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BOOK REVIEW

Worthy & Expert: A Modern History of The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh
by John L. Duncan

Hardback, 410 pages
Drummond Publishing, Nov 2025

John Duncan is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (RCSEd). He was a member of the College Council and office-bearer for eleven years.

The book provides a comprehensive account of the history of the RCSEd covering a period of over five hundred years. A helpful timeline indicates the key events in the history of the College. The book has been well researched and includes footnotes, a bibliography and general index.

The author describes how the Incorporation of Barbers and Surgeons established in 1505 developed into the College in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Reference is also made to the Seal of Cause, the founding document of the incorporation, which set the standards for surgical training and assessment some of which are still relevant today. Other topics of interest include the Letter of Exemption which recognised surgeons as non-combatants in war, the history of the College buildings and property and the recent role of women in surgical practice and the College.

There are many references to notable Fellows who have made important contributions to the development of surgical practice and the College. The role of the College in education, training and examination, as well as maintaining standards of surgical practice and ensuring patient safety, is clearly explained and documented.

Over the years, the College has needed to work with the other three Royal Colleges in the UK at times, for example, on education and training and the development of revalidation for surgeons. Furthermore, the role of the College as an international organisation is demonstrated by its involvement with the training and examination of overseas doctors and the development of relationships with Colleges of Surgeons in other countries.

The College has had to adapt to deal with, for example, the development of specialisation within surgical practice and advances in technology. The development of simulation for surgical skills training, the use of webinars and e-learning, the audit of surgical mortality and the teaching of non-technical skills for surgeons reflect some of the recent developments in modern surgical practice.

This book will be of interest to all those, whether academic or non-academic, who wish to find out more about the history of surgical practice in Scotland. Although relevant to the history of the RCSEd, the history of medicine in the nineteenth century is well documented elsewhere. Nevertheless, for the reader, this book is a useful reference providing information about the development of the RCSEd and how it has adapted to cope with changes and advances in surgical practice over five centuries.

Martyn Thomas
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