



## Standing on the shoulders of giants

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The cover of this well-illustrated, monochrome book has mini-portraits of eight surgical pioneers that suggest the scope of this coffee table sized hardback. Andreas Vesalius rubs shoulders with Lister, Wangensteen, Pasteur and Ambroise Paré. Indeed this multi-author publication is the most comprehensive tome of the history of what is the core of general surgery (i.e. surgery of the gastrointestinal tract) published to date and browsing through it was an utter delight.

I was particularly pleased to find, in an English language publication, not just contributors from the UK, the US and Australia but also from France, the Netherlands and Uruguay. Their scholarly efforts are well referenced, well-edited and hardly ever repetitive. Each chapter is written by obvious experts in their fields in which they describe their chosen sub-specialty in great historical detail. I enjoyed the Biographical Notes in the appendix detailing the life histories of the hundred or so most important pioneers (all men!) in gastrointestinal surgery. These vignettes only partly made up for the absence of an index which I think the book deserves. The chapters detail the

history of how the anatomy of the intestines was revealed, the battle against infection and pain, the development of anaesthesia and then cover the GI tract organ by organ from oesophagus to anus. Specific topics such as bariatric surgery, intestinal obstruction and the use of mechanical staplers are well covered and it was especially pleasing to see how the pioneers in the Soviet Union were given due credit for the mechanical devices.

The chapter on alimentary tract disorders in infants and children is extraordinarily detailed and throughout this book I came across snippets of knowledge that had until now passed me by such as the fact that the word *pancreas* is derived from the Greek *pan-kreas* ("all-meat") and that Professor (later Lord) Lister migrated from Glasgow (where he trained my great-grandfather) to Edinburgh (which he loved) to King's College London (which he did reluctantly) in order to take his message of antisepsis to that sceptical southern metropolis.

Between the chapters there are a few more detailed biographical footnotes on some of the pioneers and these seem to have been chosen somewhat at random (e.g. On Billroth, Ravitch, Wangensteen, Sir Alan Parks and others). However, this bit of serendipity does not detract from the overall impression of a book of high scholarship which is easy to read and will probably remain the best historical reference book in this subject for many years to come. If Winston Churchill was right when he stated that "The further you look back the easier it is to look forward!" then every student and practitioner of gastroenterological surgery must purchase a copy of *Pioneers In Surgical Gastroenterology* as soon as possible!

*Pioneers In Surgical Gastroenterology*

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