corner, and pulled by a splendid pair of horses. In this carriage, seated high above his tandem team, he raced up and down the streets of Liverpool for two or three hours before breakfast, often calling on patients in their homes so early as to be mistaken for the milkman. If the bandages had been meddled with Thomas stormed at the penitent patient, re-applied the bandage, and sealed it with a blob of wax and the signet ring from his finger carrying the initials H.O.T. Breakfast was a hurried meal, and then from nine to two he was in his consulting room, prescribing, dressing, reducing fractures and dislocations for thirty or forty patients whom he examined with rapid and gentle accuracy. No anaesthetic was ever used, and no outside aid was ever needed to provide the splints which were made on the premises by Thomas's own blacksmith and saddler. No matter what the site of his disease, the patient could be sure of returning home in an hour with the appropriate well-fitting splint. In the afternoon there were more visits and then operations at his private hospital. The records show that an average week

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provided sixteen or twenty major limb fractures, several of them compound, several cases of obstruction, and cases of joint disease and deformity, all in addition to the enormous general medical and surgical practice. There were some eighty surgery patients daily and as many home visits, and all were treated by Thomas himself. Sunday was the famous free clinic day when hundreds of patients from all over the countryside besieged Nelson Street in the morning, filling the house to overflowing and the surrounding streets with carriages and invalid chairs. On one occasion 146 patients were seen in the surgery and 16 visited in their homes. It was a great scene, with something of the atmosphere of a religious pilgrimage, and surgeons who were present never ceased talking of what they had witnessed, for Thomas was years ahead of his time and the results he could show in his treatment of fractures and tuberculous arthritis seemed little less than miraculous. He believed in always making patients pay something, however small, to preserve their self-respect and value their treatment; but his wife would sometimes send them home in a cab at his expense and maintain them afterwards from his own pocket.

This is a first-rate biography of a remarkable man who may well be called the founder of modern orthopaedic surgery. It is unusually well illustrated. It should be read by all the modern generation of orthopaedic surgeons and will greatly interest a far wider field.

WILLIAM BROCKBANK

Sir John Bland-Sutton, 1855-1936. W. R. BETT, M.R.C.S. (Eng.). With a foreword by Lord Webb-Johnson. Edinburgh: E. and S. Livingstone Ltd., 1956. Pp. 100+viii. 6 plates. 20s.

Sir John Bland-Sutton is one of the outstanding characters of medical history. Following the tradition of John Hunter, whose work he greatly admired, he built up his knowledge on his own personal observations. A man of prodigious industry, whose knowledge of comparative anatomy and pathology was unrivalled, he was, equally, a master surgeon, teacher, writer and traveller. A man of acute intelligence, he was a natural historian of disease.

Dr. Bett has done a very valuable service to the profession in producing this book outlining his life and the different aspects of his character. Middlesex men, in particular, will be grateful, as they owe so much to Bland-Sutton, who taught them with such care and whose generosity and foresight provided them with their Institute of Pathology, believing, as he did, that 'in surgery the high road lies through the pathological institute'.

Those who knew Sir John Bland-Sutton assure us that this is a true likeness of the man, and those who did not will feel their loss and be led, as