

Book Reviews

techniques and methodology it has vindicated the parish registers as the prime pre-census record of English demography after two generations of growing doubts about their flaws. Only the very highest technical sophistication has allowed this to be done – and the harvest of further “reconstitutions” is yet to come. Relatively little space, and much less technical sophistication, has gone into the sections of the text which seek to relate demographic mechanisms to their economic, social, and cultural contexts. The principal exercises undertaken are to establish the correlations with the Phelps Brown national indexes of builders’ wages and prices (now rather elderly and frail survivors from the 1950s). These reveal that population pressure pushed up food prices (the positive correlation only being broken after the Napoleonic Wars); that rapid population growth had an adverse effect upon real wages until after 1801; and that marriage rates, with gross reproduction rates and cohort reproduction rates, moved with real wages (the latter only after considerable time-lags).

The Phelps Brown indexes are too crude to bear much weight of this sort (particularly given the time lags of 15–65 years built into the correlations) and this sort of relationship of the demographic variables to context cries out for detailed regional and local analysis. With such deep-seated regional variations in all the relevant parameters in eighteenth-century England (including variations in the rates of population growth), national indexes mask much of the reality and do not prove the best basis for analysis. Consequently, social and economic historians, including historians of medicine, who are particularly concerned with the interrelations between demographic change and its context, will not find many answers to their questions here. Death rates and mortality variations are little regarded: correlations with wheat prices and real wages are poor, which suggests that disease was the main marginal determinant. Short-run fluctuations in death rates were “very largely determined by variations in factors . . . amongst which those determining the prevalence of lethal micro-organisms, though multiform and for the most part unobservable, may have been the most significant” (p. 354).

But little is said in any detail, particularly once the “dismal peaks” produced by main surges of epidemic disease had faded after 1727–30. Again, regional analysis is awaited – and the absence of London from the parishes chosen for the sample must be influential in this regard. Inoculation and vaccination, medicine, hospitals, etc., do not feature in the index. Nor (more surprisingly, perhaps) is there any discussion on the fertility side of the demographic equation of limitation of births within marriage (which was the subject of a famous article by Professor Wrigley in 1966). For historians of medicine, therefore, this most important volume does not answer many of their questions – but it does establish a large agenda for them.

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THE KEYNES PRESS INAUGURAL

WILLIAM NORMAN PICKLES, *Epidemiology in country practice*, with original preface by Major Greenwood and foreword by David Barker, London, Keynes Press (British Medical Association), 1983, 8vo, pp. xvi, 110, £35.00.

RICHARD ASHER, *A sense of Asher. A new miscellany*, selected and introduced by Ruth Holland, 8vo, pp. xv, 97, £35.00.

LORD MOYNIHAN, *Truants. A story of some who deserted medicine yet triumphed*, with a new introduction by Michael Harmer, 8vo, pp. vii, 73, £35.00.

It is difficult to think of anything more fitting, or which would have given greater pleasure to Sir Geoffrey Keynes, than the inception of the Keynes Press, whose aim is to reprint “classics with a medical interest published in the period of Keynes’s life” – which luckily was close on a century. It is probably no coincidence that the first three books to appear were written respectively by a surgeon, a general practitioner, and a physician. Each of the books is published in a limited edition of 300 copies, and each is individually designed with high-quality paper, printing, and binding. Three further volumes are planned for next spring, and the British Medical Association has taken the initiative in founding the Press; the introductory leaflet gives further details of the type-face and paper used. The first three volumes are certainly pearls of book production – but at £35 each they are pearls of some, even if not of great, price – and I am

Book Reviews

somewhat tempted to put in a word for the swine. Of course, William Pickles's classic on *Epidemiology in country practice* is readily available in medical libraries; but I suspect that Lord Moynihan's *Truants* is not, and Ruth Holland's collection of Richard Asher's writings is certainly not thus available. I hope that after a decent interval, *A sense of Asher* will be reprinted, possibly even as a paperback, for it is both excellent in itself, and an admirable complement to *Richard Asher talking sense*, the selection made by Sir Francis Avery Jones.

The three first volumes were reviewed at some length in the *British Medical Journal* of 3 December 1983; and the contents of each of them are there clearly delineated. Perhaps I can depart still further from formality, and simply give my own personal reaction to each of them.

The copies of Pickles's book which I have come across previously have tended to be rather well-worn; and it was an added pleasure to have it in one's hands in superb mint condition. And re-reading it, I was again aware of the quality of the man who more than anyone else brought a new dimension into family practice, by exploiting the advantages of his long spell in the same practice for making real advances in epidemiology. These are not advantages to be found in the practices of inner cities; yet over the years there have been many rural doctors, but few with the vision and pertinacity of William Pickles, let alone the faithful recording of his observations made by his wife and daughter.

There is more than a hint in Michael Harmer's introduction to the book by Moynihan that this is not what a tutor would call "his best work"; and this Linacre Lecture of his is indeed compared unfavourably, and in so many words, with his Romanes Lecture. The construction of his list of truants is as random as the Madamina aria in *Don Giovanni* – but lacks Mozart's music. There are, of course, good things in it, and his account of the rather pointless discussions whether medicine is a science or an art brings forth a sentence which could not be bettered: "The quarrel whether medicine is science or art has not yet quite subsided, nor will it be silenced until men recognize that medicine has contact with both: with science in its enquiries, with art in its practice". But to deal with over eighty "truants" in sixty-seven pages implies a certain superficiality; and his paragraph on Conan Doyle does not mention Sherlock Holmes, which must set something of a record in omission.

I don't think it is only my physician's bias which makes me give the preference to the Richard Asher collection. There is an admirable preface, and the richness of the store is shown by the excellence of this collection of gleanings, after the classics on the dangers of going to bed, Munchausen's syndrome, and straight and crooked thinking in medicine have been pre-empted. Richard Asher took great pains with his writing; and then went on to take the additional trouble which is needed to conceal the previous labour. And how much the reader benefits. It would not be fair, though more than tempting, to quote from the book reviews or the "Asherisms"; but what about the onomatopoeia in this description of a somewhat untranquil maternity block – "In its capacious and hygienic spaces each sound echoes and re-echoes so that the cacophony of crockery blends with the banging of doors, and the mewling and puking of the babies is drowned by the jangle of wrangling bedpans." This last phrase does not make much sense, unless "wrangling" is a transferred epithet to the utensils from those who handle them. In another context, the whole passage might be thought excessive – but in its own context, a chapter on noise, I think it succeeds.

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ANTHONY S. WOHL, *Endangered lives. Public health in Victorian Britain*, London, J. M. Dent, 1983, 8vo, pp. viii, 440, illus., £17.50.

Endangered lives is, as the popular style of its title suggests, a general work. As a beginner's introduction by a social historian, it fills what has hitherto been a void in the bibliography of the subject. From infant mortality (the "most sensitive of hygienic barometers" for contemporaries), through personal hygiene and nutrition, filthy streets, sewers and water supplies, Professor Wohl provides a guide to the basic features of living conditions in the Victorian city, and tries to evoke for the reader the very sight and smell of the Victorians. Having discussed the domestic problems, he moves on to analyse the structure of the preventive medical organiza-