

Book Reviews

MICHAEL BLISS, *The discovery of insulin*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987, 8vo, pp. 304, illus., £25.00.

Every medical student is taught that F. G. Banting, the would-be orthopaedic surgeon and part-time physiology teacher from London, Ontario and C. H. Best, the medical student, discovered insulin in 1921–22; and many know that Banting and J. J. R. MacLeod, the Professor of Physiology in Toronto, were awarded the Nobel Prize for its discovery. A few have heard that Banting shared his half of the prize with Best and that MacLeod shared his with J. B. Collip, Professor of Biochemistry at Edmonton. Whatever lies behind these different events? Michael Bliss, who is Professor of Canadian History at the University of Toronto, where all this history was made, has written a lively, scholarly, and credible account (first published in 1982) of the brief but momentous affair. It is based on published reports, new documents, and the recollections of many who were there. Four aspects are particularly interesting. First, several earlier workers, particularly the Roumanian, N. C. Paulesco, came very close to discovering insulin. Second, Banting's and Best's scientific credibility was ruthlessly attacked by F. Roberts, but Sir Henry Dale, who visited them, described this as "armchair criticism" and rose to the defence of "the two young enthusiasts in their unaided but heroic and successful attempts at research". Third, the clash of personalities, and especially Banting's paranoid reactions, made great difficulties for all concerned. MacLeod, director of the work and head of the department, behaved as a statesman throughout, but later knocked the soil of Canada from his feet when he returned home to Scotland. Fourth, Banting, Best, MacLeod, and Collip formed a team and all made distinct and vital contributions. The results were so outstanding that the Nobel award was made within a year, in 1923, unfortunately before all the credits could be assessed. Now, over sixty years later, Bliss provides a judgment which will remain valid for a very long time.

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MICHAEL WARREN and HUW FRANCIS (editors), *Recalling the Medical Officer of Health. Writings by Sidney Chave*, London, King Edward's Hospital Fund [14 Palace Court, London W2 4HT], 1987, 8vo, pp. 200, £15.00.

Sidney Chave was one of the Grand Old Men of public health, whose career at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine exactly spanned that institution's first fifty years (1929–1979). His first interest was public health, his second its history. His articles on John Snow and the Broad Street Pump, and on Henry Whitehead and the cholera in Broad Street, are classics of their kind, demonstrating the significance of minute local inquiry to wider issues of health history and health policy. These articles are reprinted in this volume, together with the fragmentary and, it must be said, rather repetitive, draft chapters of the book he was working on at the time of his death in 1985, with an additional essay by Huw Francis on the decline and restoration of the public health tradition since 1945.

The intention of the book is to "honour an outstanding teacher and to contribute to the current debates". Sidney Chave wrote well, and the skeleton of his book as presented here provides a good general background for the student of public health history. The "current debates" in question are, however, purely medical ones—on the nature and function of public health, or community medicine. Chave does discuss the process by which the Medical Officer of Health became a specialist, but there is no analysis of questions which concern historians, such as the Medical Officer's role in relation to the nineteenth-century revolution in government, or his contribution to the century's mortality decline. Chave was essentially a medical man, although he had a scholarly interest in the history of his subject; he and his editors see history as an "aid to judgement" and do not participate in the preoccupations of professional historians.

Recalling the Medical Officer is a nicely printed, if amateurishly produced book. There are some odd misprints—Sir John Simon's successor as Medical Officer of Health for the City of London is twice referred to as "Letherby" on p. 53, although correctly named as Letheby elsewhere; the Local Government Board becomes the even clumsier Local Governmental Board in Appendix H. The appendices and bibliography were a good idea, and contribute to the book's usefulness as an introductory volume. There is no index, and the absence of footnotes to the draft