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Chapters of Medical History

The Dawn of Modern Medicine. By Albert H. Buck. Yale University Press

A LOOSE and disorderly arrangement greatly lessens the usefulness of this stately volume, which appears as “the third work published by the Yale University Press on the Williams Memorial Publication Fund.” Dr. Buck says in his preface that it is in the main “a continuation and amplification” of his earlier work, “The Growth of Medicine.” After completing the latter he was unexpectedly given access to a collection of medical works in the library of Transylvania College, at Lexington, Kentucky. This collection purchased in Paris in 1819, had remained unexplored by historians of medicine for nearly a century. Dr. Buck went to Lexington and spent seven months studying it. Unluckily, the fruits of his labor do not testify very eloquently to the value of the collection. The material of genuine interest that he presents might have been discovered without difficulty in any of the medical libraries of France or in the superb collection of the Surgeon General of the Army at Washington.

Worse, the circumstances of his inquiry give a decidedly lopsided character to his book. All the stress is laid upon French physicians and surgeons at the expense of their colleagues in other countries, and though it is undoubtedly true that French medical men, during the period he covers—“from the early part of the eighteenth century to about 1860”—played parts of enormous importance in the development of their art, particularly on the surgical side, it is equally true that advances of the utmost value were also made elsewhere. As a result of this stress men of obviously inferior talents are given a false significance. For example, Raphael-Bienvenu Sabatier. Sabatier was a respectable surgeon in Paris from 1756 to 1811, “highly esteemed by his professional brethren,” but there is not the slightest indication that he stood appreciably above many others of his kind, or that he had anything whatsoever to do with “the dawn of modern medicine.” So with Desgenettes, Napoleon’s chief medical inspector. Desgenettes was Larrey’s superior, but is certainly not to be mentioned in the same breath with him. If any one man was to blame for the chronic inefficiency of Napoleon’s medical service, Desgenettes was. He contributed nothing to surgery. And the only example of his medical skill cited by Dr. Buck shows him to have been an utter ignoramus.

Unfortunately, this lack of a sense of proportion, so essential to the medical historian, is not the worst defect of Dr. Buck’s book. It contains a number of slips that almost deserve to be called howlers. On page 109, for example, in discussing the pre-vaccination method of protecting patients against smallpox by the heroic device of inoculating them with the actual disease, he gravely says that “no satisfactory evidence was forthcoming that these inoculations possessed the slightest degree of genuine protective power.” And on page 50 he falls into the almost inconceivable error of confusing Konrad Johann Martin Langenbeck, one of the founders of modern surgery, with his equally famous nephew, Bernhard Rudolph, the successor of

Dieffenbach at Berlin and for many years the chief military surgeon of Germany. It is difficult to imagine such a blunder being made by an author with access to ordinary medical reference books, or, indeed, to ordinary encyclopedias. What one derives from it and from Dr. Buck's frequent complaints about his difficulties in research—on page 262, for instance, he says that he is unable to find out what sort of work is done at the Saint-Louis Hospital in Paris at the present time—is a feeling that he is an historian full of a laudable curiosity and diligence, but not very well informed and surely not gifted with any special capacity for his task.

His book, in brief, presents a good deal of interesting raw material, but it is not a history. Its arrangement is casual and often absurd. It confuses men of the highest importance and men of no importance at all. It presents a chaotic and unintelligible picture of the progress of the medical sciences during the period under review. The syndics of the Williams Memorial Fund would do well to choose and edit their publications more carefully.

(Source: Google Books, "The Nation," : <http://url.ie/z3dg>)