

facisive description which still remains a model for anyone who would assay medical authorship. A difficult subject is explored with sympathy, sincerity, and marvellous insight. The author knows exactly what he wants to say and distils it on to the printed page in such simple English that we feel we could do it just as well. That is the hallmark of excellence. It is the simplicity of his presentation which so intrigues me. The first line of any of his articles or letters is constructed in such a way that, with a minimum of words, it immediately arrests the reader and commands his further attention. What an asset he was to his editor, for his opening sentence always provided the perfect headline for the rest of the contribution. Surprisingly, the same simple English continues throughout, for Asher perfected this kind of prose and, as Ruth Holland tells us in the introduction, repeatedly changed and polished his work until he achieved just what he wanted. He loved poking fun at pretentiousness, especially of the written word.

There must be few authors who at one time or another have not been guilty of pretentiousness. Certainly, in 1962 Ian Burn and I thought that we were clever in entitling our article in the *British Medical Journal* "Natural history of thyroid carcinoma." At the time I had picked up an old copy of Ryle's book on *The Natural History of Disease* and been impressed by the word "natural" which seemed to add just the right touch of authority to the occasion. In retrospect I think that it was a touch of Pooh Bah's "merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative." We were suitably humbled by Asher's strictures and I am today still striving to write in good clear English, which should please him, wherever he is. With his natural courtesy I remember he sent a copy of his letter with a disarming little note, well before publication, so that it would be no surprise to us.

Mental illness always interested him and his championing of the general physician as the best kind of doctor to be in charge of the hospital's mental observation ward (chapter 4) was both his apotheosis and his undoing. I have read and reread this unusual document with its beautifully unadorned case histories and can readily imagine how it must have impressed his original audience. Sadly, medicine and surgery today become more and more fragmented and specialised all the time, and we should take care that our higher training programmes, with their accreditation, do not take away more than they add in the education of our hospital doctors. Richard Asher was such a fervent generalist that when the regional board replaced him with a psychiatrist to oversee the mental observation ward in his own hospital he resigned and within a few years himself fell prey to one of those mental aberrations he had so sympathetically handled and written about.

For reading in bed, the last four chapters are pure delight: Asher at his wittiest, and he could be very witty indeed, usually with a neat little moral tucked away, not too obscurely.

It is easy to see how he loved reading and indeed he liked quoting from what he had read: Kipling, Trollope, Jane Austen, and W S Gilbert, and I am delighted to see in the final chapter of this book that Lewis Carroll must have been among his favourites. In this chapter I was particularly intrigued to find him performing so skilfully as a mathematician, something I would never have guessed.

Well, for my choice it is Jane Austen for sense, Edward Lear for nonsense, and Richard Asher for good sense. What a marvellous gift this elegantly produced book would make for a doctor's bedside table.

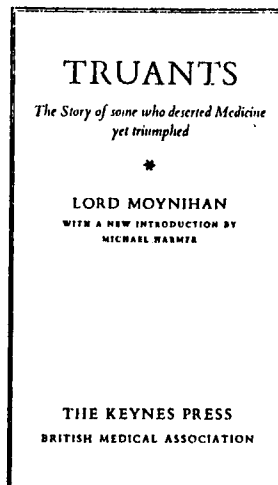
*A Sense of Asher. A new miscellany.* Richard Asher. Selected and introduced by Ruth Holland. (Pp xv + 97; £35; limited edition of 300 copies.) The Keynes Press. British Medical Association. 1983.

## Reference

- <sup>1</sup> Stallworthy J. Book of the year. A fortunate man. *Br Med J* 1981;283:1689-90.

## Gallery of colourful personalities

EOIN O'BRIEN



*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 Harmer acknowledges in his introduction. It did not compare, for example, with his brilliant Romanes 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 Harmer'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

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 coition—"the foolishness of a wise man commits in all his life, nor is there anything that will more deject 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 ridicule 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 4060 years. The index also allows the reader to identify omissions. How, we might ask, did Moynihan omit Chekov? 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:

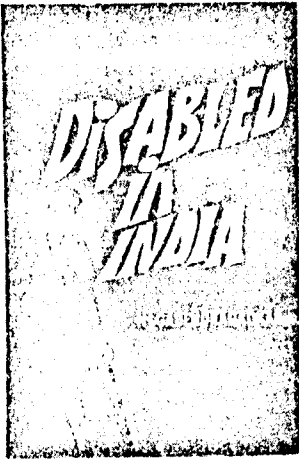
"I have gathered a posie of other men's flowers  
And nothing but the thread that binds them is mine own."

Moynihan was intrigued by the integrity of purpose and the intellectual achievements of his truants who had but one linking thread—medicine. He respected the tradition of that profession but did not hold its dictates as sacrosanct. His own words epitomise the spirit that was Berkeley Moynihan:

"The great teacher leaves behind him the written word or the memory of the spoken word; these become a gospel, uncritically preached by all acolytes who have humbly served the high priest. Those who have learned from a great master must surely not be content to imitate his methods, but rather they must strive to capture his authentic spirit and in that spirit to seek new roads and so to discover still firmer truths. Few virtues are nobler than loyalty to a great tradition. But such tradition is kept alive not by routine observance of ancient ceremony, nor by mute obedience to outworn creed, but by active faith forever seeking new truths and exploring new paths in conformity with the old spirit and with unfaltering devotion to that great ideal which tradition enshrines."

Finally to the Keynes Press a salute for demonstrating that the art of publishing has not been vanquished by the vulgar constraints of contemporary commerce; may *Truants* be the first of many titles to come.

*Truants*. The story of some who deserted medicine and yet triumphed. Lord Moynihan. New introduction by Michael Harmer. (Pp xxii+73; £35; limited edition of 300 copies.) The Keynes Press. British Medical Association. 1983.



"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 handicapped 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.

medicine was to 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,