

Book Reviews

LESLIE T. MORTON and ROBERT J. MOORE, *A bibliography of medical and biomedical biography*, Aldershot, Hants, Scolar Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. ix, 208, £37.50.

This book was originally conceived as a third edition of John Thornton's slim paperback *A select bibliography of medical biography* (1961, 1970) but has been so much enlarged and improved that it is rightly presented as a new work. Like its predecessor, it is selective and restricted to nineteenth- and twentieth-century material in English, but its scope has been widened to take in the biomedical sciences. The compilers have abandoned Thornton's limitation to monographs: journal articles, obituary notices and articles in the *Dictionary of scientific biography* and other collective works are included, giving a more comprehensive coverage, particularly of continental figures. Locations of archive material are noted and there is a useful specialty index, although Thornton's author index has been dropped.

Altogether it is a praiseworthy performance by which the indefatigable Leslie Morton once again puts us in his debt. It should serve as a useful first port of call for biographical research. Errors and omissions are inevitable, but it would be invidious to particularize, especially as the compilers are already looking towards future improved editions. One curious feature is the universal omission of knighthoods and titles of nobility—an egalitarian touch? It is mildly irritating to see familiar names deprived of their handles and one misses this sign of the public recognition accorded to individuals in their lifetime.

May one hope for a paperback edition to secure the book the wide circulation it deserves?

John Symons, Wellcome Institute

DAVID WALDRON SMITHERS, *Not a moment to lose: some reminiscences*, The Memoir Club, London, British Medical Journal, 1989, 8vo, pp. 112, illus., £14.95, £17.50 abroad, including p. & p.

Sir David was one of the small and diminishing band of consultants who practised in Harley Street before the last war. He didn't like it, and soon gave it up in favour of a full-time job in hospital; there were too many dubious quacks alongside the professionals. Apart from this, he does not have a lot to tell us about life on the famous street. He began his career as a radiotherapist when that involved working in some unwanted corner of the radiology department; he ended it presiding over a splendid department at the Royal Cancer (now Marsden) Hospital which included oncology and a clinical research section, as well as radiotherapy. Clearly a master of his subject, a kind and thoughtful clinician, and an effective administrator, he yet fails to illuminate the path by which he, and his specialty, reached these commanding heights.

Work aside, Sir David emerges as a good example of the best sort of cultured Englishman: well read, widely travelled, a follower of Sir Karl Popper, a grower of fine roses; but somehow, not very interesting. One would have liked to hear more of his fiery old father, Sir Waldron Smithers: a high Tory MP of the hanging-and-flogging school; but at home, a kind and tolerant parent.

W. R. Trotter, Haslemere, Surrey

DANIEL BOVET, *Une chimie qui guérit: histoire de la découverte des sulfamides*, Médecine et sociétés, Paris, Payot, 1989, 8vo, pp. 322, Fr. 198.00, (paperback).

The discovery of the "sulfamides" (sulphonamides, sulfa drugs) in the late 1930s began a new era in medicine. At last an effective drug became available to treat childbirth fever, and soon afterwards it was followed by a related drug that cured lobar pneumonia. So two major causes of death in the prime of life were conquered. Discovery took place in many stages and many places, with roots in Ehrlich's researches in chemotherapy and a mainstem in Domagk's work, which led to the introduction of the red dye Prontosil by Bayer. Prontosil was not antibacterial *in vitro*, and the explanation of its efficacy *in vivo* was found at the Pasteur Institute in Paris by a group which included Daniel Bovet, then about 30 years old. Fifty years later Professor Bovet has given a

Book Reviews

fresh account of the original discoveries and their development in Great Britain, Switzerland, and the United States. Your reviewer found the French text very easy to follow, illuminating about the qualities which make research successful, informative, and humorous. Some minor inaccuracies, especially in English names and in the initials of authors, are more diverting than damaging: it is surprising to meet H. G. Wells as an American bacteriologist, though H. H. Wells is evidently intended.

M. Weatherall, Charlbury, Oxon

JEREMY GIBSON and COLIN ROGERS, *Coroners' records in England and Wales*, Birmingham, Federation of Family History Societies, 1988, 8vo, pp. 48, £1.50 (paperback).

This guide is "a first attempt to itemise all extant coroners' records in England and Wales now in public repositories", which is undoubtedly a worthy undertaking. Although published by the Federation of Family History Societies, it is intended for a number of potential users, including historians, archivists, sociologists, criminologists, and coroners themselves.

The introductory sections provide a concise history of the office of coroner, a glossary of terms, select bibliography, useful geographical information on assize circuits and coroners' districts, and a brief section on coroners' records in the Public Record Office by the expert R. F. Hunnisett. The material itself is listed by county, but within the county by period (Medieval, Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries, Modern); the same repository, e.g. the County Record Office, can therefore appear three times within a county entry, if it possesses material relating to all three historical divisions. The layout is logical, but it can be rather confusing visually.

The limitations of this publication lie largely in the nature of the material with which it deals, and the information received from repositories. The level of detail given in descriptions varies from place to place (Greater Manchester and Coventry preferred not to have their modern holdings included in the guide at all), and there is, perhaps inevitably, no sort of qualitative assessment of the material. Westminster Abbey Muniments Room, for example, contains some splendid coroners' records; working on some of the eighteenth-century papers, one forms an impression of London streets awash with apothecaries, physicians, and surgeons just waiting for some fatal event to occur, on which they might give evidence. The riches therein cannot be divined from an entry which reads "City and Liberty of Westminster. Inquests and related papers c. 1760–1879". On the other hand, better to know that, than be unaware that Westminster Abbey houses such material. *Coroners' records in England and Wales* will prove a useful reference tool for a wide range of researchers, dealing with a difficult but extremely valuable group of records.

Marion Bowman, Wellcome Institute