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Review of A History of Surgery by Harold Ellis

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A History of Surgery

Harold Ellis

London, UK: Greenwich Medical Media, 2001, xxiii + 264 p., \$57.95

The history of surgery, like military history, risks the appeal of recording achievement that can easily degenerate into a litany of submerged events. Technical advances rapidly combine to clutter the random-access-memory equivalent in the human brain that is needed for easy reading. It is probably worse for the writer who soon runs out of variable descriptors and sentence forms so that the litany not only is repetitive but looks repetitive as well. These problems compound as the scope of the project increases. Lavish illustration, unfortunately not in short supply in either military or surgical endeavour, may be used to break up the text but it cannot save the author who has underestimated the challenge of transmitting the facts he or she has gathered. So is there a place for a single-volume comprehensive history of surgery? Caught up in the fin-de-siècle enthusiasm that greeted this century, Harold Ellis took on the challenge. The copy under review is the soft cover edition of his book which was first published in 2000.

Professor Ellis is well equipped for the task. Early in his career at the Westminster Hospital, his aptitude for teaching became apparent to those studying

for the anatomy examinations of the Royal College of Surgeons. It caused him to write what is today the most accessible textbook of anatomy. He partnered with Roy Calne to produce a comprehensive but short textbook of surgery which was an undergraduate favourite for over 30 years. *Operations that made history* (Greenwich Medical Media, 1996) documented, in a most readable fashion, not only surgical innovations that advanced patient care but also operations that had an impact on social or political history. A second history monograph dealt with the treatment of bladder stones from ancient to modern times and it is reprised here as a chapter.

Reviews that greeted the hardcover edition of this book attest to its success as a readable comprehensive history. In reading the book for this review I tried to discover how Professor Ellis achieved this. The principal reason is his use of a natural voice. A ready knowledge of the facts, informed by a personal knowledge of the challenges facing the surgeon of the time, allowed for the ease of narration. I suspect Professor Ellis could, if permitted, recite the entire history in Homeric tradition. The final chapter, really no more than a postscript, is the book's weakest; the author imagines the future of surgery. Many of its features, such as computer-assisted closed-cavity surgery, are in development today. It does however serve to remind the reader that the surgeon-author of the current book commenced practice at a time when problems such as those facing Ambroise Paré in the 16th century were still familiar. It is unlikely that the surgical historian of the future will have the same empathy with their subjects.

The first half of this book of 16 chapters is arranged in predictable chronological fashion while the latter half deals with specific topics. In areas where we might expect the author to be less certain, such as prehistoric surgery, his natural voice effortlessly guides the reader. For example, a description of primitive trephination leads into a 19th-century archeological discussion and on to a modern questioning of why the procedure was done. In a similar fashion he uses modern knowledge to dissect Hippocratic descriptions of surgical conditions so that the novice is informed and the knowledgeable reader provoked. In terms of detail, Professor Ellis comes into his own with the 18th century which he calls "the age of the surgeon-anatomist." The immediacy of the story is enhanced by the use of excerpts from source, many of which are told in the first person. Reading this book one might lament our own tendency to replace time-honoured personal descriptions with anonymous "technocratese." For the author the absence of first person accounts of modern surgery is solved by inserting personal experiences of his own. In a description of the surgical achievements of the Mayo brothers he tells us about his visit to the Mayo clinic in the 1970's when he was recognized as a doctor because he was the only person on the plane not on a stretcher or in a wheelchair.

Many histories of surgery are faulted for concentrating inappropriately on Britain and North America. Professor Ellis credits discoveries appropriately. The role of continental Europeans in the late 19th-century dawning of modern surgery is emphasized. The author's voice becomes more formal here. He is back on more familiar territory with an excellent chapter on the history of warfare. Napoleonic surgery and nursing developments in the Crimean War lead into a concise but complete description of the horrors of the World Wars and the Spanish Civil War. By focusing on the experiences of surgeons such as Harvey Cushing in the First World War or Joseph Trueta in Spain, an account of war is created that is probably more valid than many military histories. Clearly Ellis is all too

familiar with the surgery of the Second World War which is excellently illustrated here but he is able to maintain the reality of the suffering by including descriptions of his own patients who were victims of the IRA London bombings in the 1970s.

Professor Ellis has proven the value of a single-volume *History of Surgery*. It is required reading for the student. It will bring comfort to practising surgeons by showing how the trials of today were faced in the past. The book is sufficiently comprehensive for the historian to find it a handy reference. It should be used to inform the polemics of journalists, policy makers, and ethicists.

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