Book Reviews

Sublime and Inventive Genius

There have been many biographies of Hunter and a great deal has been written on special aspects of his versatility. What more, one would think, can be said about this gifted surgeon who was adventurous yet eminently conservative; who taught well and was a pioneer in medical education; who wrote on such diverse topics as the Gillaroo trout, gymnotus trout, hearing in fishes, the transmission of smallpox in pregnancy, the hepooana roo and other rare fauna of New South Wales, bees and the “ocononomy” of whales; who attempted to resuscitate a life-gone-wild of the Royal Hospital, after judicial hanging; who inoculated himself with syphilis in order to study its symptomatology and the best use of mercurial inunctions; who while tending the sick and wounded in the war found time to experi- ment on the digestion of the local lizards; a man who as well as being anatomist, physiologist, pathologist, and surgeon was also a geologist and botanist? Yet Miss Dobson by careful selection from a wealth of material has succeeded in doing full justice to this fascinating man in a medium-length biography, and this claim I make in spite of the fear expressed in her closing paragraph that “the task is too great.”

With unique experience of the Hunterian collection at the Royal College of Surgeons and manuscript material which includes the Long Room, she has managed to convey the facts of his career, and allowed the reader to form his own opinion as to the personality of the man called by John White “the sublime and inventive genius.”

The reader is taken from the earliest days of the Hunter family at Long Calderwood to John’s final hours in St. George’s Hospital. A major chapter is devoted to the expedition on Belleisle and the campaign in Portugal, experience which stood him in good stead when, years later, he was appointed to the offices of surgeon-general and inspector-general of hospitals. He owed much to his elder brother William, yet in 1780 there was that inexplicable estrangement over the “true” discovery of the lymphatics, an absorbing role of lymphatics to his elder brother rather than to himself. But he gave credit where credit was due, and it does not surprise us to learn that this pioneer writer on gunshot wounds, popliteal aneurysms, and phlebitis displayed a bust of William Harvey in his salon.

He was neither obsessionial nor hypomanic. His success lay in his ingenuity, thoroughness, and hard work. In his search for “truth in all branches of science” his museum was his personal reference book. He told Tobias Smollett that he was “glad to have every curious book on the face of the earth,” and later this correspondent offered to bequeath his body, “already so dry and emaciated” that if covered with pitch and painted linen it would pass for an Egyptian mummy.

The writing of this book is vivid without being dramatized. We are taken right through the fantastic preparations of the dead to the fashioning of the bust and completion of this work. We see the young surgeon with his white hair, which was never dressed, resting in his elegant home, or conversing with himself with the teaching of students at St. George’s Hospital and collapsing into a colleague’s arms. His history of “flying gout” and the alarming attack of pulselessness two years before his marriage seem inconsistent with a man who wrestled in play with a small bull presented to him by Queen Charlotte, and who single-handed caught and controlled two escaped leopards. It is no wonder that his colleagues showed interest in the postmortem examination.

The comparative greatness of Hunter— and the same is true of other outstanding characters in medicine—has not always been realized by the general public, because attainments in medicine tend to be appreciated most by those who by reason of their professional training understand their nature and importance. This biography will have a wide appeal and John Hunter is clearly shown to merit a place among the great of this country.

W. H. McMenemey.

Understanding Adolescents

The adult world is often thrown into contortions when confronted with the demands of adolescents seeking solutions to the problems which we have presented to them. In these stressful situations some young people will be thrown down, but when Society accept patterns of behaviour have changed as much as they have in the last decade, we find the borders of normal behaviour more difficult to define. Other adults are frightened that they may harm their children’s development by being too repressive, or that they may be rejected by their children if they pursue a role which they believe to be correct.

Professor Derek Miller has developed this book from a series of articles he wrote for New Education—for teachers are in the forefront in the prevention of psychological illness, or could be—but the book has a far wider impact than did the articles. In 11 chapters and 166 pages the reader can learn a lot about the scene, and some of Professor Miller’s concepts, particularly that of the three periods in adolescent development, are especially helpful when you are confronted with the problems of an individual girl or boy. What is unnerving is how inimical to the development of personality and the early establishment of identity are most of the organizational changes which have been made in recent years, as well as those changes threatened for the future, and it is indeed fool mate that the young human being is as resistant as he is to a harmful environment.

This is an important book in that all who read it, whether parents, family doctors, paediatricians, teachers, or psychiatrists will find in it intimations of what we need to know. “All adults interviewing adolescents should ask themselves at least two questions; What is this youngster likely to be feeling now? How has this feeling been modified by interviews with me and other authority figures in the past?” Why have we so often missed this point?

Until recently there has been a dearth of helpful books on the problems of adolescents, though a small number of useful monographs on the care and the treatment of the seriously disturbed have appeared recently, mostly from the United States. This book has a wider than national view, but not so wide that there is a lack of focus. We have to regret that Professor Miller has migrated from the Tavistock Clinic to the University of Michigan but, at least, he has left us this lively and intelligent book as a souvenir.

Denis Perrie.

Physically Handicapped Children

The Cheyne Walk Centre for Spastic Children, opened in 1955 in premises earlier used as a hospital for “Sick and Incurable Children,” has developed to meet the needs of young physically handicapped children.