



A POX ON THE PROVINCES

Roger Rolls, Jean Guy and John R Guy (eds)
Bath University Press, Bath (1990)
 222 pages. Price £35.00

A pox on the provinces is a collection of papers presented at the 12th annual congress of the British Society for the History of Medicine, held in Bath in April 1988. The connecting theme is English provincial medicine which, the editors suggest, has suffered neglect by medical historians.

There are 21 short papers ranging from druidic magic and Roman medicine in Wales to various aspects of the history of hospitals, hospital medicine, medical apprenticeship in the 18th century, a valuable account of the development of a database on 18th century medical practitioners and an account of an interesting but little known 18th century physician in Wells who was a noted musician and composer. In a paper on the history of specialists and specialist hospitals the author writes an account of the lying-in (maternity) hospitals without mentioning their most prominent feature: that until the 1880s they were plagued by such a high level of death owing to puerperal fever that they came close to being abolished.

This hard back book is well printed and lavishly illustrated. While there are some valuable contributions, the quality of the papers is uneven. Some may have been suitable as talks at a conference but, as their authors would probably concede, they would not normally be accepted for publication in a historical periodical. This raises the question whether the proceedings of conferences should be published, and if so, why?

In dealing with the question, I must emphasize that I am concerned not only with this volume of the history of medicine, but with conferences on all aspects of medicine. No one denies that conferences, congresses, and symposia can be valuable occasions. People meet each other, exchange ideas and their interest is stimulated. Conferences also allow people to visit new places and if the venue is well chosen, attenders may even be able to sunbathe or swim during an English winter. Having a puritan streak, I have always believed that conferences should be held in February in Grimchester or Dullborough to ensure that only the really keen attend.

Although the exchange of ideas should be sufficient reason for a conference, it must be admitted there are strong motives for publication: a sponsor may demand it; the organizer or editor may feel that a book will be useful for advancing reputation and career; the publication of reports of other conferences in the same discipline will make the organizer want to do this too; or the organizer may feel that without the bait of publication people may refuse to attend. One of the less happy features of conference publications is that they provide an opportunity for the publication of unrefereed papers. I repeat that these comments are not directed at the book under review, rather, I am thinking of the problem of conferences in general.

If an author writes a paper in the belief it is a substantial and original contribution to his or her chosen discipline, the author

is unlikely to publish it in a conference report where it may lie hidden — to choose my words carefully — among papers of somewhat doubtful merit. If the author uses a conference to publish a version of a paper already published in an established journal he or she is guilty at least of repetition, if not of self-plagiarism.

There are, however, a few conference reports that are exceptions. Most of these are reports of conferences with tightly constrained themes, firmly edited and consisting of only a few papers. How can one ensure these valuable exceptions survive while the rest disappear? I suggest that as a general rule papers given at conferences should not be published unless there are pressing reasons, and if so, the papers must be submitted for refereeing by people with recognized expertise and experience. To avoid possible unconscious bias, the referees should not be people who attended the conference. Every such publication should be subjected to careful editing. It might be a service to scholarship if such rules were followed, or at least discussed.

But now I must write up the paper I gave at a conference in Stuttgart where the weather was gorgeous, the place was exciting, and the company stimulating. If such rules as I have outlined were adopted, would I abide by them? Yes, and with a huge sense of relief that my talk would not have to be written up for publication.

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150 YEARS OF BRITISH PSYCHIATRY 1841 to 1991

G E Berrios and H Freeman (eds)
Gaskell, London (1991)
 464 pages. Price £15.00

Many readers may be astonished by a book published for the 150th anniversary of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Astonished not by the low price or by the content but by the claim that the College is so old. This volume traces the history of British psychiatry from 1841, the year in which the Association of Medical Officers of Asylums and Hospitals for the Insane, the forerunner of the Royal College, was founded. This association is the oldest professional body of psychiatrists in the world. In 1865 it became the Medico-Psychological Association of Great Britain and Ireland and in 1926 received the royal charter. Only when the domination of the Royal College of Physicians and the collective opposition of many academic and clinical psychiatrists within the profession was eventually shaken off was a College established in 1971.

It is a detailed and interesting book which takes into its ambit the history of the asylum movement, the founding of the Maudsley hospital and law and psychiatry. There are biographies of psychiatrists who were important in the history of the specialty and sections on psychosurgery, dynamic psychiatry, psychiatry