

## Book Reviews

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VIVIAN NUTTON, *From Democedes to Harvey: studies in the history of medicine* (Collected Studies series; CS 277), London, Variorum Reprints, 1988, pp. xi, 323, £32.00.

It is a pleasure to welcome this collection of fourteen of Dr Nutton's major articles ranging in date from 1971 to 1986. There has been an impressive resurgence of interest in ancient medical history in recent years—a resurgence to which Nutton has contributed in no small measure. There can be few scholars who can match his wide command at once of the epigraphical as of the literary sources not just for medicine in Graeco-Roman antiquity but also for its later influence. Many of these papers show him at work on the fine detail of the interpretation of obscure, lacunose, disputed evidence—as in the 1971 article dealing with two passages in the *Digest* on doctors' immunities or the 1985 *Medizinhistorisches Journal* trailer for his monograph on John Caius and the manuscripts of Galen. But then Nutton is quite a hand also at the *tour d'horizon*, even if he never loses sight, as many others do in such enterprises, of the lacunae in the evidence and of the sense that the grand synthesis must remain in places speculative and provisional.

The studies are divided into three not altogether firmly demarcated parts: Galen, Medicine and Society in Classical Antiquity, and the Classical Tradition of Medicine in the Renaissance. Galen, it must be said, figures throughout and not just in the three pieces (Galen and medical autobiography, the chronology of his early career, and Galen in the eyes of his contemporaries) which constitute the section formally devoted to him. Nutton describes his own intellectual Odyssey (he says transition) as one from “putative law student through Cambridge classics don to London medical historian”. Two of the features that stand out are, first, his increasing confidence in his handling of the evidence of his key witness, Galen, and secondly the growth in the temporal span of his interests. Nutton was never *uncritical*, but at times he writes as if he found it hard to be as sceptical of Galen's accounts as experience shows is necessary. In 1972 Nutton was writing: “even if we accept Galen's own description of his own actions and motives”. He did not, to be sure, but it was as if that were a viable option. By 1984 the problem is more firmly identified as one of assembling evidence and arguments to control the extent of Galen's exaggerations. In the task of unmasking Galen's rhetoric much remains to be done and we still badly need the comprehensive, up-to-date monograph on the man that Dr Nutton would be ideally placed to deliver.

But if Galen takes pride of place, these studies range far and wide. Much of the evidence for the interpretation of the social position of the doctor at different times and places in Graeco-Roman antiquity is epigraphical and elicits from Nutton a different set of skills, as does in turn the detective work involved in deciphering and interpreting the manuscript notes of a Caius or Harvey. Much of this material is highly specialized, technical and dry: but Nutton enlivens his presentation with a puckish wit, relishing (one of his words) the well-judged syllepsis (as in his opening salvo: “the collected works of Galen occupy a smaller place in the affections of classical scholars than on the library shelf”) and, especially, the teasing anecdote. Curiosity is aroused when at the beginning of an article on ‘Pliny and Roman medicine’ Nutton spends a page or so on one Mme de Zoutelandt, whom “the regular attender at the salons in the Paris of Louis XV could not have failed to meet”. The connection, in this case, is a little remote, but it transpires that Mme de Z. tried to publicize Jan van Beverwyck's defence of medicine against the attack by Montaigne . . . which was based on Pliny.

More substantially, it may be suggested that as Nutton's range has increased, so the danger of his being swamped by his material has grown larger. There is a contrast here between the firmly targetted and finely executed discussion of the history of the idea of seeds of disease (from *Medical History* 1983) and the piece on humanist surgery (1985): the latter makes out its central claim (that there were surgeons, as well as physicians, who can be classed as humanists) but hardly does justice to the series of questions that the mass of material adduced might suggest. One would have liked discussion and analysis of the *varieties* of terms of abuse deployed at

different stages in the long-drawn-out quarrels over status. If “vagabond” and “charlatan” are all-purpose accusations, was it just Lange who moved against Jews and renegade monks?

The collection as a whole is to be welcomed: but two minor complaints to end. Nutton writes in the Preface that he has taken the opportunity to correct some minor typographical errors and to add a small selection of references to more recent work. There are no problems on the second score: but the number of misprints that remain is distracting. The article on the city physician in classical antiquity and medieval Italy is particularly disfigured and in some cases the meaning is affected. For “text” on page 21, for instance, read “tax” and for “lectors” in note 46 “electors”, and if “fahter” on page 30 is just bad luck, to have Lancelot Browne, in the Caius article, called the father of William Harvey will throw the reader until the Harvey article itself reveals the missing ‘in-law’.

Secondly the usefulness of the collection would have been substantially increased if it had been provided not just with the—fairly full—Index Nominum, but also with an index of passages and documents and indeed a subject index. These papers explore a rich set of themes—far richer than I can indicate here—to do with doctors’ salaries, conditions of work, prestige, travels, public debates and contests, relations with others from Emperors to drug-sellers, and much more. But while the Index Nominum helps the reader to follow up the prosopography of ancient and medieval medicine, no equivalent subject index is supplied which would allow quick cross-referencing to these and other themes.

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*The first report on researches into the medieval hospital at Soutra, Lothian region, SHARP (Soutra Hospital Archaeoethnopharmacological Research Project) Practice 1, Edinburgh, SHARP, 1987, 4to, pp. 129, illus., £6.50 (incl. UK p&p), from SHARP, 3rd floor flat eastmost, 36 Hawthornvale, Edinburgh EH6 4JN.*

It has long been the hope of medical and social historians that general observations on the nature of poverty and disease in the Middle Ages should be tested through a series of local studies of hospitals. Such studies, a number of which have been produced in recent years for France and Italy, are only in their infancy in this country. Writing the history of hospitals is rendered especially difficult by the fact that only an interdisciplinary approach can adequately explore the nature of such multi-functional institutions. The skills needed for a combined study of documentary and archaeological evidence which pertains to the religious, medical, administrative, and financial aspects of hospital life are many, and can be most effectively deployed through team work. In making an integrated approach their aim, the early announcements of SHARP, the group set up to excavate and study Soutra Hospital in the Lothian, boded well for the future.

The First Report on progress includes a general introduction to the project’s aims and to existing literature on English hospitals, a survey of evidence on medical practices in hospitals, two sections on medical practitioners, discussion of medicinal materials and their use, and a description of Soutra’s site and environment. There are also two appendices: one on Soutra as a leper house, the excavation of the site, a geophysical survey of the site, and a summary of documents concerning the hospital; and another on the structure and funding of the project, and its members’ academic qualifications.

The contents, however, in no way live up to expectations. Among the summaries of such classics as R. M. Clay’s *The medieval hospitals of England*, and the occasional citation of examples from hospital life gleaned from the published cartularies of other hospitals, little can be found that is truly useful. Work has not yet begun on the excavation of the site, where the group could have produced new insights. On the other hand, among the reports on those preliminary examinations which have been executed, the *Geoscan* report is obscured by highly technical terminology, and little is done to integrate the photographic analyses of the site within the framework of an historical study.