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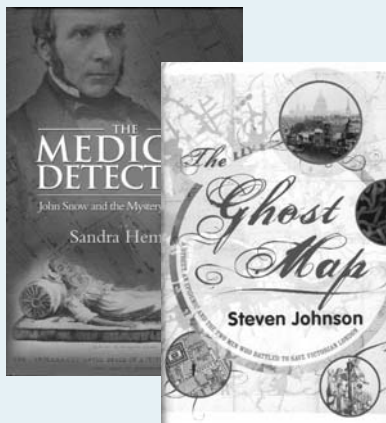
BOOKS YOU SHOULD READ

The Medical Detective by Sandra Hempel. Granta Publications; 2006 £18.99

The Ghost Map by Steven Johnson. Allen Lane; 2006 £16.99

The central figures in these two books are Dr John Snow and the Rev Henry Whitehead. In a short life of 45 years, John Snow came from humble origins to become one of the best-known doctors in London. More important, his scientific rigour, indefatigable energy and refusal to be discouraged by the opposition (even ridicule) of the medical establishment, allowed him to identify cholera as a water-borne disease, consign the accepted 'miasma' theories of its spread to history, allow effective cholera prevention; and found the discipline of epidemiology. He did all this in his 'spare time', and earned his living by making ether and chloroform anaesthesia predictable and safe. He also gave chloroform to Queen Victoria in childbirth, so making it socially acceptable for that purpose.

Henry Whitehead could hardly have been more different. A product of



Oxford University, he was a priest at St Luke's church in Soho during the cholera outbreak around Broad Street in 1854. His commitment to and compassion for the people of Soho gave him an intimate 'on the ground' knowledge of the pattern of cholera spread in the community which contributed substantially to Snow's evidence on how this had occurred. These men were medical giants, and they deserve to be better known.

However, these two well-written books are more than histories of Snow and Whitehead. Furthermore, they are very different but can be read together with pleasure. Hempel gives a fascinating account

of the spread of cholera across Europe and its eventual spread into England in the early nineteenth century. Johnson considers the place of urbanisation in human progress and the role of the city in favouring massive disease outbreaks (especially cholera). He points to Snow's and Whitehead's painstaking scientific fact-finding as the way in which increasingly urbanised humans should face future challenges to cities. Both deal starkly with the suffering of the poor.

Two aspects of particular interest to doctors stand out from both books. First, cholera caused hundreds of thousands of deaths which doctors were helpless to prevent. Countless astonishing 'impression-based' treatments failed and caused terrible suffering. Second, the medical leaders of the day, separated from the medical frontline and certain of their miasmatic theories, were unable to appreciate Snow's work. Humility, hopefully, will lead us to learn the 'evidence-based' lessons Snow and Whitehead have provided and prevent us from scoffing at our predecessors.

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