Gallery of colourful personalities

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Truants was the subject chosen by Berkeley Moynihan for the Linacre lecture delivered in 1936, some four months before his death. There are two elements to this book: first, there is the text which is the presentation of Moynihan's choice of men who were doctors but established a reputation for themselves outside medicine; then there is the author, Moynihan himself, a figure of considerable interest. Truants is not a brilliant piece of literature, nor does it qualify as a unique piece of research—the subject is too diffuse to be other than a personal and at times haphazard selection of biographical detail.

Moreover, the Linacre lecture itself was not apparently one of Moynihan's oratorical successes, as Michael Harley acknowledges in his introduction. It did not compare, for example, with his brilliant Romances lecture The Advance of Medicine. Why then should the newly established Keynes Press select Truants for republication (it was first published in 1936) in what promises to be an exquisitely produced series of books? The answer simply is that, despite all its shortcomings, Truants is a fascinating gallery of colourful medical personalities. Its fascination rests not altogether in the text, but also in the character and intellect of the man who wrote it, and for this reason Michael Harley's unpretentious and informative biographical introduction is indispensable.

Berkeley George Andrew Moynihan, first Baron of Leeds (1865–1936), was born at Malta to a father who was Irish by descent and had received the Victoria Cross from the Queen herself, and a mother who came from Ashton-under-Lyne. How great was Moynihan as man and surgeon? Does he rank with such mighty fin de siècle achievers as Osler or Cushing, or as a surgeon with his own hero J B Murphy of Chicago? There can be little doubt about his prowess in surgery. He was regarded as one of the greatest surgeons of the day, and in the estimation of Le Fanu he holds a place among "the greatest of all surgeons." He listed among his friends Halsted, the Mayo brothers, and, of course, Murphy. Two major books on abdominal surgery which "threw open the abdomen to all surgeons" secured his reputation, and his books on peptic ulceration were testimony to his ability as a researcher. As an orator and writer he was gifted, and his interests in art and culture put one in mind of Geoffrey Keynes, in whose memory the press that publishes Truants is named. He was liberal enough in outlook to espouse and support in the House of Lords voluntary euthanasia when such sentiments were unpopular and little understood. His writings, moreover, reflect a philosophical perspective on medicine. Moynihan's stature was such that he has attracted one major biography and several biographical essays, and he possesses sufficient posthumous magnetism for this generation to reassess his philosophy through his writings.

Now for the stuff of Truants. Moynihan writes with a pleasing and unpretentious style, which he uses to good effect in linking together his selection. His literary technique was developed with care, and his sentiments on writing could hardly fail to impress contemporary journal editors. "Neither have I brought to this work any craft of eloquence or adornment of words, but this only have I done that things difficult and unknown may be so handled by me and set forth in that style of writing and those
words absolutely necessary, that they may be clearly understood. "That he had read extensively and had a broad knowledge of medical history is evident from the range of his chosen subjects—from Egypt's Imhotep to Joshua Pim, who was twice singles and doubles champion at Wimbledon. Herein lies a weakness in the work. Had Moynihan sought an artist to paint on his mighty canvas his many subjects drawn from diverse civilisations and all points of time, together with their achievements, even the mighty Bruegel would have fled in terror. And yet in his bizarre canvas one glimpses, often for the first time, some fascinating personalities and moments of history.

In making this criticism it must be acknowledged in fairness that the scaffolding of this essay was contrived as the framework for an entertaining lecture, and had Moynihan contemplated the structure too critically he would have abandoned the project altogether. He has been careful not to place any restrictions on his choice. He does not define what he means by a "truant," and, though many of his subjects desert medicine altogether to achieve success elsewhere, by no means all do so. Nor does he examine why his truants became doctors, a point of some importance at least up to the Victorian period, when a career in

"The size of the country and its vast population, the majority of whom live in abject poverty, make the task of fulfilling the needs of the people a truly awesome one." Disabled in India (Sangam Books; £6.95) is a collection of reports from the various voluntary organisations there that try, with very little official help, to meet these needs. Their problems are complicated by the fact that 80% of the population live in rural areas and 80% of doctors in the cities; by cultural traditions which attach social stigma to disabling diseases, or encourage the belief that an individual is disabled because he is paying for his past sins, so that to help him is to tinker with divine justice; and by the dead hand of bureaucracy: in Uttar Pradesh, the state with the largest population of disabled, you are entitled to a half price ticket on the public bus service only if you are a double amputee, and even then for each trip you make you have to get a form signed by a civil surgeon or chief medical officer.

The book has been published as a follow up to the International Year of Disabled People, in the hope of inspiring greater government action.

Moynihan was a young gentleman with scientific ambitions; what a degree in humanities might be to one with literary aspirations. Only once does he consider this question, and that is with the poet laureate, Robert Bridges, who believed that he would be a better poet: "If he learned and practised some profession which brought him into active contact with human life, and particularly with the investigation and achievement of natural science."

Moynihan has none the less chosen his giants with care: all are men of substance, whose deliberations influenced the author in his development. Hippocrates, for example, impressed him by his elucidation of the principles of research and practice—"phenomena first, then recognition of phenomena as something separate from the material by which they were exhibited, their endless rearrangement within the mind of the observer, then judgment, then general propositions, then practical knowledge and craft."

Some delightful moments in the history of medicine are neatly portrayed, none more so than the debate at Oxford in 1860 on Darwin's hypothesis at which Bishop Wilberforce, turning to Huxley, with a smiling insolence . . . begged to know, was it through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey." Huxley in his famous reply, prefixed by an aside to Sir Benjamin Brodie that "The Lord hath delivered him into mine hands," declared to the hushed gallery that he "was not ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor; but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man whose used his great gifts to obscure the truth." Moynihan's humour shines through on many occasions; Thomas Browne's delightful definition of cotillion—"the foolishest act a wise man commits in all his life, nor is there anything that will more depress his cooled imagination than to reflect upon the folly he hath committed"—must not be taken too seriously as indeed it must not have been by its author, who became the father of 10 children. The poet and physician Markakenside (1721-70), who found his true patronym Aikinside more likely to attract the handiwork than respect in practice, puts one in mind of Mother Mary Aikenhead, the foundress of St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin, in whose memory a neurosurgical ward was named.

An excellent index, giving dates as well as a line or two of biographical detail, shows at a glance the remarkable range of Moynihan's research for Truants—83 personalities whose lives span more than 4000 years. The index also allows the reader to identify omissions. How, we might ask, did Moynihan omit Clekov? Where is Hans Sloane or William Petty or James Moore of Belfast as a representative of the art of painting? Each reader will have his own truants whose exclusion will irritate, but for all that so many unfamiliar figures are introduced for our entertainment, that the balance is much in the reader's favour. Should not the choice be taken for what it is, a personal tribute, as indeed the author acknowledges when quoting Montaigne:

"I have gathered a posie of other men's flowers
And nothing but the thread that binds them is mine own."