longer common or accepted with such extraordinary resignation by all concerned. But here are the irritations of night calls, the thrilling insights of home visits, the battle to see a child's throat, a manic depressive in full flow, the mythologising of a drunken old rogue colleague, all recounted in narratives washed clean of empty rhetoric. We know them all and yet we are seeing as if for the first time.

Williams was clearly a caring man but too honest a writer to conceal his less altruistic self. He does not hesitate to declare his stand when confronted by a "you come when I call you" type, or to acknowledge what it was that turned him on when he met the girl with the pimply face. Some parts are more than just good literature: it is tempting to feel that his style of observation could form the basis of a new branch of descriptive research for practitioners. The medical student's account to his doctor father of the narrow minded attitudes held by his medical school teachers (in a story suitably

entitled "The insane") should be compulsory reading for all engaged in medical education.

But we are left with a challenge. How can a doctor confronting the same events as specialist or generalist sustain detailed interest and enthusiasm once the work becomes humdrum and repetitious? Williams shows one way to find new meaning in our work, by looking for the poetry in the lives we meet. For those who are becoming too familiar with the precious, who cannot see the profound wood for the trivial trees, who would like to recharge, refocus, rediscover, I can recommend nothing better than a dose of old Doctor Bill.

The Doctor Stories. William Carlos Williams. Compiled by Robert Coles (Pp 142; £3.95 paperback.) London: Faber and Faber, 1987. ISBN 0-571-14728-3.

Clambering to incompetence over a mountain of corpses

NORMA PEARCE

Colin Douglas's latest tale of medical life is described in the cover blurb as "authentic, irreverent and funny." While I cannot dispute this description, I would, as a lay reader (albeit one better known for credulousness than powers of reasoning), add one further adjective—terrifying. My trust in doctors has been shattered, convinced as I now am that if ever I have to go into hospital (even if it's only to have bunions removed, which probably does cause the toes to turn up) my discharge will be accompanied by slow music. Still, if I can contain my hysteria, there is a brighter side. If enough people read *Hazards of the Profession* the number of elective hospital admissions will fall dramatically and this will help conserve life and NHS resources.

Let me, however, return to Dr Douglas's book. The title is somewhat misleading since, as I have already suggested, the hazards revealed are not so much those associated with the practice of hospital medicine as those suffered by the hapless patients admitted to the neurological ward of an Edinburgh teaching hospital under the "care" of the recently appointed, megalomaniacal Professor Hamish Sinclair. Neither the welfare of his patients nor that of his junior staff, most of whom he terrorises, features on Sinclair's list of priorities. Much energy is spent raising money for his new building and research project on Parkinson's disease—a most sinister piece of work involving baboons and patients who seem to be treated equally badly. Organising a major conference—part of his scheme for greater glory in international medicopolitics and a convenient way of purloining funds to pay for lavish parties and "business" trips abroad with glamorous Spanish neurologists—takes up a disproportionate amount of time. In what little remains he performs sporadic ward rounds, ensuring that his beds are occupied only by interesting cases under the age of 50. All other patients are deemed geriatric "social admissions" and are unceremoniously dispatched elsewhere. This is

certainly to their benefit, however, as Professor Sinclair's latest diagnostic techniques usually prove more fatal than the original disorder.

Now who is going to strike down the mad professor and save those good, Parkinson ridden citizens of "Auld Reekie?" Will his peers "shop" him to the General Medical Council? Will he be called to account under the terms of HN 61/122, or its academic equivalent? Where will they be able to find "Three wise men" in Edinburgh? Well I did think that the hero of the hour was to be none other than the worthy Dr Campbell, patients' friend (some of the time) and lead part in previous Colin Douglas books, who is now Sinclair's locum honorary registrar but does not seem to have learnt a lot since his days as a houseman. Campbell flounders, however; unable to elicit help from any quarter of the medical profession, which, although well aware of the problems, is completely unwilling to deal with the maniacal wrongdoer in their midst. Mind you, this is not surprising in an institution where one of the staff maintains that becoming a fully trained hospital doctor is like clambering "to competence over a mountain of corpses." And has it struck you that there are certain uneasy similarities in the current self regulating procedures of the medical profession and those of the City of London? Perhaps here we could replace "My word is my bond" with "My trephine is my truth": they would probably mean about the same thing.

Without wishing to reveal all, I can tell you that an unexpected ending saves our limp and ineffective hero from doing the right thing and thereby risking his career prospects. We may yet see him as a senior registrar in a future tale of medical mystery and horror; but for the sake of my emotional wellbeing I had better not read it.

Hazards of the Profession. Colin Douglas. (Pp 214; £9.95.) Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1987. ISBN 1 85158 0654.

The cartoon nurses are from the dust jacket.