BOOK REVIEW

An account of our past to inform our future

A Short History of Medical Genetics

By Peter Harper, Oxford University Press, 2008, ISBN 978-0-19-518750-2, price £29.99

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European Journal of Human Genetics (2010) **18**, 1170; doi:10.1038/ejhg.2010.74

I start this review with the observation that 'A Short History of Medical Genetics' is poorly named, simply because this book by Peter Harper is a very comprehensive history of our field of specialization.

The author modestly protests that he is not a historian, but he has managed to collate material from vastly different sources, including books, journal articles, professional society archives and personal interviews with over 70 key players. Using the style

that has made the 'Practical Genetics' series so successful, Harper integrates sound referenced material with his own commentary on the historical issues covered in the book. The reader is led through the series of events and characters that have contributed to the specialty of medical genetics, as we understand it today.

Written from an international perspective, the initial chapters set the scene with material on the foundations of human genetics,

pre- and post-Mendel. A substantial chapter on medical genetics leads us through the early attributions of disease to inherited factors, to the present day managements and treatment of genetic conditions. Later chapters address issues of relevance to society in more general terms, including work on ethics and eugenics; however, a substantial section is devoted to the political suppression of genetics in Russia during the Lysenko period. The thorough documentation of those events, unknown to so many younger geneticists, is a valuable historical record.

In the final section, a timeline for the development of human genetics (from Leeuwenhoek in 1677 to the Human Genome Project in 2003) adds to the perspective of the reader.

I would suggest this book is essential reading for any practitioner in the field today, as it is an account of our past with positive lessons to inform our future ■

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