encouraging a sturdy research tradition,
imploring naval surgeons to pursue scientific
interests whenever they had a chance.

Improvements in nursing and hospital
facilities mirrored advancements in civilian
medicine during the latter part of the century,
and successful attempts in reducing (although
not eradicating) the drunkenness problem
meant that, by the beginning of the twentieth
century, naval medicine was no longer the
grim business it had once been, even though
its reputation continued to lag behind.

Survey of the Fleet both confirms
stereotypes and reveals new dimensions to the
men who became naval surgeons and the work
they undertook. That their lives were tough
and their work erratic will not be surprising to
readers; but by drawing out the context they
were operating in, economically and
professionally, McLean breathes new life into
an area of medical history which has long been
associated with macho and triumphant
histories of old. Written to appeal beyond an
academic audience, it is a clear and accessible
read – although there is a tendency throughout
for the reader to be rather bombarded with
names, dates and statistics. Additionally, given
McLean’s assertion that ‘naval surgeons were
certainly required to be ingenious’ (p. 46), the
interplay between innovation in military and
civilian medical cultures might have been
more closely interrogated, particularly the
impact of the former upon the latter. However,
any unanswered questions are not necessarily
flaws in McLean’s work, instead they are an
invitation for other medical historians to
embark on their own journeys into this still
relatively unexplored, but intriguing historical
field.

Sally Frampton,
University College London

Nadja Durbach, Spectacle of Deformity:
Freak Shows and Modern British Culture
(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press,
2010), pp. xiii + 273, £27.95/$39.95,

Historiographically speaking, the study of
freak shows morphs from that of monsters
(teratology) to the identity politics of race,
class, gender, ethnicity, and disability of the
late twentieth century. The trope – with freaks
as ‘key to the production of the categories of
“the self” and “the other”’ (p. 17) – is by now
fairly worn, but Nadja Durbach makes a good
show of it in five engaging and illustrated
chapters focused on, in turn, ‘the Elephant
Man’, ‘the Double-Bodied Hindoo Boy’, ‘the
Hairy Belle’, the would-be ‘primitive’ Aztecs
and ‘Earthen men’, and finally, ‘Cannibal King’
(for the further locating of the freak show
within the larger history of Victorian and
Edwardian entertainment and commercialised
leisure, as well as British labour, social and
economic history). Durbach has nothing to say
on the etymology of ‘freaks’, but she makes it
clear how in nineteenth-century British culture
they became a potent source for the making up
and corseting of what it was to be ‘human’ –
be it in terms of body shape and size, colour,
sexuality, and distinctiveness from those
further down the chain of animal forms.

Hence, freaks also served powerfully for the
emerging-as-dominant evolutionary discourses
of the second half of the century – of humans,
races, and civilisations. Middle-class
scrapbooks were lovingly filled with their
photographs, suggesting how the nomativities
were recreated and consolidated in domestic
settings.

Durbach suggests that the images sold
something else as well: the very idea of
images as a means of mass communication. As
intriguing is the material she provides on the
culture of the freak show itself – its rise and
decline, and the various fates and fortunes of
the impresarios and ‘freaks’ alike: for
example, if, like me, you uncritically
consumed Frederick Treves’ famous essay on
the Elephant Man – and had it compounded,
oddly enough, in David Lynch’s film version –
Durbach’s first chapter will lift the scales from
your eyes. The Elephant Man (Joseph Merrick) may have had a hard time of it in the freak show trade from which Treves ‘rescued’ him, but he at least had the camaraderie of his fellow freaks, a degree of privacy, and the dignity of earning his own income. It was a different story in ‘the elephant house’ in the London Hospital (as it was popularly known in the medical culture of the 1880s): he was not only transformed into a piteous subject of Victorian philanthropy, but made a spectacle for the prying, prurient eyes of doctors and their friends, with no modesty spared. Treves frequently photographed Merrick in the nude and made his life sufficiently unbearable that Merrick willingly delivered himself to the workhouse and, after once again being captured by Treves, took his life in despair. Of course, from at least as far back as the sixteenth century, the ‘spectacle of deformity’ was as much within medical as it was in popular culture – think of the collecting and display of ‘anomalous’ body parts undertaken by John Hunter in the late eighteenth century; but in the nineteenth century it was increasingly in that context – with the ‘objects’ alive, rather than stuffed or pickled – that it found legitimacy. By the mid-twentieth century, with virtually all culture medicalised, it was in the medical arena alone that it survived: as one of Durbach’s sources suggests, the freak show that so benefited the medical profession, may have met its decline through the very act of appropriating its wares.

However, Durbach’s study is far from tending to the naïve view that doctors themselves make their own culture; as her other chapters also submit – albeit less with regard specifically to the culture of medicine – what the history of the freak show revealingly illuminates is the production, reproduction, and negotiation of dominant values and epistemology in relation to wider socioeconomic and political change. This surely is no less with regard to exhibiting freaks historically – as the epitome of the study of the Other – although on this and how it has served our own self-fashioning culture of ostensible self-fashioners, the Spectacle of Deformity remains silent.

Roger Cooter,
University College London


Thomas Schlich starts his Origins of Organ Transplantation, Surgery and Laboratory Science, 1880–1930 with a critique of the historiography of this surgical field. He notes that while the first transplant surgeons had been initially well aware of the novelty of their practices and concepts, they soon forgot these were new. Moreover, he argues that the historiography of organ replacement has since de-historicised, perhaps not the actual practice, but certainly the concept. The prevailing perception, so he shows, blends ahistoricity with sentimentalism. It regards the idea of organ transplantation as one of mankind’s ancient dreams, a medical development awaited for centuries, a timeless and spaceless logic. Schlich rightly rejects this perception: he notes that most accounts were written by transplant surgeons who had had no training in historical methodology. But he equally criticises the few historians who did tackle the subject for embracing the conceptual basis of modern transplant surgery as an unproblematic given. Nevertheless, he does not regard the ahistorical perception of organ transplantation as a simple product of ignorance, mistake or negligence; rather, he points at its ideological function: promoting transplant surgery (perhaps against the backdrop of its early failure to deliver on its promise).

Schlich’s intention is to re-historicise organ transplantation. The fact that he starts with a critique of the existing historiography is only