

BOOK REVIEW

The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities **by Jan Bondeson**

Paperback, 288 pages
Amberley Publishing
March 2018

Jan Bondeson, a prolific author with an academic medical background, has already written two books on “medical curiosities”, *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (1997) and *The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels* (2000). He introduces *The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities* as his “third and final collection of essays on various odd, curious and macabre aspects of the history of medicine”.

The Lion Boy has fourteen chapters, covering a number of topics which include gigantism, extreme shortness of stature, excessive hairiness and abnormal appearances of the skin. Most of the subjects he describes lived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and many, at some stage of their lives, were exhibited to the public. They often featured on picture postcards which were sold to generate income and for publicity.

The book has several points in its favour. It is written with attention to both history and medicine, giving context, facts where they are known, and sources. Many essays, though not all, include explanations of the medical background, usually clear and logical. Often, those described underwent considerable suffering and the author deals with this sensitive subject with understanding and sympathy. There are nearly 200 illustrations, many being postcards from the author’s large collection. Eleven helpful final pages give details of the sources used.

However, there are scattered typographical errors and two essays on giants might have been better combined in one. Several topics including giants and Siamese twins have featured in Dr Bondeson’s previous books. The essays on fasting artists and “hyperpedestrianism”, i.e. walking around the world, are interesting, but their medical historical aspects, if any, are not explored. An index would have been helpful.

These points aside, this is a useful contribution by an author who has made the subject a particular interest and those who are fascinated by it will find much information. The book encourages a more understanding approach to those unfortunate individuals with conditions which made them the object of curiosity and often exposed them to ridicule and exploitation.

David Wright
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