

Book Reviews

Will Pickles of Wensleydale. The Life of a Country Doctor. by JOHN PEMBERTON, London, Geoffrey Bles, 1970, pp. 224, illus., £2·50.

Will Pickles (1885–1969) was a country general practitioner of Wensleydale, who made a positive contribution to epidemiology, defining the incubation periods of infectious fevers by a method which he described as ‘the short and only possible contact’. He applied a simple practical method to find this elusive information and used his general practice as the medium for research. One wonders why it was not done before, but therein lies the greatness of the man.

The essence of a general practitioner is his detective urge to gather all the clues, as he does in making a diagnosis. Dr. Pickles applied this to the epidemic of jaundice which was to start his researches. He thought ‘it great fun when we could exercise Sherlock Holmes tactics and nail the culprits’. To follow personally from a clinical history and examination to a family history, village history and dale history was a special opportunity of his general practice. And this is what he did. Family by family, and village by village he was able to look out for personal information at weddings, christenings, parties and funerals, indeed wherever village people met. In the epidemic of 1928, out of a total estimated population in Wensleydale of 5,700 there were some 250 known cases of jaundice, of whom Dr. Pickles and his partner attended 118. The story of the research, which established the incubation period as 26 to 35 days, includes the uncovering of a secret romance and reveals the broad human interest that motivates the best medical practitioners.

By meticulous and accurate note-taking, in which he was fortunate in having his wife Gerty to transpose his diary records to charts, he extended his work to other infectious diseases that beset his patients. Ten years later, he published his *Epidemiology in a Country Practice* (1939), a work which was to make his name world famous.

Will Pickles was the son of a general practitioner of Camp Road, Leeds, and himself practised medicine in Aysgarth for over fifty years. His thinking was in the tradition of those great G.P.s Edward Jenner, William Budd and James Mackenzie. His valley did not limit his horizons and his influence was more than parochial. He was one of the minority of doctors to welcome the National Health Service Act of 1948 and the possibilities that it brought to medical practice. These he used to the full in the service of his patients and of medicine. It was fitting that he should have become the first President of the College of General Practitioners.

Professor John Pemberton’s account of his life in the closed society of the dales, portrays a community and its doctor which has already gone for ever. The biography grew out of a series of locums which the author did for Dr. Pickles in the ten years after 1949. The picture of this remarkable G.P.’s daily life, the personal reminiscences, the countryside in all its moods and the anecdotes of the villagers make most agreeable reading.

JOHN CULE

- (1) *The Founders of Neurology*, edited by W. HAYMAKER and F. SCHILLER, 2nd ed., Springfield, Illinois, C. C. Thomas, 1970, pp. xxi, 616, illus., \$18·00.
- (2) *S. Weir Mitchell, M.D., Neurologist, a Medical Biography*, by R. D. WALTER, Springfield, Illinois, C. C. Thomas, 1970, pp. ix, 232, illus., \$9·75.

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(1) Clinical neurology, as practised today in the ward and out-patient department, is not very different from that of 1900. In some ways it is a nineteenth-century art, and probably a greater proportion of the pathologists and clinicians (and anatomists and physiologists) who made contributions to it in the past are remembered in eponymous signs and diseases than in any other medical speciality. Ancestor worship can thus be said to be part of neurology, and for this reason Webb Haymaker's collection of biographical essays is a valuable addition to the neurologist's library.

The second edition contains thirty-four new biographies, including several of subjects who—as living contemporaries—were originally left out. Sherrington is the most notable of these. There are one or two minor omissions (like Carl Weigert's work on myasthenia gravis and the thymus), which do not detract from the usefulness of this book. It is not meant to be a complete history of neurology, but a warm reminder of the men who shaped it.

(2) Silas Weir Mitchell (1829–1914), one of the founders of American neurology, is today remembered by neurologists for his classic study on 'Gunshot wounds and other injuries of nerves', based on experience gained in the Civil War, and for his description of causalgia. Psychiatrists also refer to his work, that concerned with neuroses, hysteria and the function of asylums being influential in its time. He was a man of great versatility and previous biographers have emphasized his literary achievements—novels, essays and poetry—at the expense of his medical work. Dr. Walter's enjoyable new biography restores the balance. The amazing range of Mitchell's scientific writings is apparent from the 250-entry bibliography; Dr. Walter presents them both critically and entertainingly, and reveals Mitchell through them.

P. D. LEWIS

CONTRIBUTORS

BOYES, JOHN, F.R.C.S.Ed., F.D.S.R.C.S.Ed., Professor of Dental Surgery, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh 1, Scotland.

CULE, JOHN, M.D., Abereion, Capel Dewi, Llandysul, Cardiganshire, Wales.

FLAMM, EUGENE S., M.D., Department of Neurosurgery, New York University School of Medicine, 550 First Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016, U.S.A.

FRANKLIN, ALFRED WHITE, M.A., M.B., B.Ch., F.R.C.P., 149 Harley Street, London W1N 2DE.

GOODMAN, D. C., M.A., D.Phil., 4 Parkway, London, NW11.

LEWIS, P.D., B.Sc., M.D., M.R.C.P., Department of Pathology, Royal Postgraduate Medical School, Hammersmith Hospital, London W12.

MCCONAGHEY, R. M. S., O.B.E., M.D., 35 Victoria Road, Dartmouth, Devon.

ROBINSON, R. A., M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O., D.P.M., Consultant Psychiatrist, Crichton Royal Hospital, Dumfries, Scotland.

RUSSELL, K. F., M.S.(Melb.), F.R.A.C.S., Department of History of Medicine, University of Melbourne, Parkville, N2, Victoria, Australia.

TAIT, ALLAN C., F.R.C.P.Ed., D.P.H., D.P.M., Physician Superintendent, Crichton Royal Hospital, Dumfries, Scotland.

TAIT, H. P., M.D., F.R.C.P.Ed., D.P.H., 59 Woodhall Road, Edinburgh EH13 0HF, Scotland.

TOURNEY, GARFIELD, M.D., School of Medicine, Wayne State University, and Lafayette Clinic, 951 E. Lafayette, Detroit, Michigan 48207, U.S.A.