

BOOK REVIEW

The Medical Pioneers of Nineteenth Century Lancaster by *Quenton Wessels (Editor)*

Hardback, 181 pages
Cambridge Scholars Publishing
May 2018

This book aims to describe the history of medical practice in nineteenth century Lancaster or, as we are told in the Introduction, it aims “at hallmarking the main medical events in Lancaster”.

There are eight authors, including four medical students, and most chapters have three authors. These numbers may explain the excessive repetition and also the variations in style and referencing which occur even within individual chapters. Syntax and grammar are often idiosyncratic.

The target audience is not stated. Readers may be disappointed to find such banal statements as “the presence of humans in the area undoubtedly shaped the town over time”, and those with some existing knowledge of the apprenticeship system may be surprised to learn that, prior to the nineteenth century, the study and practice of medicine “predominantly relied on book-based instruction”. This reviewer’s heart sank further when he read that the aims of the Medical Officers of Health “were to increase the confidence of the working-class towards hospitals and doctors, gradually altering their beliefs from humoralism to cellular pathology, in addition to lowering mortality rates in Lancaster”. He was also surprised to read that the Medical Officers of Health “gained power and authority through the creation of the Medical Register in 1858”.

Some references are unsatisfactory. For example, in a discussion of the work undertaken by nineteenth century surgeons, the supporting reference is to the work of a surgeon who died in 1664; and the reference cited for Liston’s first use of ether in 1846 is an inaccurate account written seventy-five years after the event by someone who was not present at the operation.

Cholera and dispensaries in Lancaster are both discussed but neither is mentioned in the index. The discussion on dispensaries does not indicate whether there were only free dispensaries or whether there were provident dispensaries as well. There is brief mention of the role of Friendly Societies and Hospital Schemes, but neither is included in the index.

In conclusion, some readers may find useful information in this book, but its deficiencies make it difficult to recommend.

Henry Connor
April 2018

Published online at www.bshh.org.uk.