

Book Reviews

although the price unfortunately places it beyond the average purse (a paperback edition would be very welcome), this must be a compulsory acquisition for every institutional library serving psychologists.

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W. J. O'CONNOR, *Founders of British physiology: a biographical dictionary, 1820–1885*, Manchester University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. ix, 278, £27.50.

Obituaries make compelling reading and anyone with an interest in the history of physiology will welcome the appearance of Dr O'Connor's collection of 135 brief lives. He has selected them on the basis of their connection with physiology between 1820 and 1885, during which time physiology was established as a discipline. At the start of the period, physiology consisted of a few lectures on function tagged on to an extensive course of anatomy, usually given by a surgeon waiting for a clinical appointment. By the end of this period, it had become the equal of anatomy in medical examinations taught by full-time staff in properly equipped, independent departments, and had its own Society and Journal.

The sources of these obituaries are mainly the *British Medical Journal*, *Lancet*, *Proceedings of the Royal Society* and the *Dictionary of National Biography*. They are set out in a very readable manner, and often provide fascinating glimpses into the non-scientific life of the subjects, for example, Langley's love of ice skating, or Sir Michael Foster's passion for iris breeding.

The lives are not listed alphabetically or chronologically, but are classified by geographical location (corresponding roughly to London, Midland and Scottish) within each of three periods (1820–35, 1835–70 and 1870–85). In addition there are paragraphs, with references, which describe the state of physiology at the relevant time or place. It is all very readable, and Dr O'Connor has performed a very useful service in bringing together information about people and places which is widely scattered.

But it is not, nor was intended to be, a history of British physiology. There is no critical evaluation of the importance of these founders in the development of the subject and its institutions; its use to historians will be mainly as an additional source of secondary material. Its originality lies in the record it provides of the *teachers* of physiology, who often had little or no connection with physiology as an experimental science. Many names must have been as unmemorable in their time as they are today, and to include, for example, Sir William Gull, a fashionable physician who "made no contribution to physiology", or C. J. Wright, who had "no training as a physiologist and no experience of experimental work", as "founders" of British physiology is perhaps to stretch the term unduly. Some of the subjects undoubtedly promoted physiology without being teachers, research workers, or members of the Physiological Society: J. J. Lister, the microscope maker; the anatomists Grainger and Humphrey; and George Eliot, the novelist, and only woman represented.

There are a number of misprints and mistakes, and specialists may find fault with the treatment of their favourite biographical subject. For example, A. D. Waller became FRS in 1891, not 1882; the date is important since the award was made after his work on cardiac electrophysiology, which culminated in his recording of the human ECG in 1887. Again, it is more than academic pedantry to refer correctly to the most important piece of legislation concerning physiologists the Cruelty to Animals Act (1876), not the "Vivisection Act (1877)".

The author does not aim for comprehensiveness in his biographical sources, and the serious student will want to consult other bibliographies, for example J. S. Fruton's *Bio-bibliography of the history of the biochemical sciences since 1800* (1982), which lists 45 of the subjects, often in greater detail. This will not, however, lessen the value of the book for general readers and physiologists for whom a knowledge of the past brings enjoyment and understanding of the present.

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