

## Book Reviews

somewhat tempted to put in a word for the swine. Of course, William Pickles's classic on *Epidemiology in country practice* is readily available in medical libraries; but I suspect that Lord Moynihan's *Truants* is not, and Ruth Holland's collection of Richard Asher's writings is certainly not thus available. I hope that after a decent interval, *A sense of Asher* will be reprinted, possibly even as a paperback, for it is both excellent in itself, and an admirable complement to *Richard Asher talking sense*, the selection made by Sir Francis Avery Jones.

The three first volumes were reviewed at some length in the *British Medical Journal* of 3 December 1983; and the contents of each of them are there clearly delineated. Perhaps I can depart still further from formality, and simply give my own personal reaction to each of them.

The copies of Pickles's book which I have come across previously have tended to be rather well-worn; and it was an added pleasure to have it in one's hands in superb mint condition. And re-reading it, I was again aware of the quality of the man who more than anyone else brought a new dimension into family practice, by exploiting the advantages of his long spell in the same practice for making real advances in epidemiology. These are not advantages to be found in the practices of inner cities; yet over the years there have been many rural doctors, but few with the vision and pertinacity of William Pickles, let alone the faithful recording of his observations made by his wife and daughter.

There is more than a hint in Michael Harmer's introduction to the book by Moynihan that this is not what a tutor would call "his best work"; and this Linacre Lecture of his is indeed compared unfavourably, and in so many words, with his Romanes Lecture. The construction of his list of truants is as random as the Madamina aria in Don Giovanni – but lacks Mozart's music. There are, of course, good things in it, and his account of the rather pointless discussions whether medicine is a science or an art brings forth a sentence which could not be bettered: "The quarrel whether medicine is science or art has not yet quite subsided, nor will it be silenced until men recognize that medicine has contact with both: with science in its enquiries, with art in its practice". But to deal with over eighty "truants" in sixty-seven pages implies a certain superficiality; and his paragraph on Conan Doyle does not mention Sherlock Holmes, which must set something of a record in omission.

I don't think it is only my physician's bias which makes me give the preference to the Richard Asher collection. There is an admirable preface, and the richness of the store is shown by the excellence of this collection of gleanings, after the classics on the dangers of going to bed, Munchausen's syndrome, and straight and crooked thinking in medicine have been pre-empted. Richard Asher took great pains with his writing; and then went on to take the additional trouble which is needed to conceal the previous labour. And how much the reader benefits. It would not be fair, though more than tempting, to quote from the book reviews or the "Asherisms"; but what about the onomatopoeia in this description of a somewhat untranquil maternity block – "In its capacious and hygienic spaces each sound echoes and re-echoes so that the cacophony of crockery blends with the banging of doors, and the mewling and puking of the babies is drowned by the jangle of wrangling bedpans." This last phrase does not make much sense, unless "wrangling" is a transferred epithet to the utensils from those who handle them. In another context, the whole passage might be thought excessive – but in its own context, a chapter on noise, I think it succeeds.

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ANTHONY S. WOHL, *Endangered lives. Public health in Victorian Britain*, London, J. M. Dent, 1983, 8vo, pp. viii, 440, illus., £17.50.

*Endangered lives* is, as the popular style of its title suggests, a general work. As a beginner's introduction by a social historian, it fills what has hitherto been a void in the bibliography of the subject. From infant mortality (the "most sensitive of hygienic barometers" for contemporaries), through personal hygiene and nutrition, filthy streets, sewers and water supplies, Professor Wohl provides a guide to the basic features of living conditions in the Victorian city, and tries to evoke for the reader the very sight and smell of the Victorians. Having discussed the domestic problems, he moves on to analyse the structure of the preventive medical organiza-

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tion, and thereafter the wider environment – air and river pollution, industrial diseases and housing conditions.

The subject of public health is a large one, and Professor Wohl's canvas is broad. The book is based on readily available general sources, and the thoughtful reader will inevitably become aware of a number of omissions and inadequacies that betray the extent to which the author's imagination has been limited by his source material. There is no mention, for example, of the Port Sanitary authorities that performed so vital a part in keeping Britain virtually free from cholera after 1867. The author's curiosity has not led him to supplement the deficiencies of other secondary sources: thus he is unable to comment on the disagreement between Norman Longmate and F. B. Smith as to whether tracheotomy was used on diphtheria cases in this period. One may search in vain for an account of the development of refuse collection services, or of quality controls on fresh meat, fish, and greenstuffs. Although a whole chapter is devoted to the pollution of rivers, there is no discussion of the relationship between the rivers and domestic water supplies. Professor Wohl repeatedly laments the failure of PhD students to make use of the records of Medical Officers of Health: judicious use of these records might have contributed a further dimension to his own writings.

Defects in the overall structure of the book are complemented by a number of misprints or solecisms in the text, which might be misleading to the non-specialist reader. Obsolete Victorian chemical terms are used – bichromatic of potash, for example, for potassium dichromate (p. 276). This reviewer puzzled for some time over the implications of the destruction of the "navel septum" (*ibid.*) before realizing that "navel" should read "nasal". The MAB hospitals were officially opened to all comers in 1889, not 1899 (p. 377, note 108). Instances such as these could be multiplied.

Although this is a serviceable book for the general reader, there are many loose ends, and the index is perfunctory. It is also disappointing that Professor Wohl avoids both controversy and originality. There are no fresh insights to stimulate those working in the field; and those already familiar with the sources from which Professor Wohl derives his text will find this book a pedestrian reference work.

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GEORGE D. SUSSMAN, *Selling mothers' milk. The wet-nursing business in France 1715–1914*, Urbana, Chicago, and London, University of Illinois Press, 1982, 8vo, pp. x, 310, £14.45.

It was fortuitous that George Sussman stumbled on the evidence of babies and wet-nurses whilst carrying out his research on cholera. The evidence is inevitably patchy and is drawn from government papers, literature, medical books, parish documents, and some interesting case histories. Although spanning two centuries, the work has been successfully pulled together. The author clearly recognizes the dilemma that mothers faced rearing infants within the traditional cultural and socio-economic milieu, until a breakthrough in infant feeding emerged.

Part one starts in 1715, when the wet-nursing business was already established, and deals with the effects of the Enlightenment. Part two carries us from the Revolution and Roussel Law through the nineteenth century to the First World War. The book is the right length for the pioneer work it covers, the figures are clear, and the fine illustrations are appropriate for the subject of mothers, babies, *meneurs* and wet-nurses in history.

George Sussman's sympathetic treatment has gone a long way towards reversing the trend of thought that dubbed good mothering unequivocally an invention of modernization. It illuminates the problems that mothers of yesterday and today have, when embedded in tradition and faced with economic depression, in rearing infants. Many French mothers of the period "sold the only thing they had left to sell".

The delicate subject of breast feeding has been to a great extent, perhaps because of the sexual connotations now associated with the bosom, passed over by both male and childless female historians. Industrialization in France was chronologically and conceptually different from England, and the book perhaps throws light on the perplexing subject of why the heyday of