continuing education centre, which should help doctors find the best means of educating themselves, may become an agency for awarding points for the various forms of study undertaken by the doctor, who then presents a report of his activities, with a points tally, to an appropriate board, which will issue a re-certification document.

The American College of Physicians has offered its fellows self-assessment for the past 12 years. The medical knowledge self-assessment programme is now available in several countries, and in Australia has been vigorously promoted by both the American and Australasian colleges, using methods similar to those employed with such success by the publishers of *Reader's Digest* and *Time-Life* books. The fifth such programme is under way this year. For $A150, or $A100 for fellows of the Australasian college, the postgraduate student receives a syllabus containing advances in medicine since the last programme in 1977, a set of questions, answer sheets, and a series of deadlines by which his answers should reach the computer centre in the United States if he wishes to take an examination. His result will be known only to himself and the computer. Later he will receive a list of correct answers and a commentary on each question. The course is designed to last a whole year.

Even if he remembered many of the hundreds or thousands of new facts encountered, it could hardly be expected that a cardiologist, for example, on completing MKSAP would have turned himself into a competent endocrinologist or vice versa; and how long these new facts would be remembered, in the absence of repetition and reinforcement, must be a matter of some doubt. None the less MKSAP, which perhaps has a captive market, enjoys large sales. Whether it shows a profit for the American college I do not know. Perhaps the *Review*, which is remarkably similar to MKSAP, will make the already well-regarded Cecil even more popular, so that one wonders if the desire to advance standards of medical practice is allied to the profit motive. And if so, why not?

I still remain to be convinced that self-assessment is as good an educational method as the sort of reading I have done up until now, and am certainly not convinced that fragments from the basic sciences, such as the nature of the biochemical abnormalities in collagen in the different types of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (*Review*, part 10, question 131), of which I have actually seen one case in 30 years, will be of much importance to me and my patients.

Professional freedom

A final thought. Like our civil liberties, our professional freedom should be jealously guarded. From voluntary self-assessment it is a short step to compulsory self-assessment, and another could lead to compulsory relicensure. Where is the proof that our professional standards are unacceptably low? Where is the evidence that use of this *Review* or MKSAP (both of which entirely ignore the social and emotional content of illness) will make us better doctors? If a government in its wisdom insists that we be assessed and relicensed, then let the government pay. Let us by all means be treated like airline pilots with regular tests of competency, but also with restrictions on how many hours we may work every day, week, month, and year, with all our postgraduate material provided, with salary and all expenses paid for attendance at courses, with opportunities to have two jobs at once, and with a golden handshake on retirement. Meanwhile, let those who enjoy self-assessment continue to do it, but, until its value as an educational method is proved beyond doubt, let the organised profession look on it as just another form of postgraduate activity.

Reading for Pleasure

An alfresco choice

B G DUDLEY

Few medical students have time to read for pleasure—one drawback of so intense a period of study. Any leisure time that they have is probably spent as far away from books as possible, hence they lose the habit of extracurricular reading. Textbooks and journals are still devoured after one enters practice (the newspapers, too, perhaps), but, in my case, it was several years before I started to read regularly again. Incidentally, I suspect that study of some of the great novels or biographies might well be of more use to future doctors than many of those dry and detailed textbooks, whose facts are soon forgotten.

Many games and sports give pleasure to participant and spectator alike, but of them all cricket, I believe, has by far the finest literature. Dross exists none the less. The scandals of a tour, the shortcomings of the captain, why Joe Bloggs was never picked for England—every year sees the publication of many variations on these sad themes. Few sports, however, can boast of writers like Neville Cardus, Ray Robinson, J H Fingleton, John Arlott, or Alan Gibson.

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Cricket by the hearth

Two or three recent books have given me immense pleasure. *The Cricket Captains of England* by Alan Gibson leads the way. A scholarly account of every man who has led England's first eleven makes perfect bedtime reading because of its simple but precise English, and because of its fund of fascinating stories of the way that men behave under stress. Did you know, for example, that Robertson-Glasgow once wrote of D R Jardine, captain of England during the notorious body-line tour, that for all his taciturnity "his cursing, at its best, was

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Elizabethan in scope and variety." This brings present-day antics in the Packer series into perspective.

Rivalry between captains of England and Australia has always been intense. In England's first postwar tour of Australia, England was led by Hammond, Australia by Bradman. Both were approaching the end of distinguished careers. In the first Test Bradman had scored 28 runs when he appeared to be caught at slip. Bradman remained at the crease, and when an appeal was made it was turned down. At the end of the over Hammond said to Bradman "That's a bloody fine way to start a series." They scarcely spoke to each other again throughout the tour. Gibson ends his book with a postscript. In it he quotes the old university joke: "The Oxford man may feel he owns the earth, but the Cambridge man feels that he doesn't care a damn who owns it." Compare, for instance, Jardine and Dexter.

Two other recent books concern the 1978 cricket season in England. The approaches are very different. Bob Willis, in his *Diary of a Cricket Season*, writes of his experiences that year as a member of a highly successful England team, and a struggling Warwickshire eleven. Although I found the continual use of nicknames irritating, the book comes as near as any to conveying to the non-initiated the atmosphere in the dressing room.

Geoffrey Moorhouse has written widely on subjects as diverse as monasticism and trawler fishing. I'm not keen on his sentimental title *The Best Loved Game*, but his book is first class—spanning as it does cricket at every level from Test matches to the village green. The book opens with an account of the first day of the season at Lords. It is raining, and the first four pages describe the scene and the behaviour of the few spectators. Delicious stuff. Throughout the book spectators play their part. Consider this extract where Moorhouse describes the dismissal of Yardley, a Northants batsman. Yardley stays for a couple of overs and then is dispatched. "What a shame," says a motherly soul carrying tea over to the scorers in their box, "he's only got 3." Yardley is a man who inspires maternal thoughts with his jokes, his giddy laughter, his chattering to all around. His description of England batsman Graham Gooch evokes the man perfectly. "He is built like a guardsman, and that expressionless face with its black moustache surely saw service in England's old imperial wars, defending Rorke's Drift, and marching up the Khyber Pass." He is just as good when he describes a village match between Aston Rowant and Tiddington. The village policeman arrives at the bar. "I've heard reports," he says, "that they're selling duff beer in here and I've just come to check up." Once he would have pedalled up the B road on a Raleigh with a helmet on his head, but he is car-bound these days with a chequered cap and a walkie-talkie clipped to his lapel.

Before we leave sporting literature we must give a mention to golf. Even if one has no knowledge of golf at all Henry Longhurst's writing was a delight. *The Best of Henry Longhurst —on Golf and Life* is a collection of his essays, many from the *Sunday Times*, and is a perfect antidote to a heavy evening surgery.

Nature and naturalists

From sport I turn to natural history. All its facets interest me, none more so than bird watching. My first choice is *Bird Watchers Year*, an account by half a dozen naturalists of their year as bird watchers. Their habitats span the British Isles—the Ouse Washes in Cambridgeshire, the Isle of Man, the Scottish Highlands, and, more surprisingly, city suburbs are among the places described. The change of the seasons is less noticeable to the town dweller now than it used to be. The family doctor may see more infections in winter and more allergies in summer, but the contrast between winter slavery and summer ease nowadays is nothing like so great. To the bird watcher all is as it was. April still brings the swallows, swifts, and cuckoos from their African wintering grounds. In autumn they leave us to be replaced by the winter thrushes from Scandinavia and the wild geese from the far North.

The changes in the seasons are truly chronicled in this book. In spring the naturalists anxiously await the return of their birds to the breeding grounds. The ruffs and black-tailed godwits head for the water meadows of Cambridgeshire, the peregrines and golden eagles make for the crags of the Scottish Highlands. Through summer the naturalists can only wait and watch, heading off the predatory egg collectors as best they can. The book goes on to show that autumn and winter are just as exciting seasons for bird watchers. As with any book written by many different authors, standards of writing vary, but, in my view, only from excellent down to very good indeed.

Another book I've recently enjoyed is *The Birdman* by Henry Douglas Home. The third brother—the others are the well-known playwright and the even better known ex-Prime Minister—shows his own abilities as a naturalist and writer for our delight. His fascinating descriptions of the bird life at the Hirsel—the family estates near Coldstream in Berwickshire —prove his talent as a naturalist—for example, his work with swifts and the production of special nesting boxes for them makes interesting reading. His stories of family life at the Hirsel makes the text come alive. One story will illustrate the style. The BBC sent a team to record the call of a tawny owl at the Hirsel. Four nights passed with no sign of the owl. The BBC controller was distraught—the equipment was urgently needed elsewhere. On the fifth night everything went well, the owl called, the recording was secured and the BBC men departed in triumph. The recording became one of the BBC standards. It was years later before Henry Douglas Home learnt the truth. His brother William had been missing when the recording was being done, and he finally admitted that the "owl" had been nothing more than an impersonation.

My third natural history book must be *A Sketchbook of Birds* by C E Tunnicliffe. The artist's talent leaps out from every page. Feast your eyes on these simple sketches and your cares will roll away.

Around Britain

From natural history to travel is but a short step, and though I have many favourites I will restrict myself to three. Firstly, Hunter Davies with *A Walk Around The Lakes*. The Lake District has inspired many marvellous books. This one brings to life the people as well as the countryside. Hunter Davies tells of the Lake poets, particularly Wordsworth and his family. He talks to present-day celebrities like Chris Bonnington and A Wainwright, and others who make their homes in that glorious part of the country. Mention of A Wainwright reminds me of a series of old favourites. *Wainwright's Guides to the Fell Country* make wonderful fireside reading whether or not you have any intention of following his routes. Like hundreds of others I never venture on to the fells without the relevant *Wainwright* in my rucksack, but I fancy there is even more pleasure in planning the route beforehand or following it in the book at home afterwards than there is in the expedition itself.

My final recommendation is Margaret Drabble's *A Writer's Britain*. This book, beautifully illustrated by superb photographs of all corners of the British Isles, discusses how different parts of the country have influenced writers, and how they in turn have influenced our impression of what parts of the country are like to live in or visit. Going back in time as far as St Cuthbert's, Lindisfarne, she ventures forward to the present day with descriptions of Gloucestershire and Laurie Lee, and the Wales of Dylan Thomas.

I have meandered on without mention of a novel or a biography, both of which I enjoy immensely but they must await another day.

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