

## Book Reviews

**Elizabeth Fee and Theodore M Brown** (eds), *Making medical history: the life and times of Henry E Sigerist*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. xiii, 387, £33.00 (0-8018-5355-9).

The distinguished medical historian, Henry E Sigerist, died in 1957. It has taken a further forty years for this first significant English-language study of his work to be produced. It is perhaps no coincidence that American historians of medicine have deferred action on this subject until after the collapse of the Soviet block and the demise of socialism as an effective political force. From the present comfortable vantagepoint of American capitalism, this pioneer of the social history of medicine, advocate of socialized medicine, and friend of the Soviet system can be honoured without risk of causing undue alarm within the medico-political establishment.

As well as making their own active contribution to this volume, the editors have brought together a dozen other authors to assess the various phases of the career of Sigerist and his many-sided literary activities. The whole span of his life is considered, with inclusion of many photographs and hitherto unexploited biographical information. Understandably, the main focus of attention relates to his fifteen-year tenure as Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for the History of Medicine. Naturally, a collective work of this kind involves much repetition, but the study as a whole is satisfying and faithful to the spirit of the larger than life Sigerist.

The authors experiencing the greatest difficulty are those commenting on the scholarly work of Sigerist. While they pay tribute to his unbounding energy and gift for framing ambitious, far-sighted, indeed audacious, research projects, they find it difficult to disguise disappointment concerning the gulf between aspiration and realization. While Sigerist was a brilliant essayist and popularizer, all his major projects were either

abandoned, or realized in only the most fragmentary form. The orientalist, classicist, and medievalist therefore count Sigerist as one of the lost leaders of their disciplines.

As the essays in this volume make amply clear, the shortcomings of Sigerist as a scholar are attributable to his taste for public affairs. Surprisingly, this instinct seems to have been kept in check in Weimar Leipzig, but Sigerist reacted to the dysfunctional world of American capitalism by embracing Soviet communism, and he used his position at Johns Hopkins to promote socialized medicine by every means at his disposal. Given the urgency of the situation and the reality of the threat posed by fascism, Sigerist suspended his scholarly work and took up advocacy of such causes as public health and national health insurance. History was not neglected, but it was primarily mobilized for the purpose of promoting those social causes advocated in his innumerable lectures and public interventions. Contributors to this volume explain the circumstances that led to his preoccupation with his book on socialized medicine in the Soviet Union, which appeared simultaneously in America and England in 1937. Sigerist's activism precipitated his photograph on to the cover of *Time* magazine, with the caption "His philosophy: History spirals towards Socialization". This cover eloquently testified to Sigerist's outlook at the outbreak of the Second World War; it is therefore well-chosen as the frontispiece to the present volume.

Given the rich variety of the activities of Sigerist, not every dimension is covered. This reviewer would have liked more comment about the Gollancz edition of his book on Soviet medicine with its introduction by Sidney Webb, about Sigerist's links with the founders of social medicine including John Ryle, about Sigerist's troubled relations with George Sarton over the relations between the history of science and medicine, about the collective volume produced by Sigerist and his colleagues to mark the Paracelsus anniversary,

or about Sigerist's participation in the Commission on the future of health care in India. However, the present project offers a sound basis for further reflection on the work of this important figure, who, among other things, invites us to engage in continuing debate on the academic and public role of the history of medicine.

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**George Weisz**, *The medical mandarins: the French Academy of Medicine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. xviii, 306, illus., £46.95 (0-19-509037-3).

The title of this carefully researched book may conjure up images of an intellectual corporation, richly endowed and ceremoniously inscribed in the ruling elite—a picture typified by the physician René Laënnec, who became a great figurehead for the Academy. A classical scholar and royal favourite, Laënnec visited his patient, Cardinal Fesch—Napoleon's uncle, in “costume de cour” and sword. A medical innovator, he showed off his new auscultation by listening through a horn of paper to the palpitations of Madame de Staël's heart. But this book, to be sure, is not about the mandarin as courtier, but as bourgeois professional, dispensing medicine for a mass population. As Weisz suggests, the French Academy of Medicine was virtually created in 1820 by the state. Disparate specialities and institutional groupings were combined to form a single arbiter of new medical knowledge, a chief advisory body to the government, and the main instrument of its public health policy. A detailed account of these various functions, from the awarding of prizes and copious review writing, to the carrying out of epidemiological surveys, the administration of vaccinations, and the supervision of secret remedies and waters, constitutes a large portion of this book. But Weisz approaches his subject from other angles: its administrative structure,

architecture, finances, literary productions, prosopography, and rise and fall.

It is perhaps surprising, given the role of the Academy in the refashioning of medicine as a tool of the secular, bureaucratic state, that Weisz narrates the decline of the institution both as a centre of medical science and as an administrative body, these functions being eclipsed by its role as technical adviser. Here, removed from the explicit exercise of political power, is where post-revolutionary governments seem to have always wanted their medical elites. The growing detachment of medical science from politics is exemplified by the case of mineral waters and cures. During the middle decades of the century, the Academy actively promoted the advance of medical authority in the public sphere, regulating commercial interests, suppressing irrational treatments, and securing economic prosperity and public health through an army of inspectors, analysts, and reports on patients' health. But these measures were resisted by patients, who maintained their own rationale for taking the waters, and by local physicians, who resented the intrusions of Academy-appointed inspectors. By the end of the century, the administration of public hygiene was taken over by government officials, while private doctors supervised the health of individual patients. Likewise, the science of hydrology, once wedded to a national programme of public hygiene, gradually became an independent speciality, separate from the regulation of the spa and outside the jurisdiction of the Academy.

According to Weisz, then, the history of the Academy—the institution which, after all, served to invent “public health” as an instrument of good government, is ultimately a story about the powerlessness of medical elites over patients, over the body politic, and over the profession itself. It is a history in which power is too confined and divided to support the kind of Foucauldian framework that has proved useful in the work, for example, of Jan Goldstein and Ann La Berge. Against such arguments, the Archive strikes back!—for, as Weisz maintains, this book follows the