

## BOOK REVIEW

### Essays in Medical Biography

By J T Hughes. Pp. xii + 204. Illustrated. UK £20 / USA \$40. Rimes House, Oxford. 2008. ISBN 978-1-874317-01-2.

'On a May morning in 1935, Lawrence of Arabia was fatally injured in a motor-cycle accident, which had an important sequel for thousands of future motor cyclists. Mr Hugh Cairns, Assistant surgeon at the London Hospital, having driven a hundred miles from his home in Arundel, found the patient in a fatal coma ....' Thus begins the biography of Sir Hugh Cairns, first Professor of Neurosurgery in Oxford, innovator of much, and relentless and successful proponent of protective helmets for motor cyclists. This is a book of biographies, and the subjects are George Sharpe, Thomas Browne, Henry Power, Thomas Willis, William Petty, Laurence Sterne, Victor Horsley, Hugh Cairns and finally Julius Hallervorden. Many subjects are known for their contributions to anatomy, particularly neuroanatomy, as well as their interest in neuropathology. Many worked in Oxford.

The interest in men of the neurosciences is not surprising, as the author is a retired Oxford neuropathologist, and Emeritus Fellow of Green College; his has been a long interest in medical history and biography. Hughes has collected extensive material, and he records it in detail, well referenced, and with great interest for the reader. There are many intriguing illustrations. The most comprehensive account is that of the anatomist Thomas Willis, author of the three books *Cerebri Anatome*, *Pathologiae cerebri*, and *De anima brutorum*, books published in the seventeenth century, which accurately – sometimes for the first time – recorded the structure, function and some diseases of the brain and spinal cord. Of the many inspiring biographies, one account is bizarre, another disgraceful. The bizarre account is of the death of Laurence Sterne, celebrated author of *Tristram Shandy*, and his burial in the graveyard of St Georges Church, Hanover Square, London on 22 March 1768, his body to be recognised two days later in the dissecting halls of Cambridge, he being the victim of body snatchers. The disgraceful account is that of the neuropathologist Julius Hallervorden, who participated in the Nazi euthanasia programme by collecting materials, and sometimes removing brains from defective children that had been killed with carbon monoxide.

D M Dent

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