Geoffrey Davenport, Ian McDonald and **Caroline Moss-Gibbons** (eds), *The Royal College of Physicians and its collections: an illustrated history*, London, Royal College of Physicians, 2001, pp. 168, illus., UK £38.00, Overseas £45.00 (hardback 0-907-383-831).

As an occasional researcher of papers and books at the Royal College of Physicians of London, I was aware of the richness of this collection and anxiously awaited the new volume on the College prepared by three individuals who know the collection well. Given the almost five centuries of history and the vast library of books, manuscripts and artefacts at the College, I expected a weighty tome, and confess some surprise when I unwrapped a thin volume. My mild dismay was short lived, as this is a delightful work, presented in a lively, well organized, well written, and well illustrated format. On reflection, a weighty tome would probably have been shelved along with the many boring chronological institutional histories, and I expect this one will instead find a prominent place in physicians' libraries and on their coffee tables as an interesting account of one of the world's leading medical organizations.

Not another self-congratulatory institutional chronicle this. The colourful history of the College and its leading players is told in a clear-eyed manner, giving a balanced outline of the steps towards progress, often painfully slow (the authors do not shy from mentioning the College's errors of omission and commission) and we hear of the young members who had literally to break down the doors of the Council Room to be heard, and periods when the College leadership seemed to sleep, Rip van Winkle-like, aroused decades later to enact reforms. The College advanced the practice and professionalism of medicine in an important way, but in past centuries it could also act in its own interest against the public interest, resist public health, rail against other health professions, exclude Catholics, non-conformists and women, admit questionable members, and fail to act when its power and influence could have been a force for good. All the good and the less good is touched on, albeit in a brief way, as this volume does not pretend to be more than an introduction to the vast history and collection of the College over five centuries.

Organizing the complex story of the College and its collection required tough decisions by the editors and they have done well. There is an initial historical sweep of the centuries following the Charter of 1518 from Henry VIII, and then specific thematic chapters on regulations and fines, the fights with the apothecaries, the conflagrations, the confrontations, the outsiders and non-conformists, the arrival of women, the examinations, the development of the pharmacopoeia, the publications and Munk's Roll. In recent times there were involvements in the developing NHS, the campaign against smoking and the controversial move into modern digs on the edge of Regent's Park.

More important in this book are the sections on the great library collection and the artefacts, with discussions of some of the rare and important books, the manuscripts, the objects, and the great portrait collection. Although only examples can be given in such a book, the introduction to the discussion of the coat of arms (and why the symbol of the incorrect pulse-taking has never been corrected), the Gold Headed Cane story, the diamond ring from Catherine the Great, the nipple shield collection, and the portraits of Linacre, Harvey, and Heberden should entice anyone to look further into the College's riches.

Although this may be seen as a book for the members of the College, it is of interest to all physicians, certainly to anyone interested in the history of medicine, and highly recommended.

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Ian Maclean, *Logic, signs and nature in the Renaissance: the case of learned medicine*, Ideas in Context, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. xvi, 407, illus., £45.00 (hardback 0-521-80648-8).

Following *The Renaissance notion of woman* (1980), *Interpretation and meaning in the*