

Book Reviews

CHRISTOPHER LAWRENCE (ed.) *Medical theory, surgical practice: studies in the history of surgery*, Wellcome Institute Series in the History of Medicine, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. x, 331, £45.00 (0-415-00046-7).

Finally a book on surgical history which steps outside the well trodden paths of—albeit indispensable—(auto)biographies and the progressivist descriptions of ever new technical achievements! As Christopher Lawrence shows in his introductory essay on 'The history and historiography of surgery', there remain many aspects in pre-modern and early modern surgery, let alone that of the twentieth century, that still need to be researched. This first paper summarizes the state of the art of surgical historiography of the volume under review although it does so chiefly from the Anglo-American point of view; more recent continental scholarship is hardly taken into consideration, yet there would certainly be a case to be made for a comparative approach.

Three contributions give a refreshing insight into "classical" figures and themes such as 'Giovanni Battista Morgagni and eighteenth-century physical examination' (by Malcolm Nicolson), 'John Hunter's physiological surgery' (by Stephen Jacyna), and 'Joseph Lister and the germ theory of diseases' (by Christopher Lawrence and Richard Dixey). The direct insight into an atypical seventeenth-century London surgeon's work is given by Lucinda McCray Beier's analysis of Joseph Binns's casebook indicating a wider range of therapeutic possibilities than one would expect from the known reports of contemporary military surgeons. Roger French, too, uses unpublished material for his paper on 'Surgery and scrofula' namely the patients' records of the Aberdeen Infirmary from the eighteenth century, enabling him to link concepts and practice. Gert Brieger finds two periods in modern nineteenth-century American surgery which he terms "conservative" and "radical". His definitions of these often used terms are borne out by the American evidence he produces, although they might also be formulated quite differently against another background (which has actually been done by others).

An enlightening view on the differences between systematic anatomical and surgical concepts of one same bodily structure (as they evolved over 150 years) is given by Lindsay Granshaw in her paper on 'Surgeons, anatomists, and rectal surgery 1830-1985'. Christopher Lawrence looks closely into the older nineteenth-century controversy over chloroform and ether anaesthesia in its continuation in the twentieth century by the experimentalist Alfred Goodman Levy and his clinical counterparts between 1910 and 1960. The volume is concluded by Ghislaine Lawrence presenting us with a rewarding paper on non-verbal sources in the history of surgery: instruments and other artefacts which raise a spectrum of fascinating questions other than those coming from traditional written sources, questions that can, however, only be answered satisfactorily with the help of such written sources.

Medical theory, surgical practice is a very useful and stimulating book both for its new (and sometimes debatable) theoretical insights and for its many refreshing factual perspectives. A must for all those interested in serious history of surgery.

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JOHN M. RIDDLE, *Contraception and abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. x, 245, illus., \$39.95 (0-674-16875-5).

In this book John Riddle proposes a radical revision of the accepted view that effective contraception began only in the eighteenth century. Instead, he believes, our pre-modern ancestors "knew important things about birth control that we do not"; "the ancients discovered what we only recently rediscovered".

The argument approaches the topic from two directions. First, Riddle notes the apparently low fertility of both the ancient and the medieval worlds. Finding insufficient the usual explanations given for this situation—such as restraint, late marriage, coitus interruptus, condoms, non-fertile positions for intercourse, the rhythm method, pessaries, abortion and infanticide—he calls for a reassessment of the efficacy of oral contraceptives and early stage abortifacients described in the

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medical texts of the period. The detailed evaluation of these recipes by comparison with scientific experiments on the plants used in the medical systems of, for example, India and Latin America then forms the second part of his argument.

Riddle shows that most ancient writers after Soranus did distinguish between contraception and abortion; the grey area was instead between delayed menstruation and very early abortion, especially since the woman's word as to whether or not she was pregnant tended to be accepted. This means that drugs "to provoke the menses" could well have the same effect as those "to expel the foetus". He concludes that the plant agents employed were not only safe, if correctly used, but also highly effective.

As with any book covering the period from ancient Egypt to the seventeenth century, it is possible to criticize this work for over simplifying issues which are the subject of heated debate within particular historical specialisms. The relationship between Egyptian and Greek medicine relies on a few ingredients in common and a couple of unidentified plants, followed by the conclusion that there must "have been a connection, albeit undocumented" (p. 76). On the ancient Greek material, Riddle's discussion of myrrh as an anti-fertility agent in Soranus and Dioscorides refers to the myth of Myrrh, incestuously used by her father, and becoming the mother of Adonis, rather weakly arguing that "the plant became a rescuer of daughters caught in the distress of incest" (p. 58). The substance does not seem to have given much benefit to its mythical eponym. Here Riddle does not appear to be aware of the important work of Marcel Detienne on scent in Greek culture. Riddle also tends to see contraceptives and abortifacients where they may not exist; for example, in a discussion of the Hippocratic *Diseases of women* 1.78 he translates as "Potent uterine abortifacient" (p. 78) a phrase more accurately rendered "Able to expel the afterbirth". Later he claims that *Diseases of women* "was not translated into Latin until the Renaissance period" and was thus "unavailable to the Western Middle Ages" (p. 81); this is not strictly true, as sections were translated into Latin in Ravenna in the fifth to seventh centuries AD.

It is also possible to question Riddle's theory of knowledge. He suggests that information on effective plant contraceptives was transmitted within female networks, until these became separated from the world of university-trained physicians after the Middle Ages. This information was based on observation. However, he also provides eloquent testimony to the context within which the plants were used; not only in compound prescriptions, but also in conjunction with other methods such as amulets, pessaries, sexual positions and incantations. In such a context, how did our ancestors know which of the many elements was effective? Furthermore, were the right plants being used for the wrong reasons? The squirting cucumber has now been shown to have anti-fertility effects, but was it used in early contraceptive recipes on sympathetic magic principles, because of the way it ejects its seeds when the fruit dries?

As the argument accumulates, and more and more plants are identified as anti-fertility agents, the reader may well wonder what is left to eat if the human race is to continue. Riddle himself muses, "If garlic is a contraceptive or abortifacient, one might wonder why there is any population in the Mediterranean at all" (p. 38). By the end of the book, he observes that many anti-fertility plants are pot herbs, which could be served in salad; he proposes that, for a woman, salad "may have been her control over her own life and her family's life" (p. 155). This gives a new culinary dimension to a woman's right to choose. It is worth noting that the preface to the book includes a health warning against trying the recipes at home, in case of "unintended effects".

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RICHARD J. DURLING (ed.), *Galenus Latinus II: Burgundio of Pisa's translation of Galen's ΠΕΡΙ ΤΩΝ ΠΕΠΙΟΝΘΟΤΩΝ ΤΟΠΩΝ "De interioribus"*, 2 vols, *Ars Medica* Abt. II., 6/2A, 6/2B, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 1992, pp. 450, DM 178.00 (3-515-04363-2).

The *De locis affectis*, known as *De interioribus* in the Middle Ages, is Galen's most complete treatise on diagnosis and pathology, written by the Greek physician in the last few years of his life (after 192 AD). It consists of six books: the first two are a methodological introduction, and the other four contain a description of diseases ranging from head to genitals. This work of Galen had a