

## Book Reviews

of the book). This does not always make for easy reading, especially since the heavy referencing is not accompanied by a bibliography. On the other hand, he covers a wide canvas and is very good at highlighting the dilemmas always present for industrial health researchers and physicians: without industry the profession can hardly exist, yet working with industry nearly always involves compromises. These dilemmas were made worse by the outlook of the medical men themselves. In a telling photo caption of an industrial physician at his desk, the author notes that such men hardly ever agreed to be photographed with workers, preferring to be seen with emblems of their science such as sheafs of statistics and X-rays.

On the whole, though, Christopher Sellers suggests that industrial hygienists did a good job, imposing a discipline on the workplace through the courts, compensation boards, and even directly through the boardroom via their research links with industry. This may not convince everyone. Historians who have looked at individual industries have painted a more depressing view of industrial physicians as company-oriented individuals, whose work did little to ameliorate a system heavily stacked against the worker. This book makes little mention of corporate suppression of research, suggests that state laws compensated workers (without offering any detailed case studies from business records), and argues that medical networks ensured that industrialists paid for the hazards they inflicted on their workforce. That is certainly not the experience of many victims of industrial disease, either in America or elsewhere.

Overall, however, this is an impressive book, which will obviously be required reading for anyone interested in the history of occupational health.

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**E M Tansey, P P Catterall, D A Christie, S V Willhoft, L A Reynolds** (eds), *Wellcome witnesses to twentieth-century medicine*, vol. 1, Occupational Publications, No. 4, London, The Wellcome Trust, 1997, pp. v, 135, £9.00, \$17.00 (plus p&p) (1-869835-79-4). Orders to: Mrs Tracy Tillotson, Wellcome Institute, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE, UK.

Where contemporary history is concerned, it is not enough to trawl the written evidence. The scientific paper is partly, if unintentionally, fraudulent, giving as it does a sanitized account of what actually happened; and unpublished archives may be incomplete or even unavailable. So, whenever possible, the original participants in the events of interest must be interviewed; indeed, the Wellcome Trust makes it a condition of certain awards in the history of twentieth-century medicine that the grantee should attend a course in interview technique.

The witness seminar, of which Tilli Tansey has organized more than a dozen at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine since 1993, is a natural extension of this principle. Instead of dispatching a research assistant to interview individual makers of history, you gather together fifteen or so key figures and allow them to talk freely about events, supporting or correcting one another as may be. This book contains the proceedings of four such seminars: the discovery of monoclonal antibodies (used as a MacGuffin for a discussion on technology transfer, a theme that deserves much more attention), theories about autoimmunity (or, as we are told to call it, autoallergy), the discovery of endogenous opiates, and the establishment of the Committee on Safety of Drugs (later to become the CSM). These accounts are as problematic in their own way as written sources are: memory is fickle—tales of events are befogged by forgetfulness and moulded by the retrospectoscope; a written transcript cannot convey the nuances of expression or the body language that inform the audience; and the absence of certain important individuals (e.g. Hans Kosterlitz from the meeting on endogenous opiates) can alter the balance. But

## Book Reviews

these verbal accounts do add “artistic verisimilitude” to the written narratives.

Not all of us speak prose, as M. Jourdain suddenly discovered himself to have been doing for most of his life. Rather we string together sequences of statements, heavy with hesitation, sometimes lacking verbs, and often punctuated by parentheses. The huge task of translating the spoken word to a written text has here been expertly accomplished, mainly by Tansey (the only editor whose name appears on all four transcripts). The recordings are first transcribed, then edited from spoken into written English, sent to the speakers for stylistic amendment and correction of misremembered facts, and edited once more, with the addition of the usual academic apparatus in the form of footnotes; the speakers are then given the chance to comment again. In some cases the transcriptional problems have been overcome by asking witnesses to read prepared statements; elsewhere it is a tribute to the editors that there is little that cannot be understood on a first reading.

“History”, wrote Nehru, “is almost always written by the victors and conquerors and gives their viewpoint”. Here, only the victors of these particular campaigns are allowed a chance to tell their stories; but then there are few cases (such as that of Platt versus Pickering) in which the losers can be identified. At times, like the protagonists in Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon*, their accounts vary amusingly. We hear, for example, several differing versions of how the CSM’s yellow cards came to be yellow, and an entertaining difference of opinion between two participants in the opiates seminar, Derek Smyth claiming that, during a lecture of his, Howard Morris jumped up and vociferated, Morris vehemently denying it. But throughout, one has an overwhelming feeling of excitement at the unfolding of events as they happened at the time; for me this was particularly vivid in the case of the endogenous opiates.

These enthralling transcripts do not tell complete stories, but combined with published and unpublished written material they will undoubtedly help future historians to write as

definitive an account of the events as is humanly possible.

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**A Susan Williams**, *Women and childbirth in the twentieth century: a history of the National Birthday Trust Fund 1928–93*, Thrupp, Glos., Sutton Publishing, 1997, pp. xviii, 331, illus., £19.99 (0-7509-1209-X).

A Susan Williams has produced a detailed account of the founding moments and the work of the National Birthday Trust Fund (NBTF). The start of this study documents the genesis of the organization and its close ties with the Conservative Party. Indeed, the NBTF’s “initial aims were simply philanthropic, but they soon developed into an ambitious and determined campaign to influence government policy on maternity care” (p. 1). The organization was founded on 2 July 1928 by Ina, Lady George Cholmondeley, and Edith, the Marchioness of Londonderry. They were responsible for recruiting, in 1929, Lucy Baldwin, wife of the Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, to help in the organization’s efforts to save women from the perils of childbirth. She ardently believed that women giving birth were at as much risk of death as soldiers in World War I. “When a mother gave birth, she said, it was just like ‘going into battle—she never knows, and the doctor never knows, whether she will come out of it alive or not’” (p. 2). Above all, the history of the NBTF is tied to Conservative, wealthy, and articulate society women defining and supporting the childbirth needs of poor women in England. There are detailed chapters on how the NBTF initiated an understanding for proper nutrition during and immediately after pregnancy; on abortion; on the fight for drugs for poor women during childbirth; and an interesting chapter titled ‘The human milk bureau’. All these chapters are predicated on the NBTF’s belief that if wealthy women could have access to any of these things then so, too, should poor women.