

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Through the Pages of History: an art, music and medical miscellany by Michael Whelton**

Paperback, 182 pages  
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In this book, Dr Michael Whelton, a Gastroenterologist who lives and practises in Cork, describes a variety of medical history stories. There are chapters on The Black Death as well as on Caravaggio and lead poisoning, along with comments about *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* and left-handedness.

There is some interesting information in each story. For example, in the Willowbrook hepatitis experiments by Dr Saul Krugman, children with intellectual disability were enrolled in a trial to identify different viruses that caused hepatitis and to discover a vaccine. Michael Whelton argues that Krugman left a mixed legacy. He contributed to our understanding of hepatitis, identifying the two distinct viruses A and B, and earned a Lasker Award in 1983. The author rightly concludes that the Willowbrook hepatitis experiments were unethical by today's standards and deliberately infecting children with intellectual disability cannot be accepted as a means to justify the end.

There is an excellent chapter on Dr Marie Curie, but there are some odd bits in this book including one on Herod the Great who Whelton states was probably suffering from long-term depression and paranoia. He also concludes that Herod's crime of The Massacre of the Innocents never took place. It would be nice to have some exact references for that point.

An anomaly to my mind is the chapter on the Magna Carta in which King John is described as a cruel and devious man but not much worse than his brother or father. I am not sure why this chapter is in the book. Interestingly, Whelton throughout supports the underdog, particularly Rosalind Franklin and her role in the discovery of the double helix of DNA, and the scientist Norman Heatley and his efforts in bringing penicillin into practical use.

This is certainly an easy book to read. It is probably not aimed at students of medical history but more at the general public. I enjoyed reading it and I am sure many will find it a fascinating account of various topics in western medical history. It is opinionated but there is no harm in that, and this book should encourage people to look further into the subjects that interest them.

In the end, though, I have not understood why Dr Whelton chose his selection of topics in distinction to others, probably simply because they interested him as there is no real theme to this book, which, as the author says, is a miscellanea of topics.

**Sean Hughes**  
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