

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Gout. A Medical Microcosm in a Changing World** *by Dorian Haskard*

paperback, 375 pages

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The author is a Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine and Rheumatology in both of which fields he has published widely. This is his first publication in the history of medicine.

His aim is to chart the history of gout and how it has been perceived and treated from antiquity. He ranges from the theory of patients having a 'gouty diathesis', through the popular image of excess and the early days of scientific research, to a modern genetic and biochemical understanding.

The first half of the book reviews the literature on gout as understood in contemporary writings. The works of the ancient physicians including Hippocrates are reviewed with ample quotations throughout. Many of the Great Names of Georgian Medicine such as Mead, Pitcairn and Heberden who all had different opinions and treatments for gout are discussed. Throughout we are given extended biographical details about the physicians accompanied by a wealth of information about their theories of disease through clear explanation, pertinent quotations and many appropriate illustrations.

Because medicine had no cure for gout its treatment was a field ripe for patent nostrums and quackery of which many examples of which are given. The promotion and use of popular ones such as Daffy's Elixir and Goddard's Drops are mentioned. Eau medicinale was equally as fashionable in France where it was made as in England, was the first to successfully use colchicum, the Autumn Crocus, for relief in an acute attack.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the concretions in an acutely inflamed joint were shown to be composed of uric acid. The book then moves on to describe the work of chemists trying to work out how the acid was formed and ways of treating an attack using chemical substances. Research into renal physiology led to some understanding of uric acid metabolism. Gouty families were studied in an effort to establish a genetic link, work that is not yet completed. The theory that gout is due to overindulgence is demolished. The only certain trigger is being overweight.

The literature on gout both descriptive and scientific is vast. This fresh approach in a sturdy paperback uses an attractive presentation and an easy style of writing which could lead to a quick skim. However anyone would benefit from a slower more thoughtful read to learn about the changing understandings of the disease, the helplessness of doctors without a proven cure and the fascinating byways of history. The author succeeds in his aim in this innovative book of writing with the lay reader in mind but also for 'historians wanting to know more about science and the scientists wanting to know more about history'.

**John M T Ford**  
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