

Book Reviews

Charles F Wooley, *The irritable heart of soldiers and the origins of Anglo-American cardiology: the US Civil War (1861) to World War I (1918)*, The History of Medicine in Context, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, pp. xvi, 321, illus., £57.50 (hardback 0-7546-0595-7).

Charles Wooley is a cardiologist who has been writing about the history of the “irritable heart” for some time. This book brings together material from some of his earlier papers on the topic, adding additional context and details that help to situate the historical importance of the “irritable heart of soldiers”. Wooley frames his discussion with arguably two of the most horrible wars ever fought: the US Civil War and the First World War. During these wars—as well as others—many thousands of soldiers were incapacitated due to a vague constellation of symptoms that included varying amounts of dyspnoea, palpitations, chest pain, and easy fatigability. Not surprisingly, physicians who saw these men often concluded that the cause of their symptoms was heart disease. As an often under-appreciated, common reason for soldiers to have to withdraw from the fray, heart disease became a topic for discussion in military camps and elsewhere. There physicians debated whether soldiers suffering from these symptoms were truly ill, and, perhaps most important to them, how soldiers could best be treated so as to enable their commanders to send them back into battle. Although he explicates just why this issue was so important to the military forces of the day, Wooley’s underlying subject matter is far broader than simply the issue of heart disease in soldiers. The book’s central theme is the struggle to classify people suffering from functional and organic heart disease. This is a clinical history of ideas, and although the author occasionally makes reference to the world outside medicine, his focus is clearly on events within medicine. His belief that one can use contemporary clinical terms to analyse past diseases will doubtless cause some historians some discomfort. Much of the book comes from the author’s very careful reading of primary sources, often with rather extensive quotations from those sources. Included are many “mini-biographies” of men

who played key roles in changing the definitions of heart disease. These men also played instrumental roles in gathering together groups of physicians who would come to define the field of cardiology in the United Kingdom and the United States.

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Michael Neve and Sharon Messenger (eds), *Charles Darwin: autobiographies*, Penguin Classics, London, Penguin Books, 2002, pp. xxvi, 98, £6.99, US\$11.00 (paperback 0-14-043390-2).

This edited volume comprises Darwin’s ‘Recollections’, written between 1876 and 1881, and a short autobiographical ‘Fragment’, penned in August 1838. The editors and the publishers are to be commended for making these important texts inexpensively available to the wide audience they deserve. For whilst Darwin’s reflections are a valuable resource for historians of Victorian science, as a personal portrait of a deeply troubled, anxious and kindly (if somewhat egotistical) man, Darwin’s reminiscences are enthralling and often profoundly touching. In this latter respect they also serve a broader function. As a needed corrective to Lytton Strachey or Samuel Butler’s dyspeptic analyses of the Victorian patriarch, Darwin’s words give us glimpses of candour and humanity from a period so often presented as steeped in affectation, hypocrisy and cant.

The chief merit of this particular volume is the fine introduction provided by Michael Neve, in which he discusses eloquently what the autobiography says about Darwin’s own self-image, the audience for which his reflections were intended, and how Darwin adapted the former to the latter. Neve correctly insists that Darwin’s autobiography is not a work of unrestrained catharsis. Written exclusively for the consumption of his immediate family, Darwin imbued it with didactic purpose. Sieving and interpreting his own history, he sought to convey to his children the importance of industry,

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honesty and independence. There is no substitute for hard slog was Darwin's repeated, Smilesian refrain.

Neve's introduction is also useful in that it explores what Darwin left out of his autobiographical reflections. For instance, Darwin was extremely reticent about the death of his mother, though this should not be taken to imply that he had recovered from her loss. And he was no less circumspect about many of the structures and supports that made his scientific career possible. Darwin presumably believed in his rhetorical construction of himself as a self-made man of science. But Neve rightly emphasizes the vast colonial infrastructure of ships, men and communications that made Darwin's voyage and his collection of specimens possible. Likewise, his webs of informants, family connections, allies, female editors and translators typically enjoyed only cursory mention in his autobiography, but we need to remember the essential roles they played in the genesis and presentation of Darwin's ideas.

The introduction closes with a discussion of his exegesis on 'Religious Belief', Darwin's sincere attempt to persuade his wife and family that it was a surfeit, not an absence of compassion or humility, that drove him to agnosticism. For all the warmth of Charles's relationship with Emma, his rejection of revealed religion drove a wedge between them and brought both considerable pain. Yet the rift between Charles and Emma on the subject of religion illuminates more than an important, and rather tragic, aspect of their private worlds. As Neve points out, like all the best autobiographies Darwin's provides a microcosm of much more prevalent tensions in late Victorian society. And rarely is the crisis of faith more palpable than in Darwin's moving and heartfelt prose.

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Notes and Records of the Royal Society: A Journal of the History of Science, Millennium Issue, January 2001, **55** (1), ed. Alan Cook,

pp. 181, illus., £15.00, US\$23.00. Orders to: The Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AG, UK.

This "millennial issue" of the Royal Society's history of science journal differs little from normal issues except in the content of the customary brief preface by the then editor, Sir Alan Cook FRS. When *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* began under the anonymous editorship of the then librarian, H W Robinson, it was conceived as an "in house" periodical detailing the current affairs of the Society (now long since transferred elsewhere) together with some brief historical notes, to be distributed exclusively to Fellows. By 1940 it had begun to be what it has remained, a learned journal devoted to any aspect of the Society and its Fellows, with articles by both Fellows and non-Fellows and normal rules of subscription. Since 1960 it has been edited by a (named) Fellow with the assistance of a committee or advisory board (nowadays named in each issue) always containing some historians of science or medicine. The journal now appears three times a year and the previously sober cover has been replaced by an attractively coloured and illustrated one, different for each issue. The prevailing tone tends to be factual rather than analytical so that it usefully complements existing professional journals.

Although articles on medical Fellows (who were most numerous in the nineteenth century) are not common in *Notes and Records*, there are usually some biologically orientated articles well worth reading. Here are a dozen mostly short articles together with a book review (usually several), the annual Anniversary address by the President (Sir Aaron Klug) and a note by a member of staff on Jstor, which permits access to the Society's scientific journals since their commencement in 1665. Readers of *Medical History* can surely find the general articles here of interest, these being 'The history of science and the image of science' by William Shea, who considers briefly the public attitudes to science at the present time; an intriguing survey of "Predictions", a well-chosen review of the (mostly erroneous) attempts by distinguished