

**Thomas Scotland and Steven Heys. *Wars, Pestilence and the Surgeon's Blade: The Evolution of British Military Medicine and Surgery During the Nineteenth Century*. Solihull, England: Helion & Company, 2013. Index. Maps. Figures. Tables. Appendices. Endnotes. Cloth. xx + 407pp. ISBN 978-1909384095 (Hardback). Price £34.95.**

*Wars, Pestilence and the Surgeon's Blade* charts the evolution of the British Army Medical Services from the Peninsular War to the beginning of the Great War. It is a timely companion to the highly recommended book *War Surgery 1914-18* (Solihull, England: Helion & Company, 2012) co-edited by Scotland and Heys, after many visits to the Great War battlefields of France and Flanders. That was their first joint publication on British military history. This is their second.

At the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, our wish to connect with the depressing horrors of that conflict is evidenced by public interest in current TV dramas such as BBC1's *The Crimson Field*. Set in a tented, British Army base hospital near the sea in northern France, the drama shows how doctors and nurses in the First World War shaped the way that war injuries are treated today.

In *The Crimson Field* one surgeon-captain is a dedicated Scotsman with a passion for medicine. He uses, apparently, the novel *Thomas Splint*, to keep the fractured ends of a femur (thigh bone) together. He documents his interesting cases, and attempts to publish his article on femoral trauma in the *Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons*. This echoes the way the real life Peninsular War surgeon, Irishman John Hennen worked to have his insightful descriptions published (p. 96).

Both authors trained in surgery at Aberdeen to become specialist Consultant Surgeons. *Wars, Pestilence and the Surgeon's Blade* is their fascinating account of British Army medical and surgical practice during the 19th century from the perspectives of the individual surgeons and physicians administering it. The authors have researched meticulously – and well referenced in endnotes – surgeons' journals, and original medical publications, such as *Principles of Military Surgery* (London: John Wilson, 1829) by Hennen as Deputy Inspector of Hospitals. But Scotland and Heys rate as most significant the contribution of Sir James McGrigor. McGrigor, another Aberdeen scholar, dubbed The Father of British Military Medicine, was appointed Director General of Army Medical Services in 1815, at the age of 44, less than a week before the Battle of Waterloo! He was a consummate administrator, and statistician.

The book's backbone is a consideration of three major conflicts: The Peninsular War (1808-1814) plus the Battle of Waterloo (Sunday, 18 June 1815) the bloodiest battle of the Napoleonic Wars which presented a formidable medical task; the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Second Boer War (1899-1902). The authors also review minor, often colonial, wars fought by the British Empire during the intervening years. Three major foreign wars, to which Britain sent observers, are also considered: The American Civil War (1861-1865), the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).

In the chaos of wars throughout the 19th century disease caused more deaths in the British Army than enemy action. McGrigor's measures to improve the health of Wellington's forces were forgotten by the time of the Crimean War. Urgent investigation by the 1857 Sanitary Commission improved hospital hygiene at Scutari, and for later. The establishment of the Army Medical College in 1860 made British military medicine and surgery scientific. But a vaccine against typhoid fever – available by the time of the Boer War – was not used then with disastrous results. The Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) incorporated in 1898 encouraged men to be inoculated at the start of the Great War in 1914.

This comprehensive work may be compared with David McLean's *Surgeons of the Fleet: The Royal Navy and its Medics from Trafalgar to Jutland* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010) tracing the development of Naval medicine over a similar period. However, *Wars, Pestilence and the Surgeon's Blade* is the more rigorous study of war surgery. For example, the authors' analysis of the development of military anaesthesia in the 19th century (Chapter 9) is detailed and intriguing.

In his Foreword, Colonel (Rtd.) Michael Stewart RAMC suggests that *Wars, Pestilence and the Surgeon's Blade* is required reading for every member of the Army Medical Services (xiv-xv). I too enjoyed the engaging style; learnt much, and recommend this important book to the general reader interested in British military history.

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