

## BOOK REVIEW

### **A History of the Royal Hospital Chelsea 1682-2017**

*by Stephen Wynn and Tanya Wynn*

Hardback, 229 pages

Pen & Sword Books

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This book looks at the Hospital's beginnings, its history up to 2017, some of the current resident "In-Pensioners" and those such as Margaret and Dennis Thatcher who have been buried in the grounds. There is also an "in-depth look" at all the Hospital's governors. This is a great deal to fit in, and a clue is given in the introduction where the authors thank those who have helped to compile the book.

The book is not a history, but a compilation of short "facts", some relating to the Hospital, and some so remotely related that it is hard to tell why they are there. For instance, a piece about one governor tells us he was involved in a duel in 1708. We then have another paragraph on the last pistol-duel to be fought in England, which was in 1852.

The order of the facts is also somewhat haphazard. The chapter entitled "Margaret Thatcher" has two pages about her, then three pages about the Care Quality Commission's report in 2016. The bomb damage in 1918 is described at the end of the Second World War chapter. The editing of the book is extremely poor. Most pages have an error of fact, spelling or grammar. We have someone fighting in the Battle of Culloden in 1946, and someone else being promoted to brigadier in 1927, despite dying in 1768.

Other facts are poorly researched. A lady called Christian Davies served as a man in the British Army for several years from 1693. When she was injured at the Battle of Ramillies, her gender was uncovered, but due to her exemplary service she was granted a pension. In those days, all army pensions were administered by the Royal Hospital, most of the recipients being Out-Pensioners rather than one of the 450 In-Pensioners. Unfortunately, the authors perpetuate the error on Wikipedia that she was admitted as a Chelsea Pensioner, whereas the Hospital's website makes it clear that she was ineligible to live there at the time.

The book is obviously aimed at a general audience and is certainly not written by or for historians. The authors express surprise at things that most people familiar with medical history would take for granted, such as the fact that 18<sup>th</sup>-century physicians considered surgery beneath them. The Royal Hospital Chelsea is a fine place with a fascinating history. Sadly, this book does not start to do it justice and I cannot recommend it.

**Jane Orr**  
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