Penelope Hunting, *The history of the Royal Society of Medicine*, London, Royal Society of Medicine Press, 2002, pp. xx, 505, illus., £50.00 (hardback 1-85315-497-0).

This lavishly illustrated book was written to commemorate the so-called bicentenary of the Royal Society of Medicine (RSM), which had its beginnings in 1773, though the Society was not formally established until 1907. The Medical Society of London had been founded in 1773, and by 1805 a schism formed, largely due to the autocratic regime of the incumbent President, Dr James Sims, who resolutely held onto his position and could not be ousted. This led to the establishment of the Medical and Chirurgical Society of London, which received its charter in 1834, when it was subsequently renamed the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society, and its Members became Fellows. By 1907, there were twenty-six London medical societies that were invited to participate in an emerging comprehensive organization including the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society. Fifteen societies responded positively and they were amalgamated to form the Royal Society of Medicine.

The growth of specialist hospitals in London from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century was followed by a concomitant rise in the number of specialist medical societies including the Pathological Society (1846), the Epidemiological Society (1850), the Odontological Society (1856), the Obstetrical Society (1858) and the Clinical Society (1867). The formation of the RSM was significant since it united several of these organizations and, as Penelope Hunting points out, "the merger was a landmark in the gradual acceptance of specialization".

Apart from the scholarship on individual medical societies, historians have paid little attention to medical societies as a genre and, while a comprehensive history of medical clubs and associations remains to be written, Hunting's detailed account of the various societies that amalgamated to form the RSM is a valuable addition to medical history. Her work surpasses the previous books commissioned by the Society in 1905 and 1955 in its exhaustive use of archival material, oral history and the collaborative assistance from numerous Fellows and former Presidents of the RSM.

The first seven thematic chapters of the book encompass the development of the RSM's earlier organizations, and it continues with the advances in medicine and surgery—with the introduction of anaesthesia from the 1840s and the antiseptic methods of Joseph Lister in the 1880s. The formation of the RSM in 1907 is examined, followed by a detailed discussion of each of the twelve sections that comprised the society.

The book, however, falls into two parts, each directed at a different audience. The historical narrative of the first half is discursive, cogent and cohesive; in particular, it engages the interest of historians. From chapter seven onwards, the text, with its increased medical terminology, seems to have been written with the medical profession in mind. It is this change in style that is particularly problematic.

The shortcomings are thus in the later half of the book, which is arranged in the form of an edited collection of various contributions from a number of Fellows, each with his or her own style and chronology. Moreover, there is also a dramatic increase in the use of unnecessary, and at times unrelated, sub-headings for each chapter. Unfortunately, the writing lacks cohesion and the necessary historical links to create a fluid text. The title of chapter eight, 'Anaesthetics to proctology', for example, is puzzling, as there does not appear to be a connection between the two topics. We later learn that this and subsequent chapters are arranged chronologically, according to the formation of each new section of the RSM. Whilst both medicine and surgery became increasingly specialized throughout the

twentieth century, as new disciplines were being continually created, expunged and replaced, greater effort should have been made in this section to formulate more cohesion and unity of thought. With the encyclopaedic format in which this increasing specialization is presented, it is more useful as a reference book than as a monograph.

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Frederick F Cartwright and **Michael Biddiss,** *Disease and history*, 2nd ed., Thrupp, Sutton Publishing, 2000, pp. viii, 230, illus., £20.00 (hardback 0-7509-2315).

Aimed at the lay reader, *Disease and history* traces the effect of disease on history through the ages. This "enlarged and fully revised version" of the 1972 edition covers more fully the impact of smallpox, influenza and tuberculosis. The concluding chapter is also an attempt to bring the book up to date with contemporary concerns.

The first chapter deals with disease in the ancient world, and focuses almost entirely on Western civilization and Graeco-Roman antiquity. The account is seriously flawed in that, despite the importance of eastern civilizations at that time, the references made to the non-European world are in the following vein: "To north and west [of the Roman Empire] lay the oceans, to south and east wide unknown continents in which dwelt less civilized peoples: Africans, Arabs and the savage tribes of Asia. Beyond, in the dim shadows, lay the ancient civilizations of India and China" (p. 9). This is especially striking given that today, in the face of dissatisfaction with Western medicine, people are increasingly turning to alternative medicine from these "dim shadow" civilizations. In the second chapter the authors study the Black Death and the horror it inspired in medieval times. While the part dealing with the medical analysis and the spread of the disease is well written, that which seeks to establish causal sequences with major historical developments of the time is often farfetched. This is even more evident in the chapter on syphilis. The extremely laboured connection between the affliction of Ivan the Terrible with syphilis (in itself by no means a certain fact) and the development of Tsarist absolutism in Russia completely ignores the structural aspects of Russian society that social historians have painfully reconstructed to understand better the unique developments there.

The next chapter, one of the best, studies smallpox. The authors provide an engrossing account of the way the disease works and how epidemics develop. The attempts to find a cure and the identification of how the disease is transmitted, as well as a historical treatment of the techniques of variolation and vaccination make engaging reading. To the extent that this approach is maintained in the chapters on cholera, flu, tuberculosis, and malaria and other tropical diseases such as sleeping sickness, the book attains its object of illustrating the way disease has played an important role in history, influencing such major developments as industrialization and colonialism. While the account here is still somewhat conservative and at times highly problematic (for example, references to the "*infidel* Tartar horde", p. 51, emphasis mine), it may not be greatly contested by other historians. However, the same cannot be said about the chapters on Napoleon and the Russian Revolution, where the authors go to exaggerated lengths to link disease with important historical events.

The book is also very Britain-centred. Most of the illnesses discussed are illustrated by examples from Britain. While this is understandable in that the authors draw mainly upon their own research, it still does not justify the extremely laboured