

BOOK REVIEW

The Butchering Art: Joseph Lister's Quest to Transform the Grisly World of Victorian Medicine *by Lindsey Fitzharris*

Hardback, 304 pages
Allen Lane
October 2017

Lindsey Fitzharris has produced a well researched and entertaining account of how a quiet British surgeon transformed surgical practice by introducing effective antisepsis.

We are shown the horrors of surgical practice in Victorian Glasgow, Edinburgh and London. The development of anaesthesia had enabled surgeons to operate for longer and more invasively. Post-operative infection, however, remained a major problem and hospital mortality rates rose during the mid-1800s.

As well as the supportive influences of his father, the Scottish surgeon James Syme and Louis Pasteur, we are confronted with Lister's flamboyant detractors who ridicule his innovative changes. But Lister's application of scientific method and observation gradually transforms clinical practice. His pioneering work makes surgery a more reliable, safer field of medicine, starting the transformation of hospitals from places of death to centres of healing.

The writing style, which may not appeal to some historians, is a happy blend of scholarship and storytelling, making the subject accessible to the non-specialist. Lister's story illustrates how innovators often have to struggle against entrenched vested interests, a message still relevant for today. In the words of Lister's student, Hector Cameron, speaking of his teacher: "We *knew* we were in contact with Genius. We felt we were helping the making of History and all things were becoming new."

I would recommend the book to those interested in medical history but also as an informative biography of Joseph Lister for a more general audience. With her vivid descriptions, Fitzharris brings the reader into the very operating theatre.

That *The Butchering Art* was winner of the 2018 PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award, and is currently shortlisted for the 2018 Wellcome Book Prize, serves to underline the merit of this work.

Mike Davidson
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