

Book reviews

If A Child Cries . . . Collected papers of John Apley. Edited by A G Apley. Pp 214: £9.95 hardback. London: Butterworths, 1984.

Fifteen years ago when John Apley invited me to join him in a writing venture I replied that I would love to work with him and that I thought I could be useful because I probably had 'the right amount of admiration and misgivings about him and his work'. It was an impetuous and ill considered comment for a junior to make to a senior paediatrician whom I did not know well, and he was the wrong sort of person to make it to. When I met him a few weeks later he said he was glad I would work with him but that he did not altogether understand my comment—and nor did I. Nor do I 15 years later, and yet the same conflicting emotions arise after reading his collected papers.

Although the papers have been edited by his brother they were assembled by John himself during his final illness. I am glad that he will have found some happiness during a depressing fatal illness looking through articles which he says he 'enjoyed writing at the time and still enjoys rereading' (and I trust that he had a glass of good wine in his hand as he did it). There can be few medical writers with such an absolute right to gloat at their own work for parts are very, very good. Yet, assembling the best of one's written work together for publication is rather like writing one's own obituary. No good item will be omitted but there is a danger that it may lack other aspects that make the person live in the memory. Without the wrinkles and the warts the picture becomes a Botticelli rather than a Rembrandt, and it is the latter who would have portrayed John Apley best.

The articles selected reflect his love of language; he was proud of his proficiency with words and gloried in it. He realised his good fortune in acquiring that love and skill early in life, since those who set about it late 'will never enjoy the bouquet and resonances of language or will ever use words dazzlingly, as an English poet or an Irish taxi driver does'. I know of no paediatrician with greater knowledge of, or skill at, the craft of writing. His sentences have a grace and a balance and are meant to be read at leisure and for pleasure.

The title is taken from one of his many aphorisms 'if a child cries it is my fault'. It is a marvellous maxim for a paediatrician to try to observe, though probably it could only have been devised by one who himself did not have children. Aphorisms abound. 'Emotional underfeeding can lead to physical undernutrition', 'Sweets are calories in the nude', 'Dead or alive, sick or well children are not just mini adults', 'Anxiety like courage is contagious'. The medical articles are peppered with such phrases and, though usually apt, they sometimes detract from the flow of thought and feeling. His style is immensely ornamental: it is a very decorated English.

It is perhaps the nice distinction between artifice and artificial that disturbs. John Apley took immense care about his writing: each piece went through many drafts. He consulted his numerous dictionaries and took a punctilious pride in appropriate punctuation. Writing a chapter with him was a wonderful lesson. Yet I was always slightly uneasy; or was it guilt? He did not always remember the many different reasons why people wrote; and that some wrote from a great need to express something they cared about, to dispose of thoughts that made them restless, to be rid of distraction and to sleep. I had written a draft chapter fast and furiously with my usual idiosyncratic punctuation and construction. After scanty correction it was sent post haste to John that it might be discussed together with other chapters the next weekend. I remember with embarrassment that weekend in a Leamington hotel; he liked the first draft chapter best of all and said he could see how much trouble I had taken about the piece and that he could always tell when a person took their writing through many different drafts revising each one carefully, as he did! I still don't know whether he was the deceived tutor or the tactful deceiver.

In the first third of the book are his articles about writing. The rest is taken up with medical writing of one sort or another. He has left out his early medical articles which he says are not of much interest—though I would have been interested to see them. There appear the famous papers on recurrent abdominal pain and on psychosomatic illness with which many people will associate him. I am unclear why those papers no longer excite. I suspect that it is

because the message is familiar, perhaps over familiar nowadays, and that people who have been trained by teachers who always made it clear that pain need not have an organic cause will not find these papers exciting; but they will find them a rewarding and delightful read.

There is an article on the pleasures of medical speaking and it is intriguing to read of his delight in speaking for though I only heard him give one formal lecture, I didn't find him a great speaker; despite rich language and abundant aphorism there was a shortage of passion and purpose for a presentation that would have come better from the page than from the platform.

The book displays John Apley in full plumage. Those who knew and admired him will enjoy it and the memories recreated; those who did not will learn; and some will wonder.

ROY MEADOW

Congenital Hypothyroidism. Edited by J H Dussault and P Walker. Pp 473: £32.50 hardback. New York: Marcel Dekker, (London: Butterworths), 1984.

This monograph is part of a series of volumes on basic and clinical endocrinology. It is divided into four main sections on maturation of thyroid physiology, screening for congenital hypothyroidism, classification of congenital hypothyroidism, and treatment.

The contribution by Morreale de Escobar and colleagues on 'Thyroid Hormone and the Developing Brain' is outstanding. A clear account of normal brain development is given, followed by a description of the use of animal models to study brain damage in experimental hypothyroidism. The different timing of neurodevelopmental events relative to birth in the human and experimental animals is rightly emphasised. The chapter ends with a short section of the effect of excess thyroid hormone on the developing brain.

The section on screening is most disappointing. To discuss congenital hypothyroidism of the prescreening era, the pros and cons of screening by thyroxine or thyroid stimulating hormone estimation, and cost-benefit analysis of screening now seems to be of historical interest only and