
‘Beethoven never has learnt anything and never will learn anything. As a composer is he hopeless’ wrote Albrechtsberger his tutor. Handel would have been a barber if his father had succeeded in imposing his will. Shelley, at Eton, was at the mercy of a ‘Shelley Bating Society’. Byron, when he was 15, missed a whole term at Harrow because of a love affair. But those who pay expensive fees for private education of their sons may ruefully count their blessings, as it would hardly happen now. And one does indeed feel on reading these anecdotes and extraordinary facts with which this book is packed that we are looking at things of the past and that many lessons from childhood have been learnt.

The authors could well have been content with their gleanings from a great field of history and biography, but their purpose is more serious and they do not write for our entertainment. They have attempted to classify childhood experience, tendencies, drives, parent attitudes, and dramatic events in childhood and to relate these to the character and achievement of unusual men and women. By choosing mostly well-known or famous people they not only compel our attention but are able to dispense with much biographical matter. There are 440 names in the index of persons, ranging from Abel (the mathematician) to Zola, from Ampère to Yeats. The acknowledgement to publishers for quotations from biographies is very long, and the bibliography is extensive. The work must have been formidable but the presentation is not heavy. There is humour here and there, a little dry. There is also, to help the reader to attack this book seriously or amuse himself in browsing through it, a subject index, from which it is possible to go straight to a topic e.g. ability unrecognized, bullying, calculators, clumsiness, displaying the prodigy, precocity, punishment, ugliness and bereavement in childhood (a factor of importance).

Eight of the 14 chapters deal with various powerful influences resulting in or modifying the remarkable ability of an individual, such as home and upbringing, education at home, early personality, punishment and bullying, thwarting by father.

The Illingworths admit in their comments and conclusions that the extreme diversity of the backgrounds and extreme variety of gifts of the men and women they have studied makes it impossible to answer, except vaguely, the question whether these people were remarkable because of their frustrations or in spite of them. To give a complete answer it would perhaps require another book on nonentities who might have triumphed. But some lessons have indeed been learnt and we have been given much to think about in this fine essay.


This book and especially the way in which it has changed during its four editions reflects very much the altering attitude of paediatricians to what is important in paediatrics. This book is not a standard textbook of disease but is a fascinating account of the development of the child and of what society has to offer in its organization for the care of that child.

The book is in two parts, the first of which is devoted to a study of all aspects of development. It starts very properly before conception with a simple account of genetic principles and an easily understood account of chromosome structure and function. The reader is then given a lucid account by a number of eminent authors of the development of the foetus, the practical aspects of the perinatal period with particular attention to the physiological changes occurring at birth, and then a series of chapters on the various aspects of postnatal development—physical, behavioural, and emotional. The interesting chapter on puberty and adolescence has perhaps a little too much physiology and too little psychology.

The second part of the book is entitled the ‘Social Aspects of Child Health’, and is in a way the more interesting section, for here a number of authors describe those services in the community which have been created to support, protect, and perhaps correct the child in his development and in his reaction to his environment. Thus, such subjects as the School Health Service, juvenile courts, and accident prevention are dealt with in separate chapters. One of these chapters is entitled simply ‘Punishment’, and is an excellent contribution written in a most enjoyable and philosophical manner.

This is not a textbook of the usual paediatric diseases but is a book of interest to many people other than students and doctors. It is written and produced in a very pleasing manner, and is certain to be popular amongst health visitors, social workers, psychologists, and also among established and training paediatricians. Its appeal is so wide that many parents who ordinarily have little to do with the world of medicine will also find it well worth reading.