

BOOK REVIEW

Of Patient Bearing – A History of General Practice in Eight Generations *by Stephen Gillam*

Paperback, 288 pages

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Stephen Gillam was well into his career as an academic general practitioner and public health doctor before he uncovered the extent of his own medical heritage. Since 1770, eight generations of his family worked as apothecaries and general practitioners, largely around rural Norfolk. In what he cheerfully describes as a 'quirky' book, part personal memoir and part textbook of the history of general practice, Gillam employs well-researched descriptions of the life and work of his medical forbears to illustrate his history of the structure and practice of medicine. Gillam's history generally follows standard textbooks and provides few original insights, but is nicely balanced by descriptions of his ancestors which are at times moving and include frank details of suicide, early death and selfless dedication. The incarceration of his great-great-grandmother Lizzie in a psychiatric institution for most of her life, for example, leads to a discussion of the history of 19th and 20th century asylums and psychiatric treatment.

Some chapters are more successful than others in relating Gillam's ancestors' work to the wider history. Paradoxically, later chapters felt somewhat less effective in this regard despite the greater amount of source material – I wondered if the author felt less comfortable scrutinising the practice of forbears known personally to him. The tone changes in the last chapter where Gillam provides his own biography, which includes being a policymaker and advisor to government on primary care, and becomes more personal, even polemical with regard to the shortcomings of current UK primary care structure and funding. Here is much detail regarding policy and contract changes over the past four decades but little about the changing feel of 'seat-of-the-pants' general practice. This chapter, and the conclusion which follows, might hold less interest for non-GP readers. Overall, however, this well illustrated, nicely written, readable overview of 200 years of British general practice, complimented by some very personal descriptions, will be of interest to many readers, including medical historians.

Martin Edwards

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