

book reviews

Walking the Paris hospitals: diary of an Edinburgh medical student 1834–1835

Edited by Diana E Manuel. The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine, London 2004. *Medical History*, Supplement no 23. 223pp. £32.

Medical students have always travelled in search of learning. In the 17th century, William Harvey and his contemporaries sought enlightenment from Italian schools such as Padua. A century later, Leiden became the Mecca for medical education. After the death of Herman Boerhaave in 1738, however, Edinburgh inherited its position as the centre for medical pilgrimage. Here American medical students equipped themselves for founding the first medical schools in the American colonies. By the first half of the 19th century, Edinburgh had lost its lustre and it was then Paris that medical students from the Western world, particularly from America, made their way.

Paris was particularly attractive, not simply because of the undoubted brilliance of its medical men – Laennec, Pierre Louis and Baron Alibert for example – but also because, following the reforms of the Revolution, attendance at the medical lectures of even the most exalted was free. It was possible for young students to have free and open access to the opportunities for anatomical dissection that the French capital offered. During the first half of the 19th century, several hundred American students pursued their further education in Paris. Many left diaries as well as wrote letters home, artefacts which are preserved in American collections.

There are fewer such literary contributions from young British medical students who sought enlightenment in Paris. Nor are there many which have been subjected to the detailed historical analysis that Diana Manuel has given to the diary of an Edinburgh medical student who walked the wards of the Paris hospitals between 1834 and 1835. The anonymous diary was purchased by the Wellcome Library to whom the author gives fulsome acknowledgement. Although anonymous, Manuel believes the author of the diary was James Surrage who lived in Clifton, part of Bristol, in the county of Gloucestershire. He gained an MD of the University of Edinburgh in 1835, with a thesis on puerperal fever, and his excursion to Paris came after his Edinburgh graduation. His father appears to have been a surgeon in Wincanton.

The diary is detailed. It gives accounts of the author's activities every day, visiting hospitals, recording the relative merits of the Parisian physicians and surgeons he encountered, describing their attempts at treatment and often sadly their outcome. There is an almost tedious repetition of attendance at lectures where it was difficult to get near enough to the front to hear what was happening but remarkably the diarist had sufficiently expert French to be able to understand the lectures he was attending. He sought inexpensive lodgings, often at some distance from the hospitals he attended, and necessitating a long walk first thing in the morning and an equally

long walk home. His account is reminiscent of this reviewer's own long walk to work when, as a student in Paris, he could not afford the cost of the Metro. He attended many clinics, often those where he could perform a 'toucher', an intimate examination of women who were pregnant, something he could not at that time have undertaken in England. Curiously the term 'toucher' is not included in the index. The author's account of dermatology in Paris, and particularly the influence of the London physician Dr Willan, is important – Willan, however, did not as suggested, 'have a dispensary'. He was a physician who was appointed to the Carey Street Dispensary, a charity whose president was the Earl of Sandwich. There is not a great amount of the author's impressions of Paris but he did visit the Louvre and other Parisian attractions. He also recorded a visit by his family where he ate in restaurants far more agreeable than those to which he was accustomed.

This is, however, a fascinating account of Parisian medicine in the first half of the 19th century. Manuel is to be congratulated on the detailed footnotes which will be valuable to all those interested in Parisian medicine in its heyday. Her introduction too deserves great credit for giving an outstanding account of Parisian medicine at the time when this diary was written. This is a work of scholarship that is highly commended.

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Honest talk and wholesome wine: a history of the St Albans Medical Club

By David Hay, 2004. £20 (including postage and packing)
from: David Hay, 1 Grove Orchard, Bloswood Lane,
Whitchurch, Hampshire RG28 7BT. Tel: 01256 893796.

In 2002, I reviewed *A flickering lamp: a history of the Sydenham Medical Club (1775–2000)* written by a club member and retired general practitioner, David Hay.¹ He has now written a history of the St Albans Medical Club. The two clubs are remarkably similar and indeed meet together from time to time. Both started in the late 18th century when such associations became popular in London and the provincial cities. These clubs still flourish today. Initially the St Albans Club consisted of seven physicians, seven surgeons and seven apothecaries (now general practitioners) who met monthly. The same number of representatives now meet three times a year. David Hay describes the prodigious amount of wine that was regularly consumed in the early days and the wagers that were laid on the outcome of often-trivial events, the forfeits often paid in food or wine. The continued convivial association of the three branches of medicine is surprising since physicians in the 18th century were perceived as socially and educationally superior to their colleagues. The Royal College of Surgeons in London was only granted their