Book Reviews


In writing this life of Dr. John Thomson the author has produced a magnificent story of a 'true son of Edinburgh', and at the same time he has given to us a memorable piece of paediatric history. Professor Stuart Craig has extensively elaborated upon the qualities of a man who was noted by Sir Thomas Barlow to have 'modest, half-deprecating demeanour'; whom Sir Frederick Still regarded as having given a life-work to 'the enlargement of knowledge of disease of children'. Thomson's famous student Sir Robert Hutchinson paid an endearing tribute—'his zeal for scientific truth was a real inspiration . . . but most of all his lasting memorial was in the grateful hearts of the children to whose welfare his whole life was consecrated.' And every chapter in this book paints the picture around these commendable statements.

The literary works of Thomson are in true memory of the man. Many of us have been grateful to have his translation of Hencoch's 'Lectures on Children's Diseases' (1889), and, of course, Thomson's 'Guide to the Clinical Examination and Treatment of Sick Children' (1901) can, even now, form good reading and example for any present-day teacher of paediatrics. But, his 'Opening Doors' (1923) was an awful revelation of an attitude towards child life and mental health hitherto almost untouched. Happily, this little volume had a very wide circulation in Great Britain and in America; its influence must have been immense, opening up not only the needs of physically and mentally handicapped children, but leading on to the vast fields of what is now understood under the term 'social paediatrics'.

The author reminds us of some of the great paediatricians who were influenced by Thomson—Barlow, Gee, Cheadle, Cameron, and Still, among others. It is pleasant to read about the Children’s Clinical Club and Thomson’s part in the founding of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Paediatric Club (1922). No avenue was left unexplored where advancement in paediatrics was a possibility.

John Thomson may be said to have prepared the way for the ultimate establishment of a Chair of Child Life and Health in the University of Edinburgh. Maternity and child welfare and school medical services were promoted and developed at this time. He had the conspicuous advantage of being closely associated with J. W. Ballantyne, physician, Royal Maternity Hospital, Edinburgh, and pioneer in antenatal care. These were clearly lively times in Thomson’s life, and this book outlines the immense trouble which he took in his medical records and the precious clinical photographs, now excellently reproduced, which depict the general picture of disease in infants and children as occurring and frequently seen in Thomson’s period at the Edinburgh Children’s Hospital. All this makes the book, which has obviously been written as a labour of love, a memorable record of the life and work of a great doctor who has been rightly regarded as the founder of the modern school of child health in Edinburgh.

The book is also a notable contribution to the history of Edinburgh. The inclusion, in full colour reproduction, of 'The Royal Mile', by Mrs. Jane Stewart-Smith (1867) stamps the author’s deep and lasting affection for that City.

Finally, the bibliography, the biographical notes, and the comprehensive index complete the book.


This small book of only about 230 pages succeeds in providing an admirably clear exposition of its subject. To the reviewer, it has already become one of the reference books he is glad to have constantly at hand, for such are the complexities of those genetic problems normally encountered in the day-to-day work of a paediatrician, that it is a relief to be able to remind himself frequently of the principles concerned. And it is in his exposition of principles that the author is particularly adept.

Though in general up to date, it was perhaps a pity that the author decided to limit severely his treatment of the subject of multifactorial inheritance, for the ideas which are currently emerging as a result of the new knowledge about enzyme polymorphism, seem destined to modify some of the classical principles of medical genetics. In this context, H. Harris has stated, 'Defective enzymes and proteins found in specific inherited diseases must be regarded simply as extreme examples of a kind of variation which is widespread throughout the species, and indeed one of its fundamental characteristics.'

There is a sensible glossary of genetic terms—how many of us would be sure to know what, for instance, aneuploid meant, when we read the term in an article, or would properly distinguish between a proband and a propositus if we wrote an article?—altogether, this is a book which can be enthusiastically recommended.