Bland history of a Royal Infirmary

CHRISTOPHER BOOTH

The first 200 years of the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary were recounted by Dr Logan Turner in his *Story of a Great Hospital*, which was first published in 1937 and reissued in 1979, the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Infirmary. *The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, 1929-1979* brings the story up to date by dealing with the 50 years since 1929. The book was commissioned by the Lothian Health Board to celebrate the Infirmary's 250th anniversary as well as the centenary of the opening of the main Infirmary building in Lauriston Place and of the Edinburgh Royal Maternity and Simpson Memorial Hospital. The author, who was an administrative officer on the staff of the Scottish South-East Regional Hospital Board during the early years of the National Health Service, has adopted a largely chronological approach. There are chapters on the 1930s, the second world war, the coming of the National Health Service, the development of new services, the planning of new buildings, reorganisation, and an account of the visit in 1969 of the Duke of Edinburgh who "caused a glow within the entire hospital" and of the royal occasion on the triple anniversary when the Queen is said to have shown "a sparkling bedside manner."

The book gives a bland and factual record of events during half a century, seen from the viewpoint of an administrator. Little is omitted, and for this reason the book may perhaps be welcomed by those who want to know what happened from an organisational point of view during those eventful years. For the historian the book is disappointing. Although there are brief accounts of exciting events such as Professor Woodruff's first kidney transplant in Britain, there is very little that reflects the dramatic changes that have occurred in medicine and health care during the period under review. Antibiotics are not included in the index. Did neither the advent of the sulphonamides nor of penicillin raise a ripple of interest among the good citizens of Edinburgh? The development of dialysis, the Poisoning Treatment Centre, cardiac surgery, as well as many other technical advances in medicine, receive scant attention, nor is the dramatic social change that occurred with the introduction of the National Health Service given more than a superficial analysis. Tuberculosis is presumably omitted because it was cared for in a separate institution.

For a teaching hospital with a record of outstanding past achievement there should also have been a closer analysis of the

Night nurses' bus. These nurses, coming off duty in 1950, are boarding their special bus which took them daily to and from Woodburn House, Canaan Lane, Morningside, used as a night nurses' home from 1922 until 1966. Reproduced with the permission of the Lothian Health Board.

essential symbiotic relationships that must have existed between the Infirmary and the University of Edinburgh rather than a simple account of the administrative facts. There is too much wordy recording of the remarks of long forgotten board chairmen and the like, and not enough to give the reader the feel of life in a remarkable hospital. This is a complacent and dull book which may appropriately find its final resting place on the coffee tables of Morningside.

The appendices on the comparative statistics of the Royal Infirmary 1729-1978 and the list of Medical and Surgical Officers, Senior Nursing and Senior Administrative Officers (1929-1979) may possibly be of value to future scholars, but this book quite frankly does not do justice to a once great institution. Was there never any blood on the floor?

The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh 1929-1979. E F Catford. (Pp 290; £10.50.) Scottish Academic Press. 1984.

Medical historian's delight

JOHN L THORNTON

Most of the older medical school libraries house extensive historical collections, but few are maintained or exploited as they should be. Some of the individual items have great monetary value if sold, but their true value can be revealed only by investigation and exploitation. Unfortunately, few of the librarians have sufficient interest in the history of medicine to take full advantage of the treasures in their custody and to make them available to readers. They display some of them on special occasions, but know little about their importance and potential value as research and teaching material. All medical research should start with a thorough investigation into its earlier history, not only to avoid duplication of effort, but to ensure that the final result is itself a worthwhile contribution to the history which continues indefinitely.

This *Catalogue* will reveal the location of 3384 books published between 1491 and 1900, 112 runs of periodicals issued between 1667 and 1900, and 151 manuscripts. It is a location list with adequate bibliographical details, but was not intended to provide full collations—for example, as in a bibliographical catalogue. The funds for the preparation and publication of this *Catalogue* were provided by the special trustees of the hospital, who administer funds and property possessed before the introduction of the National Health Service, and they have also provided for the preservation, rebinding, and housing the books in new cases. This farsighted gesture recognises the value of the heritage, and ensures its preservation as an important contribution to medical education and history.

The Library includes the collection brought to St Thomas's by