

Book Reviews

T. V. N. PERSAUD, *Early history of human anatomy. From antiquity to the beginning of the modern era*, Springfield, Illinois, C. C Thomas, 1984, 8vo, pp. ix, 200, illus., \$24.75.

Professor Persaud has written a book about the early history of anatomy on the assumption that without a knowledge of anatomy "the diagnosis and treatment of diseases are inconceivable." His purpose has been "to chart the momentous achievements and changing concepts from ancient speculations and philosophical notions to the dawn of the scientific era." Although Persaud has consulted various manuscript collections, this work is based mainly upon secondary source-material. The book is thus not primarily for an academic audience. It is more an overview of the topic aimed at introducing the general reader to the history of anatomy. With its good illustrations, the book is, on the whole, well produced, excepting the typographical errors and the few obvious mistranslations from Latin.

Persaud's book serves well to highlight the many difficulties the historian is presented with when engaged upon a project like this. One of the most obvious tendencies is to focus upon European conceptions of anatomy. While Persaud begins his work with a survey of anatomy in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and India, by chapter two he is already concentrating upon familiar ancient Greek notions of the body. By chapter six he is into the Roman Empire, and for the rest of the book he is concerned exclusively with the anatomical ideas of Western Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Another difficulty in such an enterprise, which this book well characterizes, concerns the method of selection. What is it that makes certain people, notions, theories, and so on, worthy of inclusion in general accounts such as this, and on what grounds are others excluded? Persaud's procedure is to include as evidence of anatomy any trace in the past which appears to him to correspond to the modern discipline of anatomy. Thus, the Mesopotamians are mentioned because they made models of internal organs for instructing their disciplines. Ancient Egyptian documents contain numerous anatomical terms: for instance, it is here for the first time that the word "brain" is mentioned. In Aristotle, he sees "the fundamental concepts of organic evolution". Alexandria is important to Persaud because here "the human body was dissected in order to understand more about its structure." This could be carried out because an "empiricism prevailed which was based upon scientific investigations, actual observations, clinical histories and analogies."

Another difficulty that Persaud's book exemplifies is the temptation for historians to interpret the past from the point of view of our modern conceptions. Persaud, having selected his material, describes the past in terms of modern diseases, operations, and instruments. He also sees no problem in reading into the past modern distinctions of theory and practice; medicine, surgery and anatomy; and form and function.

The problem with this approach is that by viewing the past from such a modern-day perspective it hinders any attempt to reconstruct accounts of the different notions of the body as people in the past themselves perceived it. Instead, such accounts of the history of anatomy present a series of "surprising", "bizarre", and "fanciful" anomalies. Persaud's story abundantly illustrates this. For example, to his way of thinking, "notwithstanding their devotion to spiritual pursuits, the Aryans surprisingly developed a rational and secular approach to the practice of healing." Even if this was in fact what the Aryans were doing, then presumably they themselves were far from surprised by it! Again, Hippocrates' knowledge of internal organs and muscles is described by Persaud as "confused and speculative", and his view of the relationship between lungs, kidneys, and bowels is thought to be "highly fanciful". Also, "bizarre" as many of Pliny's stories seem to Persaud and "despite the lack of any scientific merit to Pliny's astonishing interpretation of the natural world", Persaud is willing to admit that "his influence remained strong into the 17th century". Concerning Galen, Persaud considers that he "failed to differentiate nerves and tendons, and his inadequate and distorted account of the blood vessels prevented him from discovering the pulmonary circulation." He tells us that this was because

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Galen's physiological system was "completely lacking any scientific basis", and was in fact a "highly fanciful concept of bodily function". For Persaud, "Galen's death heralded a long era with a predictable outcome. Medicine, and the study of human anatomy in particular, languished in passive moribundity only to reach a climactic end in 1543 with the publication of *De corporis humani fabrica*." Persaud's story ends with an account of the progress of anatomy from Mondino, the "restorer of anatomy", through Leonardo da Vinci to Andreas Vesalius, "the first man of modern science".

Persaud's interpretation will probably be passed over by scholars in the field as being too whiggish. The book may, however, prove to be popular among students new to the field, especially among medical students. Indeed, this is probably precisely the audience at which Persaud (himself an eminent medical doctor if the list of qualifications after his name on the title-page is anything to go by) is targeting his book.

It is this aspect of Persaud's book which is probably the most interesting. Far from being particularly revealing about the *history* of anatomy, this work is more of an insight into the concerns and interests of modern anatomists and how they perceive their own discipline today.

Cornelius O'Boyle

Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, Cambridge

JUDITH LEAVITT, *Brought to bed. Childbearing in America, 1750-1950*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, 8vo, pp. ix, 284, illus., £19.50.

Feminist historians are amongst the leaders in presenting medical history from the patient's point of view. Leavitt, whose previous contributions to the history of women and health in America are well known, provides us here with a vivid and moving account of the experience of childbirth in America. The impulse that led to this book was the birth of her own children; this, she says, gave her profound appreciation of the importance of the old ideal of childbirth as a social occasion in which women banded together to provide mutual support. Through such support, "childbirth customs and rituals formed a cornerstone of women's group identity. By attending confinements, women strengthened their life-long mutual bonds". This is a constantly reiterated theme, which forms the background against which she explores the consequences of the invasion of childbirth by the male physician ("physician" in the American sense), and, above all, by the move of childbirth to hospital. These are seen as events which not only destroyed the much-needed support of women in labour by other women, but made matters worse by the clumsy or unnecessary interventions of physicians and their tendency to transmit infection. It is suggested that modern women may have lost more than they have gained by the impact of "impersonal science" on obstetric care. Curiously, very little is said about the presence of fathers in the delivery room and the importance of this in bonding the family closely together. Was this because it is seen as a battle that has been won and is taken for granted; or is it regarded as unimportant; or is it perhaps that the presence of fathers is something that disrupts supportive groups of women?

Today, parents of both sexes will tell you that childbirth is not only an intensely emotional event, it is also for most people by far their most important contact with the medical and nursing professions. The subjective and emotional nature of discussions of childbirth is also found in histories of the subject—partly because here, more than anywhere, history is felt to be so closely connected to present practices. Indeed, many histories of obstetric care fall clearly into one of two categories: the older sort, which were written to stress the "wonderful advances" of medical science and the consequent saving of lives; and the more recent, which so often attack the medical profession for authoritarianism, insensitivity, and for robbing women today of the "wonderful experience of having a baby". So copious are the records of obstetric care that it is easy to write either version and give it spurious authority by numerous references. Faced with such polarization of attitudes, the unpolemical historian of obstetric care must work with a cool and balanced approach. In the first four-fifths of this book, the author walks this tightrope with