

Book Reviews

Florence Nightingale, William Farr and John Simon. All of these have received a good measure of historical attention, but the engineer Joseph Bazalgette, architect of London's main drainage system, and arguably originator of the blueprint for modern city sanitation, has been neglected by historians. This is a pity, because the conception of Bazalgette's grand plan for London's drainage, the techniques he used in its construction, and the scientific and technical debates which surrounded the project are surely worthy of the type of critical analysis which Christopher Hamlin has devoted to the science of water analysis and the work of Edwin Chadwick. Stephen Halliday's history is not of this calibre. Welcome though it is as the first study to focus specifically on the great engineer, this is a general narrative account which skates across the surface of history without pausing for reflection on the depths below the waterline, or on the wider contexts within which the basic story could be placed. Lavishly illustrated, and with distracting biographical insets of such relevant personages as Sir Francis Bond Head, Sir Goldsworthy Gurney and W H Smith, this is spiritually a coffee table book.

As a general narrative introduction to Bazalgette's life and achievements, *The great stink* is satisfactory. It covers not only Bazalgette's work on the main drainage system, but also on London's Embankment, gas-lighting provision and street clearances. It does, however, leave the academic reader hungry for a fuller, more historically perceptive account. Little of Bazalgette's real personality, and less of his thought processes, come across here. There is no attempt to place the main drainage system in its wider context—to explain, for example, the enormous local authority effort which abolished cesspools, ensured the connection of house drains with the main drainage system, and made the latter effective. Halliday persistently suggests (e.g., pp. 143, 187) that Bazalgette “banished epidemics” from London, notably cholera in 1892, but

he fails to give due attention to the water purification systems and the extension of constant water supplies (let alone of the port sanitary surveillance system) which were an essential complement of effective drainage in the struggle against waterborne disease. The chapter on cholera is innocent of any deeper appreciation of the existing historiography, recording the disease as “one of the main impulses” towards drainage reform while ignoring the greater scourge of endemic typhoid, and noting, with naive surprise that “despite compelling evidence, the connection between good sanitation, clean drinking water and good health was long overlooked or denied by many of the most important reformers of the Victorian era” (p. 124). Neither of the important Hamlin studies, *What becomes of pollution* (1987) and *A science of impurity* (1990) feature in the bibliography, and although they might be considered tough going for the general reader, it would have been nice if Halliday's work had been informed by the perspectives which they throw on the processes of Victorian public health reform. A book like this once again raises questions about the nature of the link between popular history and historical scholarship, and the failures of the former to absorb and transmit, even in the most general way, the more novel and exciting interpretations of the latter.

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Michael R Finn, *Proust: the body and literary form*, Cambridge Studies in French 59, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. xiii, 207, £40.00, \$59.95 (0-521-64189-6).

Marcel Proust was a *world-class* patient and *world-class* writer, even if the latter was more quickly recognized. Dead at fifty in 1922, and by then famous all over Europe, he had spent most of his adult life enclosed in

miserable surroundings in a central Paris flat. After the Second World War, interest in literary patients increased and Proust became a first-class medical curiosity, which depended on his prior recognition as one of the century's great novelists. More recently, the history of medicine and literary interpretation have independently made great strides in—respectively—the semiotic status of the body and text (hardly unrelated realms). It was therefore predictable that Proust would command a second wave of interest among Proustians probing body and text as one phenomenon. Now Michael Finn has added to this gathering library by demonstrating how the two—text and body, as well as patient and literary form—can be productively brought together. In a sense, this work could be called “the eloquent patient” or “the ailing writer”.

Proust's maladies were many: over time they altered and were transformed, but asthma and neurasthenia remained constants in his diagnostic dyad. *Au fond* both were nervous ailments, as were most of Proust's other conditions, and they followed on the heels of the nineteenth century's magisterial transformation of nervous disease. But Proust was not alone or first in the nervous realm: he shared his predicament with Flaubert, Baudelaire, Nerval, Senancour, and the Goncourt brothers—all patients in some sense, all great writers. And he would have well understood Henri Amiel, a now obscure Swiss-Romand academician who bore resemblances to Proust as a patient and wrote as much about his own clinical case, when in 1871 (the year of Proust's birth) Amiel pronounced his whole generation nervous and neurasthenic. By the time George Beard “discovered” neurasthenia early in the 1880s the “novel of nerves” may be said to have been a century old.

Finn demonstrates how potent neurasthenia was in the Proust household and how many of its concerns were available to the novelist for creative application; to the extent that *Maison Proustienne* forms some of

the rationale for the book: “I wish to re-examine here”, Finn writes (p. 41), “the notion that, in the early stages of its conception, *À la recherche du temps perdu* may well have been seen, by its author, as the biography of a neurasthenic, the story of an individual who suffers from a disease of the will, but succeeds in understanding his ailment, and overcomes it by discovering special sources of energy.” Finn extends his biographical investigation to “Proust's extraordinary anxiety about language” (p. 4), especially the “obsessional fear of orality” (p. 4), which was no fetish but a terrifying ordeal that Proust believed would render him even more vulnerable and alienated than he already was as a member of several minorities: Jewish, homosexual, intellectual, ailing. Exploration of “the relationship between oral voice, individuality and creativity in Proust's writerly-character Bergotte” (p. 5) further demonstrates what exploration of this type amounts to; especially when Finn extends the argument to correlate orality to a writer's individuality. Finn also problematizes the relation of fiction (Proust's “pure literature”) to non-fiction—Finn's third chapter—and shows how vexed for Proust their status was. Malady, especially neurasthenia, recedes from these literary concerns in chapters 2 and 3, but never disappears or evaporates. It would have been possible—it is true—to reach these conclusions *without* Proust's various ailments and the toll they took at particular moments of his creative life; but *Proust: the body and literary form* is all the more enriched for constructing a broad context grounded in the subject's biomedical life. The structure of Proust's novels ultimately remained his overarching concern, especially during the years when he was composing *À la recherche*. Yet any notion that structure can be exhausted is shallow: the corporate Proustian text is so layered and intertextual that its density will never be consumed by any critical or biographical form of analysis. Proust's works will always exceed their critical exegesis.

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Finn's book also brings out the best in the modern biographies (Painter, Tadié) and foregrounds Proust's father—the famous professor of hygiene in the faculty of medicine in Paris, Dr Adrien Proust—in new light. Under this treatment, creative writing becomes more than the indulgence of desire or the rejuvenation of will. Cure of the disease of volition elevates neurasthenia to an aesthetic, when properly indulged, and provides a successful antidote to the malady in an era when medicine could offer none. The marshalling of the writer's attention thereby relates directly to the struggle to create a new form. The artistic consequence of such existence “between literature and medicine”, as Finn suggests, is that it permits the author to confront the Other; that is, not merely to give voice to the dominant psychosocial maladies of the era—hysteria, neurasthenia, in Freud's nomenclature “the actual neuroses”—but to discover the self's voices and thereby redefine subjectivity more accurately.

Hence Finn's compass demonstrates several things: literary, medical, bodily, linguistic, novelistic. Among all, he shows how actual flesh-and-blood body never lies far from artistic leap. He has also mastered the art of compression, and says more in a few pages than others would in three times the number. His book may be short yet it opens up new avenues crucial in contemporary Proust studies.

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B Innes Williams, *The matter of motion and Galvani's frogs*, Bletchingdon, Rana, 2000, pp. vi, 298, illus., £25.00 (hardback 0-9538092-0X). Orders to: Rana, Courtyard House, Church End, Bletchingdon, Oxfordshire OX5 3DL.

Here is a tribute to the very best tradition in the history of ideas. After a career in medicine and raising children, Billie Williams turned to the history of science

and medicine. She was trained in the 1960s at Imperial College, London, by Rupert and Marie Boas Hall and the book is testimony to their inspiring teaching. The core of the volume is a reworking of Billie Williams' 1976 thesis on Luigi Galvani (1737–98), edited by her husband, Peter Williams, Billie herself having been unwell in recent years. Peter adopts an unnecessarily defensive tone in his Preface, writing about the uncommercial nature of the volume and the small market for it. One would be grateful if many of the books published commercially in the history of science and medicine these days had some of the scholarship that is in here. True to the tradition from which it stems, this book is not just about Galvani, rather it is a history of the problem of motion since the Greeks, particularly as regards the apparent fact that living things can initiate their own motion and inanimate things cannot. For half the book, Williams traces this question from the pre-Socratics, through Galen, the scholastics, Thomas Willis and Newton to name but a few. This is all impressively done, yet the book's lasting quality will remain the chapters on Galvani. Here the reader is treated to the year by year, sometimes day by day, development of Galvani's thought. As one would expect, Galvani's concepts of animate motion are embedded in the general context of Newton's various speculations and the work of the electricians, notably Franklin. More specifically Haller's work on irritability and its rejection by Robert Whytt form a narrower context.

The key and most original chapter in the book is on Galvani's work from 1780 to 1783. After a series of experiments on frogs (note the volume's publisher), Galvani was convinced that the nervous juice was inherently electrical and did not derive its power from the brain or the atmosphere. Perhaps historians these days might be a little more sceptical of how far experiment led and theory followed but Williams' detailed storytelling and mastery of the