

BOOK REVIEW

Emotions and Surgery in Britain, 1793-1912

by Michael Brown

Hardback, 300 pages
Cambridge University Press
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This engaging book explores the emotions of surgeons from the 18th to the early 20th century. It is well referenced and sources material from the archives of Astley Cooper (1768-1841) amongst others.

Brown, an historian at Lancaster University, examines the culture of surgery particularly at the two large medical metropolises London and Edinburgh. He suggests that surgery in the period, from the late 18th to the middle of the 19th century, was performed as a piece of theatre, conducted in front of a live audience. Brown posits that these surgeons did express emotion and concern for the patients who they were operating on and quotes Frances Burney (1752-1840) following her operation for breast cancer, that Dr Dominique Larrey (1766-1842) was “pale nearly as myself, his face streaked with blood and its expression depicting grief, apprehension and almost horror”. Looking for the patient’s voice in that period was not easy, but using Cooper’s archives, and letters written either by patients, doctors or clergy on their behalf Brown creates a persuasive picture of the patient’s experience.

However, everything changed with anaesthesia. The body to be operated on was no longer the emotional subject of the pre-anaesthetic era. Instead the patient was now an inanimate object lying on the operating table with no need for haste. Then came antiseptics as defined by Joseph Lister (1827-1912). The great benefits of Listerism are evident but there were others such as Lawson Tait (1845-1899) who promoted asepsis, notably with the Cleanliness and Cold-Water school, but Tait sadly gets no mention in Brown’s book.

This though is an extremely informative book with a lot of interesting details, with well-constructed arguments to demonstrate the emotions of surgeons in the Romantic period and to reflect on the actions of surgeons in the Modern era.

I would thoroughly recommend this book to anyone who wants to read about the changing patterns of surgery. Although surgeons in the Romantic period had limited methods of relieving pain, from reading Brown’s book it is clear many were emotionally involved when operating and were trying to do their best for their patients.

Sean Hughes
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