Things Fall Apart

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Things fall apart

Stephen Lock

For some time the Edinburgh medical establishment has been allegedly trembling at the thought that Colin Douglas was writing a major novel about it. Would the characters in this roman fleuve be so thinly disguised as to be identifiable, rather as we think we can spot the originals in other time based works, such as Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time* or Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*? In the event, though my local knowledge is patchy and many readers will be unable to resist trying to identify prototypes, the Drs McBuffer can breathe easily again. As any novelist will tell you, even strong originals become transmuted in the creative process (never better expressed than in Waugh's disclaimer to *Brideshead Revisited:* "I am not I: thou art not he or she: they are not they"). And, though Douglas's latest novel, *Sickness and Health*, does follow some of the class of '63 to almost the present day, whatever his original intentions his theme is less how people change through the machinations of others than how an institution crumbles—in this case the NHS, the decline and imminent fall of which is the thrust of this book.

Douglas's class of '63 has an interesting social mix, probably wider than it would be today, particularly for the boys (whose fathers range from a railwayman through a tailor and a minister to a physician) compared with the girls (though only two are specified; a professor of endocrinology and a former Polish cavalry officer). For these 18 year olds the early 1960s are in any case an era of change; the major student unrest of the latter part of the decade is yet to come, but in 1964 after 230 years women are being admitted to the student medical society for the first time, while the contraceptive pill is ensuring the pleasures of sex without its penalties, something that Douglas particularises throughout the book.

Their elders are more static; to be sure, Douglas does show us any number of decent people getting on with their jobs, but inevitably interest centres on the others in his mythical teaching hospital, the Royal Charitable Institute. As in Dante's *Inferno* these are arranged in a number of circles. Highest, perhaps, come the surgeons; short on personal relationships and capable of wrecking a junior's career on specious grounds, they are men of action when it comes to turning out in the night to repair a leaking aorta or ligate the oesophageal varices in a colleague's alcoholic wife. Below them come the physicians, largely preoccupied with power: merit awards, planning meetings, and appointment committees. One is reluctant to tell leukaemic patients the truth, another insists that his ward rounds are accorded the military honours of a full retinue, while yet another does a teaching round only rarely but with a predictable aim: to make boys from the lower social orders squirm and girls of any description cry.

On an even lower circle is an assortment of true villains, who because they have medical degrees never get their justified comeuppance. "Tiger" Johnny Burton-Smith, initially medical superintendent of a poorhouse, fiddles the cremation certificates and his income tax but ends up on the staff of the regional board while his collaborator, the mortuary attendant, goes to prison. Roger Killick, a consultant in immunology, has his fraudulent research disclosed by his secretary-mistress once she has recovered from taking an overdose, but he is dealt with by a "very quiet little committee" and exile to a similar job in Malaysia. And lowest of all comes another immunologist, Gus Ratho, who if only in terms of prolonged survival and awfulness is Douglas's Widmerpool. The son of an established Edinburgh physician and one of the class of '63, he rises through ambition to early office as president of the student medical society. Not unsurprisingly, he then fakes his laboratory results and is rewarded with a first in immunology and an early consultant post, from which he does lucrative private practice on myalgic encephalomyelitis. At the end of the book he has sidestepped the rationalisation of immunology and is about to move off into medical education.

The heroes in *Sickness and Health* are the people—the "folk" or "narod" as the Russians would call them. Recognising their qualities in the Somme trenches or on the Anzio beaches, once these are no longer needed we abandon them—to tower blocks, inadequate schooling, and unemployment. Till now, however, they have been rather better served by the NHS: as the various episodes forming the clinical backdrop in Douglas's book show, mostly their illnesses are competently treated, albeit in filthy hospitals and by overstretched staff. But Douglas is a knowledgeable geriatrician, and it has to be asked whether at the end of life there are still (as I suspect there are) the humiliations of communal knickers—"large, a bit larger, and bloody enormous"—and lavatories that can be used only in full view of the ward.

For Douglas's views of the future we should look at his heroine, Sandy Lennox, whom I take to be a symbol of the NHS. The daughter of the dean of the institute (whose probable suicide opens the book), Sandy has a personal and medical career that follows a sine wave: unprotected premarital sex and an abortion, marriage to Gus Ratho, adultery, a mentally handicapped child, and divorce; happy and successful house and registrar jobs but failure to get a consultant post largely because she is a woman, and a satisfying move into administration. At the end of the book, though, she has had a firm tethered lump in her breast for three months, which

she and her ex-lover recognise spells death before too long.

If all this sounds like the *Archers* it is far from it. Douglas is a serious writer who has enhanced his standing with this many layered if sprawling book. As should happen, it will make a good television series. But I hope that the producer will concentrate not on the all too boring couplings but on the rotten and decaying fabric of a once great enterprise, for which none of us can escape responsibility.

Sickness and Health. C Douglas. (Pp 523; £14.99.) London: William Heinemann, 1991. ISBN 0-434-20424-2.

Quakers, shakers and movers

Jonathan Liebenau

The Pharmaceutical Society has been a major force in British pharmacy and through its influence over the supply of medicines has had a major influence on the development of British medicine. Long dominated by industrialists, it was the meeting place for a variety of interests ranging from manufacturers, retailers, and educationalists to the wider medical community. An outline of its history is included in every serious consideration of British medical history covering the period since its foundation 150 years ago and even before. The publication of its official history is not only appropriate as a monument to the society; it is also appropriate that the roles of the institutions that shaped British medicine should be considered at times of especial turbulence for the medical community. This publication is also appropriate because in S W F Holloway the society has found a knowledgeable and caring chronicler and interpreter.

Holloway has chosen to concentrate on the interesting early history of the society, the background to its establishment, and the pharmaceutical community at the time, led by the influential community of Quaker manufacturers including Thomas Allen, Daniel Bell Hanbury, and most particularly Jacob Bell, who became instrumental in founding the *Pharmaceutical Journal* and the society. Holloway pays most attention to the first part of the history, rooting it well into the historical context of medicine and professionalisation. He is less concerned with the past 50 years, ostensibly because he feels unable to assess historically the significance of recent times, but also because he seems unwilling to delve too deeply into the implications for these times of the strong preceding history. This is perhaps especially so considering the great strength of the society in its early days, in contrast to its relative weakness in trying to influence either medical practice or government policy more recently.

For me the highlights of the book are the middle chapters on the early years. The first of these draws an evocative picture of "the chemist and druggist, 1750-1870" and places the early years of the society firmly within the historical context. Here we learn of the scope of the business and the market it held. The relationship between chemists and druggists and the rest of the medical profession is emphasised and the reasons for medicine's separation are congently explained. The chapter ostensibly about "the foundation of the Pharmaceutical Society" is well used as a vehicle for presenting more about the political and economic status of the emerging medical profession. These chapters draw heavily from well chosen secondary sources in addition to contemporary periodicals.

This is not an easy book for the general medical reader to go through happily. The concern for detail which makes it an obvious product of good historical research obscures the interesting thematic issues. Excellent use of illustrations helps, and the choice of early drawings and expressive photographs will make this attractive even to people who will only dip into the text perhaps to learn something about an institution associated with the society. For the more patient reader, however, the sophistication of the analysis is worth the effort.

The author's choice of epigraph for each chapter, which he takes from a traditional herbal, provides an apt metaphor for the society and its history: *prima luce; dolore urgente; fiat emulsio; dosis augeatur; misce et fiat mistura; in phiala bene obturata; tunicatae prius, denique in folio argenti volvendae.* [At first light, if the pain is severe, make an emulsion, increase the dose, mix and make a mixture, in a well stoppered bottle, first varnished and then rolled in silver leaf.]

Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain 1841-1991. A Political and Social History. S W F Holloway. (Pp 440; £35.) London: Pharmaceutical Press, 1991. ISBN 0-85369-244-0.

ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN

Etching by T H Jones, one of several satires produced at the time of William Allen's third marriage, accusing him of hypocrisy and humbug

A pragmatic free marketeer

Gordon Macpherson

Are you desperate to know the contents of Mrs T's handbag? Do you relish political scandals? Or do you thrive on political tracts? If so Norman Fowler's memoirs of the Thatcher years are not for you. But read them if you fancy a pragmatic account of how government operates from day to day and how a conscientious MP who is also a cabinet minister tries to balance the demands of his constituency, his party, his government colleagues, his civil servants, and his family. Read his book, too, if you want the flavour of a committed free marketeer of the '80s.

Mandarins and money

At first glance the memoirs are an anodyne account of his 15 or so years with Margaret Thatcher, first in the shadow cabinet as a political stripling of 37, then as a cabinet minister until he resigned in 1990 to spend more time with his family. But they camouflage a determined climb to the top from midlands grammar school via Cambridge and Fleet Street.