

book reviews

My ward: the story of St Thomas', Guy's and the Evelina Children's Hospitals and their ward names

By Wendy Mathews. Walpole House Publishing 2010. 135 pp.

I was privileged to be a Guy's medical student between 1961 and 1968, encompassing 1st MB and a BSc. I loved the place, got a fair sense of its history and traditions but looking back feel ashamed that I delved so little into the detail. Names like Hodgkin and Addison attracted attention but a myriad of other names were sadly left without personal associations. During one obstetric tutorial we were taught about Braxton Hicks contractions and asked 'And who was Braxton Hicks?' A seemingly long silence transpired despite which the consultant appeared intent on awaiting some response. I took it upon myself to venture, 'He was a famous Guy's obstetrician from the 19th century'. I don't think I ever elicited such a joyful response from any of my teachers. Sadly the episode was severely turned on its head within the same seminar when I guessed in similar vein and from a standpoint of equal ignorance about the Guy's connections, nonexistent in this case, of another eponymous grandee. Wendy Mathews' book has given me the ideal opportunity to diminish my ignorance and to personify many of the great names of the past. Mathews trained and worked as a physiotherapist at Tommy's and married a Guy's graduate. As a strong supporter of the Florence Nightingale Museum she has been ideally placed to glean the biographical details which make her characters come alive.

The early giants predated modern specialisation. Nevertheless, I was intrigued to read that Sir Arthur Hurst, known to me for being the first president of the British Society of Gastroenterology (I was the 66th) was credited with starting Guy's first neurology clinic. I was taught psychiatry in the York clinic but had no idea that its founder, Robert Gillespie, appointed as a psychiatrist at Guy's aged 29, became victim to depression and took his own life. William Gull, is described as a poor boy who, because he was befriended by the Guy's treasurer, became a Guy's student; he went on to become a Guy's physician known for describing anorexia nervosa and myxoedema. I am so grateful that the welfare state afforded my generation the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of the medical and philanthropic giants chronicled here. My first six months as a house physician on Addison ward was an extremely happy and educational part of my life, despite my being one of two house physicians continually on-take for medical emergencies during seven successive days and nights – maybe it is just as well that no one told me then of what is chronicled here; the ghost of a bygone sister from that ward had accidentally killed a patient and returned from time to time to tap a nurse on the shoulder. Many aspects of the chronicle illuminate past memories. It is also a sign of the passage of time that figures who loomed large as my teachers and examiners (Russell Brock, Hedley Atkins, Ronnie Mackeith) now have their names deservedly commemorated for the succeeding generations alongside Addison, Hodgkin and co. For doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and others who have been privileged to be a part of the St Thomas'/Guy's heritage I believe this delightful collection will evoke much interest and revive equally cherished memories of a privileged procession.

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