

Book Reviews

increasing technicality of medicine, which, he held, distanced the physician from the patient. Consequently Bang found himself in opposition to younger colleagues, who emphasised the importance of autopsies, microscopy and animal experiments. For him, medicine was centred on the individual, carefully tailored to each patient, whereas for younger doctors objectivity and regularity took precedence over the individual.

The most interesting chapter is that in which Skydsgaard analyses this period of change in Danish medicine by looking at how various physicians worked with one single disease – typhoid. He demonstrates well that new and, in retrospect, ‘correct’ ideas do not spread without friction. Also, it allows him to compare treatment methods. Bang’s younger colleagues, more favourably received in Danish historiography due to their introduction of ‘modern’ methods such as microscopy and laboratory tests, basically treated typhoid fever no differently than did Bang himself.

Nevertheless, while overall this is a well-constructed and interesting piece of research work, it is not without its flaws. Perhaps most importantly, Skydsgaard’s selection of sources is too limited. He has studied published articles and books, as well as newspapers and letters from the period, but omitted hospital records. It is difficult to understand why this vital primary source of therapeutic data is ignored, and second- and third-hand descriptions of such treatment used instead. Additionally, Skydsgaard is not very comfortable or convincing when it comes to medical philosophy. His discussions of nosology and diagnostics are confusing, perhaps owing to insufficient knowledge of the important change from medical semiotics to medical diagnostics in the early nineteenth century. Finally, this is very much a book about Denmark, and, if more of Bang’s professional life had been placed in an international context, the work would have gained from a wider view.

But, despite these flaws, there is no doubt that Skydsgaard has written a well-researched

book about this interesting period in Danish medicine.

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Iris Bruijn, *Ship’s Surgeons of the Dutch East India Company: Commerce and the Progress of Medicine in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2009), pp. 388, €39.50, paperback, ISBN: 978-90-87-28-0512.

In *Ship’s Surgeons of the Dutch East India Company: Commerce and the Progress of Medicine in the Eighteenth Century*, Iris Bruijn successfully condenses a vast amount of detailed research into an accessible and interesting account of her subjects. It is Bruijn’s stated aim to rescue these employees of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from what she terms a prevailing historical ‘black legend’ that labels the ship’s surgeon a ‘mere village barber, a good-for-nothing and an illiterate’. In this, Bruijn possibly overlooks a significant volume of recent research that has gone a good way to demonstrating the fallacy of that image, certainly for the nineteenth century. However, the eighteenth century has received significantly less attention from other historians. The data she has collected for the VOC is impressive and significant in its own right, but also provides a very important source of comparison with other European seafaring nations, widening our understanding of the overall picture of medicine at sea during this period.

The opening chapters provide the reader with a useful summary of the medical system of the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century, both on land and at sea, the avenues of medical education, and differences between urban and country practice. The picture of maritime health and medicine presented will be familiar to historians of this period, while also highlighting the unique features of the Dutch experience. Those hoping to find in this volume details of the day-to-day medical

practice of these surgeons, or indeed the prevailing diseases they encountered and treatments they employed, will be disappointed. This book is less a history of disease than an examination of the professional progress of the surgeons and the administrative arrangements of the VOC's medical department. Bruijn examined a sample of three thousand surgeons (roughly one quarter of the total employed by the VOC over its two centuries of existence) taken from the financial books kept by each vessel to enable the company to keep track of all crew members' rank and pay. These records were used to create an extensive database, and the identified surgeons then pursued through other government and VOC records principally held in Amsterdam and Jakarta. Through this painstaking work, Bruijn has been able to establish a comprehensive portrait of the typical VOC surgeon; his education, geographic origin, social status, period of service with the Company, subsequent career trajectory, wealth, and (miserable) life expectancy within the service.

These findings allow Bruijn to ask and answer some important questions about the motivations of those men who served with the Company, including their likely reasons for joining up and the wealth they could expect to accumulate. In direct contrast to the aforementioned 'black legend', Bruijn establishes that VOC surgeons were well educated, and more likely to join in times of financial security than out of desperation or necessity. Her important claims that the VOC developed a professionalised 'fully fledged maritime medical service' and that, in Batavia, the company established a centralised health service with modern hospitals are well supported, if not representative of developments as unique as she maintains. Her findings respecting the development of modern hospitals adds further weight to the growing evidence that hospital medicine originated on colonial and military ventures.

Ship's Surgeons is a valuable resource for historians of maritime medicine, and provides

a much needed fresh perspective on a field which has, to date, been dominated by investigation of the British experience.

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A.W. Bates, *The Anatomy of Robert Knox: Murder, Mad Science and Medical Regulation in Nineteenth-Century Edinburgh* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), pp. x + 228, £39.95, hardback, ISBN: 978-1-84519-381-2.

As in all other re-runs of Knox's troubled life, this book relies, in large part, upon Henry Lonsdale's 1870 biography. It is a pity, therefore, that one has to go to the secondary source bibliography to get its full title. However, in a way, Lonsdale has had the last laugh, albeit posthumously. Bates refers to a judgement by John Struther that *A Sketch of the Life and Writings of Robert Knox, The Anatomist* was 'reliable as to facts' (p. 9), thereby capturing the most likely critical judgement of this book by historians of medicine.

Struther, another anatomist, like Knox and Lonsdale, made his comment on a postcard now in the archives of the Royal College of Physicians of London. Although this and other manuscript material are footnoted in abbreviated form, the primary source bibliography is restricted to printed works only. This leads to difficulties for any reader wishing to follow up manuscript references. For example, census information about Knox's household is referenced as 'GROS 1841...' (p. 193) but this acronym (General Register Office for Scotland) does not appear in the list of abbreviation for archives in the bibliography. Other references are inconsistent (GU and GUL for Glasgow University Library).

Small matters one might contend; however, they are symptomatic of a fairly widespread disregard for post-1970