

Book Reviews

WILLIAM B. BEAN, *Walter Reed. A biography*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1982, 8vo, pp. xiv, 190, \$12.95.

I enjoyed reading Dr Bean's life of Walter Reed. Its style and content fall somewhere between the writings of Paul de Kruif and Gwyn Macfarlane's life of Howard Florey. In fact, there are striking resemblances to Macfarlane's book, as the author has been to enormous trouble to seek out the letters from Reed to his wife Emilie and to quote from them. Unfortunately, Reed was more reserved than Florey, and so there is less to glean from these letters.

This book gives an account of Reed's life from his childhood in the Virginia of 1851 through the Army Medical Corps on the American frontier and the Sioux wars to his training as a bacteriologist and his work on typhoid and on the aetiology of yellow fever in Cuba at the turn of the century. The story of the scientific discovery is interspersed with personal material about the lives of the team members in Cuba and their relationships with their families, contemporaries, and senior officers. This type of treatment conveys quite effectively the atmosphere surrounding the research but detracts from the description of the studies themselves, which must effectively be the climax of the story – since the rest of Reed's life does not appear to have been especially distinguished. His experiences were those of others in the Army Medical Corps of that era – interesting as a description of a fascinating period of history.

It is very difficult to get a clear picture of the research that proved the transmission of yellow fever by *Aedes aegypti* from this account. It seems probably that Lazear collected some *Aedes* from the camp, where it was thought that the yellow fever cases might in fact be suffering from malaria. The book does not explain why the team suddenly became converted to Carlos Finlay's theory – disregarded for so long – and proceeded to infect mosquitoes and feed these mosquitoes on themselves and volunteers – while Reed was in Washington.

These studies, which led to the death of Lazear from the bite of a stray insect and the near death of Carol from one being fed to keep it alive, were suggestive but not conclusive, and so when Reed returned to Cuba, volunteer studies were undertaken that ultimately proved the *Aedes* transmission theory to be correct. The original studies by the members of the commission were more accident than design, but the later work was one of the most remarkable stories of bravery ever undertaken for the sake of medical knowledge. When one considers the far-reaching consequences of this work and the fact that it would not be allowed today, one realizes how lucky we are that problems like this were solved before ethical standards changed.

To decide the significance of this book it is necessary to compare it with H. A. Kelly's *Walter Reed and yellow fever* (1906). Kelly gives a much clearer account of the life of Reed and his work in Cuba. Bean's account does not appear to add anything new except some sentimental details about Reed's relationships to his family and the jealousies between the various parties. Nevertheless, we must thank Dr Bean for reviving this epic story in a very readable form.

P. O. Williams
Wellcome Institute

JOHN LYON and PHILLIP R. SLOAN, *From natural history to the history of nature. Readings from Buffon and his critics*, Notre Dame, Ind., and London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 8vo, pp. xiv, 406, illus., [no price stated].

This scholarly and conscientious book makes an important and timely contribution to the study and interpretation of Buffon, and so, too, to the Enlightenment generally. What Lyon and Sloan have done is present English texts under four headings, so that we have successively: a selection from Buffon's writings prior to the first (1749) volumes of his *Histoire naturelle*; pieces from these first volumes of 1749; immediate responses by the earliest critics, writing about the 1749 texts, and finally Hérault de Séchelles' essay on Buffon, *Voyage à Montbard*. Much of the material is in translations made by Lyon and Sloan themselves, and in many cases the texts are ones not previously translated into English. Moreover, at every turn Lyon and Sloan have provided highly informative notes and commentary. In a substantial and original introduction, they have discussed the nature of Buffon's natural history especially from an epistemological point of view.

Book Reviews

The volume is limited, reasonably enough, to the early Buffon and to the critical writings he provoked. And the main aim is to place the early Buffon in his context. But, of course, any future efforts to reinterpret Buffon's career and his *Histoire* as a whole will be aided by this view of the man and his *magnum opus*.

The translations by Lyon and Sloan quite rightly put accuracy before stylistic appeal. Buffon himself often sacrificed precision of argument for fluency of prose, and it would only have compounded the difficulty raised by that tendency were his translators to have done likewise.

Altogether, then, the book is a very welcome addition to the Buffon literature. One can only hope – although the editors are silent on this – that there may be a sequel to it covering the rest of Buffon's long life and extensive writings. Meanwhile, readers may like to know of a much briefer collection in translation that appeared too recently to be noticed by Lyon and Sloan. It is called *Buffon's Natural history* (Open University Press); it forms Units 17–18 of the Open University course on the Enlightenment and is prepared by David Goodman.

M. J. S. Hodge

Division of History and Philosophy of Science
University of Leeds

NANCY M. FRIEDEN, *Russian physicians in an era of reform and revolution: 1856–1905*, Princeton, N.J., and Guildford, Surrey, Princeton University Press, 1981, 8vo, pp. xvii, 378, illus., £22.80.

Apart from the names of a few of the more illustrious of its members, little is generally known in the West about the medical profession in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and this pioneering study by a social historian is welcome and timely.

After an interesting section on the social background of medical students and the lowly status of doctors, reflected in pay and rank (a medical degree ranked lower than any other university degree) in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, a major part of the book examines the crucial role of the Zemstvo system, which sought to bring medical care within reach of the poorest and most remote inhabitants of those Russian provinces where it was introduced, in strengthening professional solidarity among its doctors. A lively medical press and several medical societies, notably the Pirogov Medical Society, guided and inspired the doctors in their struggles against what they considered to be maladministration and injustice on the part of the central government.

The increasing bitterness of this conflict dominates the final part of the book, and although the author denies that the actions of delegates to the congresses of the Pirogov Society were politically motivated, it is easy to see how the situation was ripe for the political infiltration of this and other professional organizations that occurred later. As always in pre-Revolutionary Russia, however, only the opposition is articulate. Despite censorship, all the available documentary evidence is against the Establishment and impartiality is strained. Nevertheless, the evidence is fairly presented and the reader will reach his own conclusions.

In some respects this book is premature, for it deals with a body of men whose primary professional activities are not widely enough known. A history of Zemstvo medicine, for instance, is long overdue.

The bibliography is excellent and reveals the thoroughness with which the subject has been researched. The problem of what to provide in the way of illustrations has been ingeniously solved. A minor criticism is the habit of translating, rather than transliterating, the names of Russian periodicals – as if one were to refer to “Pravda” as “Truth”. I. I. Mechnikov is introduced early in the book as a “pioneer in comparative embryology” whereas it is for his work on the pathology of inflammation that he is remembered today.

The book can be recommended as a valuable source of factual information on the medical profession and its aims and aspirations in pre-Revolutionary Russia.

Basil Haigh
Cambridge