Book Reviews


It is not often that the reading of a scientific monograph on a wet Sunday afternoon gives such pleasure as your review writer enjoyed from this short book. Osteitis deformans is a common disease. Most of us think we know more or less all about it, but I found something new on almost every page. Dr Barry has taken a special interest in the condition for many years past and discusses in a most readable way every aspect of this puzzling disorder, including all that is known about its etiology, which is of course very little. Even though it is basically a disease of old age and is so often symptomless and almost harmless, it is perhaps surprising that there are so many gaps in our knowledge and that so little experimental work has been done on it. One would like to know, for example, more of the fate of bone grafts applied to ununited fractures in this condition. Do other mammals suffer from it? The fate of a piece of affected bone transplanted to a bed of normal bone would be of great interest, but in the human subject would scarcely be an acceptable experiment, although we know that the disease does not cross the plane of arthrosis when only one bone is affected in an osteoarthritic knee.

Readers may be surprised to learn Dr Barry's opinion that internal fixation, in spite of its difficulties, is the treatment of choice in fractures of the femur, but comforted by his failure to find any evidence that a fracture ever precipitates malignant change. When a Künschier nail is used he insists that it must run the full length of the shaft if a second fracture at the lower end of the nail is to be avoided. His chapter on neoplastic change is especially good, even if it does make depressing reading, and one can indeed recommend the whole book to orthopaedic surgeons and radiologists alike with genuine enthusiasm. As one has come to expect from the house of Livingstone, the quality of production, particularly that of the radiographs, is first class, but is it too much in this expensive day and age to suggest that histological sections should be reproduced in colour?—T. J. Fairbank.


This is a collection of memoirs that appeared in the British Journal of Surgery during the years 1964–68. The reader is not introduced to a portrait gallery of great surgeons, men whose names are known throughout the world; perhaps not more than eight out of the thirty-three could be regarded as Olympians. Nor is he asked to reverence great research workers as such, though there were some, notably William Macewen and Victor Horsley. He is invited to contemplate certain notable teachers of surgery.

There is no doubt that the British medical student has a respect and affection for the good teacher that he withholds from those who, however eminent in other respects, lack the gift of imparting knowledge and instilling wisdom, and he remembers his teachers for many years afterwards. This has some relevance today. One legitimate cause of student unrest is indifferent teaching. Some most able scientists have been known to say—and they said it out loud—that in a healthy university all that matters is research, and the instruction of the young is altogether secondary. The trouble about this pernicious idea is that there is some truth in it. If nothing original is going on the place is dead. But it is wrong to suppose that the excitement engendered by first class research, discovery and inventiveness somehow percolates automatically down to the undergraduate and so stimulates him. It works that way at graduate level, and this is well illustrated by the life and work of Harold Gillies. By conventional standards he was hardly a teacher at all. He was egocentric and hopelessly unsystematic; yet the sheer brilliance and originality of the man compelled attention and attracted ardent pupils, but men who were already on their way to becoming plastic surgeons.