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A History of Scottish Medicine. Themes and Influences
(review)

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Reviews

A History of Scottish Medicine. Themes and Influences

By Helen M. Dingwall. Pp.282.

ISBN 0 7486 0865 6

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2003. £19.99.

The author in her introduction highlights the dilemma that faces historians of medicine: whether to deal with medicine in Scotland or Scottish medicine. The title tells us about her decision, although she does acknowledge that ‘the complexities of the past’ and her particular approach do not provide a complete answer to the question and she is less certain that in the age of technology medicine in Scotland has remained distinctively Scottish.

This new work is significant in that it is the first wide-ranging account of Scottish medicine to appear for nearly a quarter of a century and, more importantly, the first to be written by someone who is not a Scottish physician or surgeon; in other words it is not a doctor’s history. However, as the author points out, this work is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all aspects of Scottish medicine; rather, her intention is ‘to offer a general perspective as a basis for further detailed research.’ In the space of less than 300 pages Dr Dingwall has dealt not only with the influences shaping Scottish medicine in Scotland but also with the impact of Scottish doctors on the development of medicine in other countries and in particular areas of medical practice—in England, the Empire, Russia and in the early years of the United States of America; at sea, as military surgeons and in the field of public health.

Her research illustrates the degree to which the study of medical history has progressed since Comrie’s history of Scottish medicine was published in 1932; Dr Dingwall has moved away from the “peoples and places” approach of Comrie and while not ignoring a chronological narrative she has placed the development of Scottish medicine firmly in the context of cultural, social and economic change, at the same time exploring the influence of European teaching on Scottish medical education. As John Pickstone put it in a recent review: ‘[medical history] cannot be understood without reference to the major intellectual and political movements...’ (*Social History of Medicine* 18 (2005) 308) and in this volume the author has fulfilled that task.

The book is in three parts, divided chronologically: from earliest times to c.1500; from c.1500 to c.1800; and from c. 1800 to 2000. Each section is prefaced by a chapter offering ‘brief general historical surveys’ and setting the context in which medicine changed and developed. To take one example, the development of the medical and surgical colleges in Scotland is handled skilfully, setting their emergence in the context of economic transformation and the population shift which occurred with urbanisation. It is this contextual approach that is valuable, a methodology that is markedly different from that used by the majority of doctor historians. This technique of scene-setting works well on the whole, but this reader was left feeling that too much information was presented in the space available; a larger format may have proved more successful. The further reading list and bibliography are comprehensive, covering historical theory, Scottish history and all aspects of Scottish medicine from the general to the specific; such topics as alternative medicine, dentistry, hospital histories, women in medicine and the military are included.

There were sections that I found less satisfactory, in particular that dealing with the nineteenth century, but this may be the consequence of a perspective

born of a career in surgery and a more recent involvement in the study of nineteenth century epidemics. However, this does not detract from a first-rate achievement: this is a text which will undoubtedly prove to be an important introduction to Scottish medicine and an essential source in this expanding field.

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The Celts: A History from Earliest Times to the Present.

By Bernhard Maier. Pp. ix, 310.

ISBN 0 7486 1605 5.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003. £49.50.

This is an English version of the author's recently published German study *Die Kelten* (München 2000: Beck), a work which surveys the diverse evidence for the presence and activities of Celtic-speaking peoples past and present, drawing on up-to-date scholarship in the several disciplines involved to offer the general reader an integrated picture and specialists in one field access to current thinking in others. The English edition is aimed at the same dual readership and is essentially the same work.

Through the author's strong sense of purpose and the translator's intelligence and art *The Celts* is clear and readable, well ordered and well sign-posted. It is divided into three major sections: the ancient, the mediaeval and the modern world. Each section is sub-divided by place and, where applicable, by period, which makes it easy to find one's way around. It is also very nicely produced, although it may be remarked that this is the only such book encountered by the present writer to contain no illustrations at all. By contrast, the German edition contains thirteen images—admittedly austere black and white ones—of metal-work, illuminated manuscripts and so on. Apart from this puzzling gap, *The Celts* is a highly presentable piece of publishing.

It has to be said that there are considerable numbers of books around with similar or identical content and title. T.G.E. Powell's 1958 volume for Thames and Hudson's 'Ancient Peoples and Places' series may be seen as the first of the modern genre, capitalising on the rapid post-war expansion of archaeology and seizing the opportunity to fuse this with current thinking in the fields of literature (Celtic and classical), language and history. The authors who have followed Powell in writing about the Celts display different emphases, depending on whether their primary expertise is literary, historical, philological, archaeological, or none. But the main ingredients remain essentially the same: a comparative, mostly Indo-European frame of reference (e.g. for language, religion and institutions); archaeologically derived evidence (e.g. for material culture and 'everyday life'); and the continuing literary traditions (mediaeval and modern) of the British Isles and Brittany.

The 'market niche' for the German version of Dr Maier's book was clearly enough defined: by contrast with Britain, there were few scholarly-popular works of synthesis available in German. Specifically 'Celtic' books like Helmut Birkhan's *Kelten* and Karl-Horst Schmidt's *Geschichte und Kultur der Kelten* are heavily weighted towards linguistic matters and the proto-historical period; while the magnificent archaeological publications based on the excavations at Hallstatt, Heuneburg, Hochdorf and elsewhere have tended to be uncompromisingly specialist in their coverage and tone. Yet the last few decades have seen a considerable widening of interest in Germany's Celtic past and in the mediaeval and modern 'Celtic Fringe', and Maier's *Die Kelten* clearly spoke to