

THOMAS ROGERS FORBES, *Surgeons at the Bailey. English forensic medicine to 1878*, New Haven, Conn., and London, Yale University Press, 1986, 8vo, pp. xiii, 255, illus., £20.00.

Since the history of British legal medicine is uncharted, let alone the subject of definitive studies, to attempt a synthesis is a bold step. The range of potential subject matter and sources is so vast and ill-defined that any historian will confront dilemmas. Forbes attempts to cut through them to provide what he himself calls the first “chronicle” of the topic. He does this by extracting “medical” material from one extremely rich, continuous and connected set of criminal trial records, the Old Bailey Sessions Papers (beginning in 1684), commenting as he goes along in the light of relevant secondary sources. The result is unsatisfactory: at times we have little beyond a listing of what Forbes (and modern forensic pathologists) judge to be “medical” evidence as it appears in these records. On the positive side, though, here is a readable introduction to a great range of case material, undoubtedly raising fascinating questions, of great contemporary relevance, about how “expert” knowledge interacts with public affairs. And there are more than a few bizarre and gruesome tales.

Forbes resolves one dilemma, namely, which audience to write for, by plumping for doctors rather than historians. Thus he organizes the great bulk of the case material along lines which reflect a standard forensic test—such as the late Keith Simpson’s own (Simpson provides a Foreword here). As with a modern forensic text, what gets recorded are empirical statements about investigative procedures, the state of bodies, the results of chemical analyses, and so on, often with little record as to what the case is otherwise about. This recording does suggest what a range of “expert” beliefs played a role. Much more seriously, the result in Forbes’s work is that it is not a problem in itself to know what is “medical” or “expert” evidence, since modern medical understandings preselected the whole scheme of organization. Important questions concerning who and what were recognized as expert by the courts and the conditions (procedural and social) in which such “expertise” had influence are left untouched.

The book begins with an overview, covering the legal and institutional setting of what is now forensic medicine. Here and later, Forbes relies on and quotes from secondary sources, some of which even at their best repeat tired clichés which themselves ought to be the subject of historical work (like the coronership impeding the progress of forensic medicine compared with Continental Europe). Secondary sources, as yet, provide no basis for describing matters that very much impinge on Forbes’s study. One might mention here the question of the relation between medical evidence in civil cases and the development of forensic occupations in the criminal area; understanding the range of issues (political, financial, and administrative) which went into major modern legislation on the coronership and how this affected the expert forensic occupations; or even assessing the medico-legal contribution of such major figures as Robert Christison or Alfred Swaine Taylor.

Thus this is a book which will attract forensic practitioners as a goldmine of historical comment. But historians may feel that the complete lack of a conclusion, after pages listing statements of every conceivable forensic “medical” character in Old Bailey trials, signals the need for a more broadly based and more critical assessment of what the subject of the history of forensic medicine might be and how it has changed over the centuries.

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MONICA E. BALY. *Florence Nightingale and the nursing legacy*, London, Croom Helm, 1986, 8vo, pp. vi, 237, £22.50.

In 1855, with Florence Nightingale the nation’s popular heroine, a fund was opened for the public to show their appreciation in a practical way. Monica Baly relates how money flowed in from every quarter, though not without a little persuasion on the part of the organisers. Nearly £45,000 was collected—perhaps the equivalent of £1,000,000 today. Miss Nightingale’s friends knew that she would not accept any personal gift but thought that the opportunity to found an institution for the training of nurses would meet with her approval. Not everyone considered this a worthwhile project; Lady Palmerston thought the Nightingale Fund “great humbug” and described the nurses as “very good, now” even though they did “drink a little”.