Cockles and muscles

PHILIP RHODES

If you have only the most passing interest in words the best advice I can give you is to go out and buy B J Freedman's *Just a Word, Doctor*. The short pieces on a variety of medical words will be known to readers of the *BMJ*, where most of them have recently been published. But it is a delight to have them all between covers, for they merit another look for the pleasure they bring. The author, formerly consulting physician at King's College Hospital, has had a lot of fun tracing the origins of the words, which are in daily use in medicine, and he communicates it entertainingly, with obvious delight in his task. He makes brief forays into Latin, Greek, and modern languages for the light they throw on etymology, though this is always with a light touch and is not enough to frighten the ignorant reader away.

One surprise is that Dr Freedman wonders where are "the COCKLES of the heart." My ancient *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* suggests that they are explained "(1) by the likeness of a heart to a cockleshell (2) by the zool. name for the cockle, *Cardium*." I hesitate to offer this to the master, who must have thought of and discarded it.

Jogging he says is "the allegedly health-giving form of locomotion," and "a lexicographer with a Freudian scotoma" is a worthy who explained the words "to cock," defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "to stick stiffly up or out" as like a cock's neck in crowing. The author is not above a little neologopoesis himself. He has coined "deflatulate" as a polite form of "fart." Other rough rude short words for bodily functions have their politer forms but not this one for "emitting wind from the anus," which I have to say is rather overblown, in the manner of this gentle author and mentor. It was a slight shock to find that Max Miller had to be explained in a footnote for readers younger than myself. The time passes so quickly. It does in reading this book. Get it. Moments of such enjoyment are relatively rare.

Just a Word, Doctor. A Lighthearted Guide to Medical Terms. B J Freedman. (Pp 144; figs; £4.95 paperback.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. ISBN 0-19-261641-2.

More than stories

ROGER HIGGS

I know a pathologist who avoids consultations at cocktail parties by explaining, "Madam, I think you should know that all my patients are dead!" We all resent the way work can intrude into our private lives to one extent or other, and for me stories about doctors used to be the last straw. Reading was for escape, relaxation, reflection. I had done my stint for that day (or day/night/day) and I wanted something that took me back into the real world. Then I came across John Berger's view of that world through the eyes of *A Fortunate Man* and my allergy was challenged. Now a little book by William Carlos Williams has made me realise that I may be on the way to addiction.

His name will be familiar to readers of modern verse, and comes attached to short, deceptively casual, but crystal clear descriptive pieces that often focus on something very ordinary and make us look again. Literary buffs will know him as an American modernist of the Ezra Pound vintage, whose big work *Paterson* was a five volume evocation of life in his own city.

It comes as something of a shock to discover that this poet was also Doctor Bill, a good old fashioned general practitioner, who served the underprivileged of the inner city (see how the jargon numbs) with three surgeries a day and home visiting between, in New Jersey, US of A, through much of the first half of this century. To the conflicts of the double life that all GPs experience—medical work and home life sometimes uncomfortably entangled—he added a third strand, that of the out of hours writer. "It was at night that he would call on apparently endless stores of energy, the tattoo of his typewriter providing a reassuring lullaby to which my brother Paul and I slept and awoke throughout childhood," wrote his son, later a doctor too. From this schedule, as tough no doubt on Flossie (Mrs Williams) as on her husband, emerged the anthologised gems, but also the less familiar short stories and essays gathered in this book about his medical life and work.

William Carlos Williams.

Camera Press.

Given how remote we are now from the time and medical system in which he worked, it is the similarities with modern practice that are so striking to a British reader. We do not have to moan about unpaid debts, and thank goodness the deaths of children are no