

BOOK REVIEW

The Matter of the Heart: A History of the Heart in Eleven Operations *by Thomas Morris*

Hardback, 432 pages
Bodley Head
June 2017

The endorsements on the dust jacket, placed beside a puzzling image of the heart, say this is an “amazing” and “pulse-thumpingly gripping” story. Morris, the author, cannot be blamed for the cover, but the journalist in him often gets the upper hand, aiming at an appeal to a wide readership. Eleven historic cardiac surgery operations are promised; instead ten themes are explored in ten chapters with a final chapter setting out the author’s vision of the promise of recent Good News.

Morris covers the main historical developments to date, and the text follows familiar lines with the story of blue babies, hypothermia, the heart-lung machine, the Cooley/DeBakey feud, cardiac catheterisation, heart transplants, interventional surgery and, finally, a digression on aortic aneurysm surgery, which allows inclusion of more of the “swaggering, arrogant, fearless psychopaths” promised. The action is personalised – often stitch-by-stitch – and the ground covered is extensive.

The author, who hid away in the Royal Society of Medicine Library to write this work, has diligently researched the very early work relevant to each theme. He gives fulsome credit to the more detailed texts available on individual aspects of earlier cardiac surgery. The historical references, though extensive, are difficult to navigate. No thematic bibliography is given, but there is a good index.

After describing the vivid career of Christiaan Barnard, however, the drama is not sustained. The “dramatic scenes” promised on the cover are less vivid than before and the pioneers instead seem engaged on more believable business-as-usual, grinding out work on xenografts, stem cells and robotic surgery. Maybe, looking back, cardiac surgery was never that dramatic; perhaps journalists and a public thirst for heroes and villains have made it appear so.

The Matter of the Heart is a work to entertain and could perhaps be an inspirational introduction for the young reader. For a popular work, some diagrams would have helped.

David Hamilton
June 2017

Published online at www.bshh.org.uk.