Book Reviews


Earl Walker was Professor of Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital from 1947 until his retirement in 1972 at the age of 65. He then became visiting professor at the University of New Mexico, and it was during the last 20 years or so of his life that he returned to his lifelong interest in the history of the neurosciences. Following his sudden death in 1995, his widow began to put together all his writings on the subject and vast collection of references. This text is a fitting tribute to his work and to the devoted interest of his wife.

The coverage extends from the origins of the subject in earliest times right up to the present day. The chapters are arranged roughly along anatomical lines: encephalisation, spinal cord, peripheral nerves, cerebral disorders (epilepsy, cerebrovascular disease, etc.), congenital anomalies and the evolution of neurosurgery and neurology as distinct disciplines. There are 3 appendices covering the arts in neuroscience (which reflects the author’s broad interests), medical fees throughout the ages, and a very useful historical glossary of neurological syndromes. There is also a complete bibliography of Earl Walker’s writings and a very extensive reference section. It is well-illustrated, mainly with portraits of eminent individuals in the field.

A particularly attractive feature of the text is the clear demarcation of topics each outlining their relevant early history with pertinent references. This could be very valuable to lecturers preparing their courses as well as to others in writing articles on specific topics. Good examples are the discussions of the recognition and diagnosis of syphilitic infections of the nervous system and cerebral tumours. The neurosurgical aspects of many conditions are given particular attention.

Perhaps it is asking too much of a single author, however, to cover all areas of neuroscience in sufficient detail to satisfy everyone. For example in regard to my own field of interest, namely neuromuscular disorders, I discovered a few points to challenge. It is stated, for example, that Duchenne developed dementia (sic) and died practically unknown (p. 276). In fact, though he may have been depressed during his later years, he was much feted and honoured and his international reputation in the field of neurology was especially emphasised in his obituaries in Lancet and elsewhere. Spinal muscular atrophy is covered but there is only passing mention of the dystrophies. The role of Landouzy (1845–1917) and Dejerine (1849–1917) in regard to dystrophy is omitted, though Dejerine’s other contributions to neurology are detailed. Controversial issues of priority, such as the discovery of the distinct functions of the anterior and posterior nerve roots of the spinal cord (Bell and Majendie) are considered, but not in detail. The early successful surgical treatment of intracranial aneurysms is credited among others to Walter Dandy (1886–1946), Earl Walker’s predecessor at Johns Hopkins, and to Norman Dott (1897–1973) of Edinburgh. But there is no mention of the role played by Geoffrey Jefferson (1886–1961) who some might consider to have been of equal importance. It is inevitable however, that in taking a broad brush in writing on medical history there will be some casualties and one’s personal preferences and biases may suffer. Notwithstanding, this is an excellent and informative read, well documented and a worthy reflection of the scholarship and industry of a great neurosurgeon.

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