

Book Reviews

John Walker-Smith, *Enduring memories: a paediatric gastroenterologist remembers. A tale of London and Sydney*, Spennymoor, The Memoir Club, 2003, pp. xv, 304, £17.50 (hardback 1-84104-052-5).

Enduring memories is both an autobiography and an evocation, or more correctly a celebration, of a largely vanished world. John Walker-Smith, an accomplished paediatric gastroenterologist, charts his career from his early education in a privileged and Anglophile public school in Sydney, Australia, through his years of medical training, his decision to become a medical scientist, and the long career of research and specialist practice that followed in Sydney and London. This is a candid and sincere portrait of a life devoted to improving the health of children with serious and debilitating conditions in a field that, if already in existence in the 1950s, had yet to be consolidated. Walker-Smith has been intimately involved in the development and advancement of this field and his story is a valuable one for historians of paediatric medicine.

Walker-Smith's book also sheds rich light on two key episodes in the history of modern British medicine. First, he describes in detail the (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts made by the Conservative government of the early 1990s to close the ancient institution of St Bartholomew's Hospital, with regrettable repercussions for the morale of the hospital staff (not least for Walker-Smith himself) and many of their patients. Second, he explores the ongoing controversy concerning the claim that there might be a link between the MMR jab and the putative increase in the incidence of children suffering from autism. Walker-Smith, who was involved in the research and writing of the paper that caused such massive press interest, describes some of the disparities between the media representation of the argument and the claims actually made by Wakefield *et al.* He expresses regret that the press was so rapidly involved in the issue, but defends the integrity of Wakefield and his colleagues as scientists and insists that it remains entirely valid to explore the possibility of a link between the MMR jab and a small

number of cases where gastroenterological disorders are associated with autistic-like symptoms. It is an engaging discussion of a too often polarized issue.

This book is not just a survey of a life in medicine. Walker-Smith devotes large sections to broader reflections: on the relations between Britain and Australia, the role and significance of the monarchy, on tradition, poetry, literature and art. Walker-Smith is an ardent monarchist and a believer in the desirability of close Anglo-Australian ties. To a growing extent (as the author appreciates), such views put him out of step with the times. And some readers might find the values expressed not to their taste. Paying homage to such poets as Housman and Kipling, Walker-Smith sees much to admire in a past where deference to royalty, institutions and the traditions they were meant to embody seemed to come more readily. But there is no crude flag-waving here. In a rather moving passage, he recalls the words Viscount Slim addressed to himself and the other boys at his Sydney public school: "You boys are having a very privileged education. You, yourselves, have done nothing to deserve it. You need to spend the rest of your life paying back the debt you have incurred." Walker-Smith's book shows how these values of civic duty and public service conditioned his enthusiasm for and approach to caring for sick children.

Enduring memories will be of considerable interest to Walker-Smith's friends, family and colleagues. But it will also be of value to any historian wishing to understand the development in Britain and Australia of the speciality of paediatric gastroenterology as well as the debates over NHS restructuring in the 1990s.

John C Waller,
University of Melbourne

Peter O Williams, *The exotic fruits of my life*, Bletchingdon, Rana, 2003, pp. ix, 158, illus., £20.00 (hardback 0-9538092-1-8). Orders to: Rana, Courtyard House, Church End, Bletchingdon, Oxfordshire OX5 3DL.