BOOK REVIEW

Captive memories
Far East POWs and Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
M Parkes, G Gill
Palatine Books, Lancaster 2015
ISBN 9781910837009 £12.99 p264

Rob Havers*

In this most thorough and engagingly written book, Captive Memories: Far East POWs and Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Meg Parkes and Geoff Gill draw together an impressive array of details about the experiences of British service personnel held as Prisoners of War by the Japanese during World War Two; providing a useful overview of the different theatres in which they were captured and held and also an examination that looks specifically at their lives, post-captivity, and the central role played therein by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine.

As the authors rightly attest, early on, scholarly interest in the experiences of Far Eastern Prisoners of War (FEPOWs) has been comparatively sparse, despite both a rich seam of primary source material in the form of unpublished diaries (held especially in the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum and elsewhere) and other, official, documents pertaining to captivity. The FEPOW experience is present, forcefully, in the popular culture of post-War Britain, for example through the cinematic adaptation of 'The Bridge on the River Kwai, most notably, and located more broadly within the canon of other POW narratives (although these are often set in the far more reasonable circumstances of the European theatre - a consideration the authors also note). The reasons for this are likely several, with the fact of defeat in Singapore and South East Asia being a likely consideration that explains this, along with the more simple consideration that captivity at the hands of the Japanese offered far less opportunity to record the experience. Life as a FEPOW was brutal and the Japanese treated their charges, with a few exceptions, in an inhuman fashion.

Although academic investigation has been thin, to date, concerning the experiences of FEPOWs, paradoxically that little which has been undertaken is comparatively abundant when set against the research undertaken to examine their lives upon return from captivity. Much as most FEPOWs simply got on with their lives when they did return and,

* Address for correspondence: email: rhavers@marshallfoundation.org
publicly at least, spoke little of their experiences, so too did writers and researchers focus on the war years rather than the post-war years. Where a consistent eye was applied, and of necessity, was at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), one of only two medical institutions in the United Kingdom qualified to treat men with prolonged exposure to the tropics and the myriad associated health challenges. This establishment provided a ready nexus both for treating these men but also the necessary mechanisms to engage them more fully in terms of understanding their mental well-being. This book, therefore, is as much about this unique relationship between FEPOWs and the LSTM and the resultant dataset as it is about the men themselves and the broader FEPOW experience.

In these endeavours this book is a valuable addition to the literature and provides a significant set of sign posts that will, surely, prompt more interest in this fascinating subject. The overview of the oral testimony undertaken as part of the academic study that supports this book was both belated (in that no other such work had been undertaken previously) and most timely; as the authors note, at the time of writing more than 2/3 of the subjects are now deceased and anyone with an interest in the area should be grateful that so much was done when it could be done. Of substantial interest also is the manner in which the entrepreneurial medical staff achieved so much with so little and how remarkable, when examined with a modern critical eye, were their efforts more than half a century ago and possessing little in the way of tools, let alone a contemporary understanding of the complexities of tropical disease. Their efforts, lauded at the time, stand more impressive still with the passage of time.

This work is testament, too, to the passion and commitment of the two authors whose interests and focus were derived from different starting points but which converged to write an impressive exposition of a subject that deserves still far greater scrutiny today.
BOOK REVIEW

Life and limb. Perspectives on the American Civil War
D Seed, SC Kenny, C Williams (eds.)
Liverpool University Press 2015
ISBN 9781781382509 £14.95 p210

AJ Larner*

The many commemorations of the centenary of the outbreak of the 1st World War (not least in some of the contents of this issue of the Journal) have overshadowed the anniversary of another cataclysmic military conflict – the sesquicentenary of the end of the American Civil War (1861-5), which falls this year. This commemorative volume, edited by three academics from Liverpool, contributes to this anniversary, focussing “on the wounded and on medical practice” (p. 1). The book’s launch coincided with a small but informative exhibition entitled Life and Limb which ran from April 16th to June 20th 2015 at 19 Abercromby Square, a US Library of Medicine travelling exhibition, which some readers may hopefully have had the chance to see.

The book combines first-hand accounts of Civil War medicine and nursing, some written contemporaneously and some from the post-war perspective. In addition, each section of the book intercalates more extended pieces written by academics with an interest in the Civil War, such that the volume is part anthology and part commentary.

It features material from authors well known to posterity who became embroiled in the war, such as Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Ambrose Bierce, as well as Stephen Crane although he was not born until after the war. In addition there are contributions from what might be termed “rank-and-file” combatants and practitioners. Notable clinicians active during and writing on the war include physicians such as Austin Flint (cardiology) and Silas Weir Mitchell (neurology; it has been previously argued that the “rise of the new specialism of neurology ..[had] .. roots in the clinical opportunities presented by the Civil War”), and the surgeon Robert(s) Bartholow (incorrectly given here as “Bartholomew”; now recognised as a pioneer of electrical brain

---

* Address for correspondence: Cognitive Function Clinic, WCNN, Liverpool, L9 7LJ; email: a.larner@thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk

stimulation techniques akin to those used today in the treatment of some neurological disorders\(^2\).

The overriding medical image, as implied by the book’s title, is that of amputation. It is estimated that some 60000 amputations took place during the War, as a consequence of trauma (the devastating effects of the Minié bullet) and of wounds becoming gangrenous. An ineluctable consequence was the boost to the manufacturers of limb prostheses, and examples of recommendations and testimonials for these products are included (pp. 123,127). Weir Mitchell’s work on phantom limbs, the sensation that all or more commonly part of an amputated limb was still present, is obviously also pertinent here. He recognised that this phenomenon must ultimately be mediated by the brain (p. 148), but it was not until the latter part of the 20\(^{th}\) century that the subject of phantom limbs once again captured significant medical attention again, giving important insights into brain function and plasticity.\(^3\)

The book is nicely presented and handsomely illustrated with both figures and plates. It bears similarities in form with David Seed’s earlier edited anthology on *American Travellers in Liverpool* (Liverpool University Press, 2008) with which local readers may already be familiar. *Life and Limb* may find a welcome niche in the library of anyone with an interest in medical history and of the American Civil War in particular.

(NB For interested readers, this book has now been donated to the LMI Library, which also has a copy of Louisa May Alcott’s *Civil War hospital sketches*.)

---


BOOK REVIEW

Plants: Healers and killers
M Radcliffe Lee
Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh 2015
ISBN 9781906129965 £15.00 P160

AJ Larner*

“Botany and medicine are inextricably linked” (p. 138). This text may be taken as the theme underpinning this short but engaging book written by a retired professor of clinical pharmacology and therapeutics and based on articles previously published in the Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh.

Each of the 16 chapters, ranging from 6-10 pages in length, focuses on one plant and then explores its botany, history and mythology, and clinical usage from antiquity to the modern day. This broad historical sweep is matched by the global distribution of the various plants described.

The chosen pharmacopoeia includes several medications which will be familiar to most, if not all, clinicians as well as many lay people, including atropine, physostigmine, digitalis, and quinine, as well as drugs which have more recently found a place in modern Western medicine such as artemisinin, galantamine and paclitaxel which, respectively, have been used in the treatment of malaria, Alzheimer’s disease, and some cancers.

The author is careful to point out both the beneficial and adverse effects of each compound, including some gripping accounts of deliberate and accidental poisoning.

The whole is a most enjoyable read, but there are occasional niggling errors: Ehrlich (1854-1915) is inexplicably “Robert” rather than “Paul” (p.129); there is inconsistency in dates (e.g. Theophrastus, cf. pp. 48 and 54; Caventou cf. p. 125 vs. pp. 96 and 111), and Erasmus Darwin is stated to be the “father of Charles” (p. 131), a mistake in which this author is not alone (see reference 1, McCrae book, p 260n5). 1

* Address for correspondence: Cognitive Function Clinic, WCNN, Liverpool, L9 7LJ; email: a.larner@thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk

statement is not in fact technically incorrect, since one of Erasmus’s sons was called Charles, but this was not the evolutionist; he was Erasmus’s grandson, as is evident from the fact that Erasmus died in 1802 and Charles was born in 1809. Liverpool readers will be disappointed that there is no explicit mention of Cecil Gray in the chapter on curare, although he does appear in the Sources (p. 146). The suggestion that diazepam has replaced quinine for the treatment of cramps (p. 113) does not tally with my clinical experience.

Beautifully and richly illustrated, and a fluent read, this book is a gem which will delight any reader interested in the ways that “botany and medicine are intimately interlinked” (p. 5). The demise of botany in the medical curriculum\(^2\) means that this knowledge risks gradual attrition amongst medical practitioners with the passage of time, despite the likelihood that more plant products with medicinal uses remain to be discovered. The threatened global loss of plant diversity may have not only ecological but also medical consequences.

(NB For interested readers, this book has now been donated to the LMI Library.)

---

BOOK REVIEW

Microbes and the Fetlar man. The life of Sir William Watson Cheyne
Jane Coutts
Humming Earth, Edinburgh 2015
ISBN 9781846220616 £35.00 P546

AJ Larner*

Though the name flows easily off the tongue, William Watson Cheyne (pronounced “Chain”, or “Sheen” in his native Shetland Islands) may not be familiar to many readers, including the current author before being enlightened by this splendid book.

Cheyne has been dubbed “Lister’s bulldog” for his devotion to Lord Lister (1827-1912), the pioneer of antiseptic surgery in the nineteenth century. As a medical student in Edinburgh, Cheyne chanced to hear Joseph Lister, as he then was, giving a lecture in his position of Professor of Clinical Surgery, and, according to his retrospective testimony, was hooked. He followed the great man to London, eventually being appointed at Kings College Hospital, then in Lincoln’s Inn Fields before its transfer to Denmark Hill.

With the researches of Pasteur and Koch, this was an exhilarating age for medical science, and Cheyne was the one to take on the laboratory work required to underpin the theory of Listerian antisepsis. He proved himself a capable bacteriologist, and his travels to laboratories in Continental Europe included a visit to Koch whom he subsequently counted as a friend.

Eventually, perhaps in part for lack of research funding, Cheyne restricted himself to surgical practice, in which his publication rate was as equally impressive as that during his bacteriological career. He continued to value a strong early scientific component in medical education. In all, he remained Lister’s advocate, defender and friend, particularly after the latter largely withdrew from public life. This role was, of course, not without controversy: with the development of aseptic practices, Cheyne became widely characterised as something of an “old fogey” for continuing to champion antisepsis. He saw service in both the Boer and First World Wars, and became President of the Royal College of Surgeons before his retirement to his native Shetland Islands (specifically Fetlar).

* Address for correspondence: Cognitive Function Clinic, WCNN, Liverpool, L9 7LJ; email: a.larner@thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk
This is a beautifully produced volume with few, and only minor, typographical errors, and one unfortunate type setting error (p. 397) with loss of at least one line of text. Many of the black and white images illustrating the book are reproductions of photographs taken by Sir Watson himself. The work is thickly referenced (72 pages worth!) and has an extensive bibliography. This was obviously a labour of love for the author and one of the reasons for her interest is evidenced in the text (p. 405): Frank Coutts, manager of Cheyne’s Home Farm on Fetlar fathered nine children, the youngest of whom, John, is the author’s husband. Access to local knowledge, enhanced by the author’s work as manager of the Fetlar Interpretive Centre for many years, has undoubtedly been the source of many anecdotes (oral history) concerning Sir Watson which might not have been available to another biographer.

This is an absorbing read which will appeal not only to surgeons wanting to know more about the origins of antiseptic surgery but also to all medical historians with an interest in the paradigm shift in clinical practice which Lister helped to initiate.

(NB For interested readers, this book has now been donated to the LMI Library.)
 Booker REVIEW

Doctors of another calling.
Physicians who are best known in fields other than medicine
David K C Cooper (editor)
University of Delaware Press, Newark 2014
ISBN 9781611495973 P477

AJ Larner

There can be few medical practitioners so dedicated to their art that they have not, at least on occasion, considered the green-grass prospects of alternative employment, perhaps more so now than in previous eras. This book, realising a long-held aspiration of the editor, gives brief accounts of 38 of those who have stepped away, transiently or permanently, from the strictures of the Hippocratic oath to plough, with success, another occupational furrow. Some are familiar figures, already much “biographised”, others more obscure; all are male.

Interestingly, as pointed out in the foreword by Howard Dean (sometime medical aspirant to the US Presidency – what lessons he might have learned from the current example of Ben Carson!), writers make up a large percentage of those selected: John Keats, Arthur Conan Doyle, Anton Chekhov, W Somerset Maugham, AJ Cronin. Some of these authors have of course used their medical knowledge and experience to inform their fictional writings, some whilst continuing to practice medicine (e.g. Chekhov, Cronin). To this list of writers may also be added St Luke and Dante Alighieri, although neither would be understood as doctors in the sense that we now understand the word.

Other alternative careers represented here include the sciences (Copernicus, Thomas Young), philosophy (John Locke), politics (Sun Yat-sen, Ernesto Che Guevara), music (Borodin, Boyd Neel), exploration (Mungo Park, David Livingstone, Edward Wilson; Roald Amundsen is included amongst those medical students who did not qualify), sport (Henry Stallard, Roger Bannister), philanthropy (Hans Sloane, Albert Schweitzer, Jules Stein, Armand Hammer), comedy (Graham Chapman), and even piracy (Thomas Dover). There is some special pleading, in that some of those described were not true clinicians, having qualified but practised only briefly (2 weeks as an ENT locum for Graham Chapman) or not at all (Somerset Maugham, Armand Hammer). Others reached

* Address for correspondence: Cognitive Function Clinic, WCNN, Liverpool, L9 7LJ; email: a.larner@thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk
positions of renown in the medical hierarchy (Hans Sloane, Benjamin Rush, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Roger Bannister) as well as their other calling.

Overall, this is a stimulating book, nicely illustrated, perhaps a little uneven in the quality of the chapters from the 26 contributors. Limitations relate to the selective nature of those included (many other “truant” could have been chosen, as illustrated in two long appendices by the editor), and of course we learn nothing of those who abandoned medicine and proved average or failed in other careers. To paraphrase a famous saying of Chekhov, those medics happily married to the practice of medicine will probably find no appeal or interest in this book at all, whilst for those flirting with a possible mistress outside the confines of a medical career it may provide some alluring possibilities.

(NB For interested readers, this book has now been donated to the LMI Library.)