

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,