

## Book Reviews

**Mary Bruins Allison**, *Doctor Mary in Arabia*, ed. Sandra Shaw, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1994, pp. xxxiv, 329, illus., \$42.50 (hardback 0-292-70454-2), \$17.95 (paperback 0-292-70456-9).

The author of this book is a retired missionary of the Reformed Church of America. Born in 1903 into a conservative Protestant family of Dutch origin in the American Midwest, she decided on a missionary career at an early age and was one of the first to follow the path through medical school pursued by many women missionaries of the period. After two internships and a year's study of Arabic, she proceeded to Arabia in 1934 and spent most of the next thirty years there as a medical missionary at the Reformed Church's hospital and mission in Kuwait. A malpractice complaint in 1964 led to her transfer to Bahrain, where she served at another mission hospital until 1970, and a final period of service in Oman from 1971 to 1975 preceded her retirement and return to the United States.

Allison's reminiscences of her career as a medical missionary in Arabia (based on a diary, letters, official reports, and her own recollections) are a variable mine of information on a period of dramatic change—in medicine as in all other fields—in the Persian Gulf region. Kuwait in the 1930s was a town of one-storey huts surrounded by mud walls, with no medical facilities whatever other than the mission hospital, and attitudes toward the world that could get a government teacher sacked for saying that the earth is round. By 1967, the country's phenomenal oil-boom development had included such comprehensive advances in medicine that the mission hospital was not only superfluous, but unable to meet the increasingly rigorous standards with which all medical establishments were required to comply. A vast array of cases were handled: ulcers and abscesses, back problems, toothache, eye disorders, abdominal and gynaecological complaints, coughs and fevers, tuberculosis, asthma, diabetes, dysentery, cholera, smallpox, epilepsy, childbirth and

paediatric matters, and a wide range of accidental injuries. Broader themes include, among many other things, relations with patients, local perceptions of western medicine, increasing confidence with respect to problems requiring surgery, and endless difficulties in acquiring needed supplies, keeping staff, and maintaining minimal order and basic professional and sanitary standards.

The author is disarmingly frank about her career. She makes it clear that missionary doctors regarded the local population as potential converts more than patients, and that conflicts between evangelistic and medical priorities were a recurrent problem at every level of the Reformed Church's missionary enterprise in Arabia. Even more striking are the repeated revelations of professional incompetence, carelessness in surgical procedure, ignorance of basic techniques, and blunders of the most unconscionable kind—administering novocaine instead of insulin to a diabetic, for example, or giving a child a fatal dose of cocaine instead of the intended simple remedy. Such cases often—and unsurprisingly—ended with the death of the patient, and one can hardly avoid the conclusion that it was only the awe with which western medicine was regarded that postponed the first malpractice suit until 1964.

The publisher presents this book as a contribution to Middle East anthropology and women's studies, but in fact it is neither. The chapters are roughly chronological, but within them the detailed material on offer is simply jumbled together with no sense of direction or continuity. The narrative is repetitive and frequently confused, and at times the underlying logic (such as it is) is clear only if the text is read with the agenda of American Protestant fundamentalism in mind—as, for example, in the conclusion that a certain individual took up an interest in horoscopes “for lack of a religion” (p. 156).

Readers seeking analysis or synthesis will be disappointed with this book, the usefulness of which is limited to its corpus of anecdotes and raw data. Numerous works by others involved in or familiar with missionary medicine in

Arabia are available for study, and in recent reprintings of such rare journals as *Arabia Calling* provide access to its extensive medical documentation. When advantage is taken of all this material to write the history of the American medical missionary enterprise in the Gulf, Allison's contribution will undoubtedly figure as an important source. To judge from her own material, one conclusion of such a study will probably prove to be that while the mission doctors performed innumerable worthwhile services at an individual level, the Gulf regimes did not have to advance too far in their awareness of modern medicine before they came to realize that they would be well advised to look in other directions for models for the professionalization of medicine in their own countries.

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Andrew Cunningham (ed.), *English manuscripts of Francis Glisson (1): from Anatomia hepatis (The anatomy of the liver), 1654*, Cambridge Wellcome Texts and Documents, no. 3, Cambridge, Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, 1994, pp. vii, 221, £15.00 (UK), £16.00 (elsewhere in Europe), £18.00 (elsewhere in the world) (0-9516693-3-8).

As the introduction to this volume points out, Francis Glisson's published writings have (with one exception—a pirated translation of one of them) remained in what is now the obscurity of Latin. The anatomists christened by his name the loose connective tissue packing together the branches of the bile duct, portal vein and hepatic artery, and then abandoned him by renaming it the "hepatobiliary capsule". The present transcript of one of his manuscripts written in English is therefore welcome, and opens a window long shuttered, revealing the original English of the introduction to his *Anatomia hepatis* and of the work's postscript on the lymphatic system; together they comprise some 23 per cent of the whole work. The main substance of the work evidently does not survive as its English

original. The first MS is a reasoned and rather lengthy exposition of the traditional terms of descriptive anatomy. The second MS supplies a remarkably wide-ranging account of the lymphatic system, chiefly defective (with hindsight) because Glisson clearly could not identify nerves reliably as such.

From material here quoted, it is clear that George Ent translated Glisson's English into the Latin in which it was published. Now that we can see that English, his achievement was remarkable. He deployed an active Latin vocabulary of enviable size, together with a profound judgement on what to amplify and what to delete. He also had an eye for a neat classical simile: he likens (p. 188) Nature assembling something from components and then taking it apart again (which he thought incredible), to "going back under starter's orders after completing the race". Glisson (p. 177) matches this with his own "Does Nature spin Penelope's thread, do and undo?" However, Nature does, indeed.

Ent's Latin gave Glisson's work access to the European common market of scientific scholarship. Yet his enormous contribution was not even mentioned in the published volume. Eleven years later, however, he reached a distinction any anatomist might envy: he was knighted within the very College of Physicians by Charles II at the close of a series of anatomy lectures he had given. And the *Dictionary of national biography* bears witness to his "excellent Latin, with many happy quotations from Greek and Latin poets". A distinguished product of an English public school's classical training? Alas, no; he was schooled in Rotterdam!

The present work clarifies by footnotes the meaning of any English word now obsolete or of changed significance. These are short and generally helpful, though not always reliable. On p. 25, Glisson's "genius" is interpreted by Ent's Latin as "inclination", but the footnote offers "talent". My reading of the OED inclines me to side with Ent. At the foot of p. 93, a surprising mole—the animal, and from Aristotle, too—scuttles in. I think he is an illusion; Ent translates as "naevus".