

Book Reviews

Introducing the new Book Reviews Editor

This will be my final issue serving as book reviews editor for *Medical History*, though I look forward to a continuing role on its editorial board. Beginning in 2013, book reviews for the journal will be edited by Professor Akihito Suzuki, of Keio University, and a new section on new media reviews will be edited by Professors Stephen Casper and Mariola Espinosa, of Clarkson University and Yale University, respectively. These developments are important steps in the broadening the global reach of the journal in an era of digital scholarship, and promise to yield great benefits for readers, scholars, and the field as a whole.

Jeremy Greene

Johns Hopkins University, USA

doi:10.1017/mdh.2012.52

W.J. Bishop, *Knife, Fire and Bolling Oil*, The Early History of Surgery (London: Robert Hale, 2011), pp. 192, £9.99, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-7090-9155-4.

Bishop's *History*, albeit under a different title, reappears like an old friend, indeed I bought my copy over forty years ago. It has many merits. It is inexpensive, clearly written and gives a good general account of the history of surgery from prehistoric times until the 1890s in a brief and accessible form. As a short guide to its subject, it still retains some value, for it straddles the gap between chapters in general surveys and more extended treatments of individuals or the subject in general. It is primarily orientated towards a medical audience and is more concerned with exposition than with analysis.

But there are also glaring weaknesses. History has moved on and surgery has developed out of all recognition since this book was written. Whether we are talking about transplantation or traumatology, cancer surgery or damaged spines, so much has happened that one can only feel short-changed by a narrative that ends at the end of the nineteenth century and, even more so, when the book's trajectory is one of relentless progress. The final chapter, on Lister and after, becomes little more than a hurried list of famous names and 'firsts', useful as a preliminary orientation, but without any guidance as to how one might proceed further.

Even in the earlier chapters much has changed to render many of Bishop's judgments out of date. The evidence of archaeological finds, whether of instruments or skulls showing trepanation, has added considerably to our knowledge of ancient surgery, both its triumphs and limitations, and the evidence of surgical texts in vernaculars other than English, many published only in the last thirty years, has modified the gruesome picture painted by the book's new title. Similarly, the notion of a widespread opposition between physician and surgeon in the Middle Ages and Renaissance has become vastly more nuanced thanks to the work of Michael McVaugh and Margaret Pelling, among others, while the study of

instruments has moved away from the purely antiquarian and the province of collectors of antiques.

This is also a book written before the study of the social history of medicine, so that the social context of many of these operations is almost entirely missing. The growth of schools of surgery in the Po valley has links with the development of universities and, to take a more modern example, industrialisation, as well as warfare, has a major part to play. The availability of commercial artificial limbs brought about a change in surgical techniques, as surgeons operated in a way that would best adapt to the new limbs. Historians such as Christopher Lawrence have also queried many of the old ideas about Lister and Listerism.

But, at the same time, modern historians themselves must take some of the blame. There is very little available between major histories and chapters in more general histories of medicine that can give the interested reader a good grasp of the history of surgery as it has been interpreted over the last two or three decades. Writing such a book is not easy, especially in light of the great surgical advances of more recent times, and one can see why many have eschewed the task. So Bishop still continues to fill a gap, however much one might lament it.

Vivian Nutton
St Albans, UK

doi:10.1017/mdh.2012.53

Chryssi Bourbou, *Health and Disease in Byzantine Crete (7th–12th Centuries AD)*, *Medicine in the Medieval Mediterranean 1* (Ashgate, 2011), pp. 264, hardcover, \$99, ISBN: 978-0754666158.

The reviewed book examines health, nutrition and lifestyle in medieval Crete. The analysis is based on a detailed survey of human remains found on the island. These findings are then contextualised, using archeological and written sources. The book starts with a foreword by Donald Ortner, which is followed by an introduction by Bourbou. The first chapter outlines the historical, cultural and medical background of medieval Crete, along with a description of the burial sites examined, including detailed statistics. It also describes the methodology used for the anthropological evaluation of the remains.

The second chapter discusses selected specimens found at these burial sites. Here, teeth are of particular interest, as they display the nutrition of the specific individual. Bourbou notes a high rate of dental diseases, in particular in the male population, which she attributes to lack of dental hygiene and possibly a different diet of the male and female population. (Previous research had suggested that the nutrition in Byzantine Crete would have contributed to good oral health.) Other findings in this chapter include a higher incidence of degenerative joint diseases among the male population, evidence of hematopoietic disorders, periostosis, a possible case of sacral actinomycosis, a higher incidence of bone fractures amongst males, a perimortem occipital skull fracture, most likely caused by a weapon, and a 9.8% incidence of spina bifida occulta. This chapter is followed by a very good and detailed discussion of infant health. Chapter four presents the results of an isotope analysis of the remains. It concludes that the nutrition of the persons in question is in accordance with the descriptions in written sources.