

# Striving towards elegance

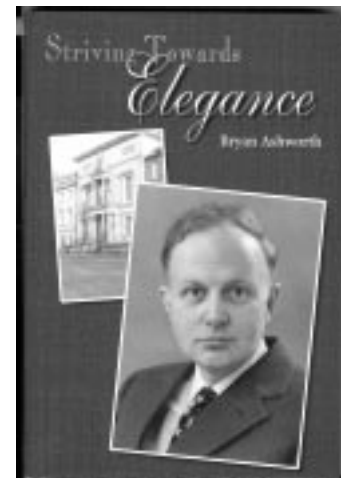
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**REVIEWER** A Doig



Autobiographical works by physicians date from the period of the late renaissance when Girolamo Cardano, a member of the College of Physicians in Milan, wrote *De vita propria liber*, later to be published in English under the title of *The book of my life*. The author's candid approach and vivid writing anticipates some of the best in modern autobiography.

The first Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh to write an autobiography was our principal founder Sir Robert Sibbald. When James Boswell later acquired his manuscript, which was dated 1695, he was entertained 'calmly' by the *Memoirs* of the respected physician and discussed them with Samuel Johnson because he had thought of printing them. Notwithstanding Johnson's approval, publication did not occur until 1833.

Life histories of two other notable Fellows were published during the nineteenth century: the autobiography of Sir James McGrigor, Director General of the Army Medical Services during the Napoleonic wars, and the life of Sir Robert Christison, the eminent toxicologist, physician and College President. *The Life of Christison* is in two volumes, the first of which was written by himself and the second was compiled by his sons.

It is surprising that during the first half of the twentieth century, no Fellow appears to have been prepared to publish his life story. Were those interested in doing so discouraged by Bernard Shaw and other influential critics who claimed that no man is bad enough or good enough to tell the truth about himself during his lifetime? Autobiographical works relating to medicine in the second half of the twentieth century have been written by 17 Fellows. The authors and the titles of their books

are listed in the accompanying table under categories which indicate their main fields of interest. All of these titles are available in the College Library.

The most recent addition to this list is Bryan Ashworth's *Striving towards elegance: medicine, books and business*. In this delightful, slim volume of just over one hundred pages, a distinguished neurologist recounts the events of his personal and professional life and reflects on developments which have occurred in medicine during the past 50 years.

A succinct account is given of the remarkably wide experience he gained in general medicine while serving as a junior doctor in hospitals in England and Scotland and the experience he acquired in tropical medicine during his National Service in Nigeria.

The author's appraisal of his five-year period of training in neurology at Manchester and Bristol includes frank assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of his senior colleagues. Four of them had come under the influence of Sir Charles Symonds, and it was through them that he absorbed the fine traditions of clinical neurology which Symonds and his colleagues practised in London. A description is given of a year spent as a Wellcome Fellow at the Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm which completed his formal training in neurology.

Many readers will find that the most fascinating part of this book is the picture delineated of teaching hospital neurology in Manchester and Edinburgh where the author held senior conjoint posts with the NHS and the universities. Problems associated with the provision of high standards of patient care and teaching receive particular emphasis. There is an informative

chapter on the subspecialty of neuro-ophthalmology which describes its history, development and the author's research contributions and educational activities in this field.

This work is spiced with thoughtful observations and comments on a number of controversial topics of general interest. These include the philosophy of health care, the effects of health service reorganisations, hospital and university administration, teaching and examinations and the consultant merit award scheme. Also of interest are brief accounts of the author's bibliophile pursuits and his work on the history of medicine which led to his appointments of Honorary Librarian in the Edinburgh College of

Physicians and President of the Scottish Society for the History of Medicine.

The book is elegantly written and produced, its text is illustrated by 12 well chosen photographs and it contains details of the author's private life. This work is a valuable contribution to the history of medicine in the second half of the twentieth century and will be appreciated by medical historians and their successors. In addition, it will appeal to neurologists and ophthalmologists and to many who, in the recent past, have witnessed the development of hospital medicine and its clinical specialities. General readers whose preferences include medical biography will also find much of interest in this book.

**TABLE 1** Autobiographical works by Fellows of the RCPE relating to medicine in the second half of the twentieth century.

#### Academic Medicine

Sir Douglas Black (1987)	<i>Recollections and reflections</i>
Ronald H Girdwood (1991)	<i>Travels with a stethoscope: a physician looks at the twentieth century</i>
John Richmond (2001)	<i>Life's jigsaw: a medical man finds the pieces</i>
Michael R Lee (2003)	<i>Stood on the shoulders of giants: a medical odyssey</i>

#### Forensic Medicine

Sir Sydney Smith (1959)	<i>Mostly murder</i>
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#### General Practice

Jack Wilson (1993)	<i>A medical odyssey</i>
David Illingworth (2003)	<i>The bridge with broken arches: the journals of a Scottish family doctor (1943–1986)</i>

#### Immunology

Sir Peter Medawar (1986)	<i>Memoir of a thinking radish: an autobiography</i>
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#### Medical Genetics

Alan Emery (2003)	<i>Tales from a geneticist's case book</i>
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#### Neurology

John M Sutherland (1989)	<i>A far off sunlit place: the life and times of John Sutherland, neurologist of Scotland and Australia</i>
Edmund Critchley (2001)	<i>A neurologist's tale</i>
Bryan Ashworth (2004)	<i>Striving towards elegance: medicine, books and business</i>

#### Paediatrics

John Walker-Smith (2003)	<i>Enduring memories: a paediatric gastroenterologist remembers</i>
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#### Respiratory Medicine

WA Murray (1982)	<i>A life worth living: 50 years in medicine [mainly TB]</i>
D H Blake (1999)	<i>The autobiography of a one-time chest physician [and geriatrician]</i>
EJ Moran Campbell (1988)	<i>Not always on the level</i>

#### Tropical Medicine

John Goodall (1987)	<i>Goodbye to Empire: a doctor remembers</i>
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