NURSING HISTORY AND LOCAL STUDIES: A REVIEW ESSAY

Since the beginning of this century, anyone interested in nursing history has had to rely on two contrasting styles: either the macro-histories in the Tooley/Nutting-Dock vein with a world view from prehistoric times, or studies of local hospitals concentrating on the internal aspects of the institution with little reference to external or national trends. The former histories have until recently tended to fossilise the study of nursing history and yet are still produced, whilst the latter have not really been analysed for their contribution to the history of nursing.

Unlike the macro-histories, it is not possible positively to date the origins of the genre since hospital histories have been written since the eighteenth century, sometimes only thirty years after foundations in the form of a fundraising pamphlet. However, those written after 1900 do appear to have a number of characteristics which help identify a distinct genre.(1)

As may be expected from specific studies, the histories display a remarkable variety. All types of hospital have been researched: metropolitan and provincial, special, military, mental and cottage. The lengths of such histories vary from a few pages in either a pamphlet or medical journal to multi-volumed books. Over the past eighty years the style and content has mirrored the changes in degrees of sophistication of method and presentation of local history, especially since the post-war 'revolution' of the Hoskins' 'Leicester School'.(2) Indeed, any writer of a specific hospital history, especially outside London, must be a local historian with an awareness of the usual array of sources. The methodology and historiography of urban history can also contribute to studies of specific institutions, given their geographical locations.(3)

Who then has the dedication and interest to write such histories? Most have been compiled by doctors but house governors, trustees, journalists, even 'professional' authors (selected for expertise and readability) and lately nurses have tried their hands. This is yet another reason for the eclecticism and variety of the genre, with the occupation of the writer dictating the space alloted to that particular aspect of history vis-à-vis other occupations.

Why are hospital histories written? Before 1948 the pretext of a building extension or a move gave the opportunity for history writing, often as fund-raising propaganda. So too did a centenary or anniversary celebration, which was and remains the chief rationale. Naturally, the inception of the National Health Service itself, which might have led to a change of name or function as well as management, provided another opportunity for publication, often an eulogy to long-lost voluntaryism. 1974 was another significant date: reorganisation often spurred Area Health Authorities to arrange histories. Reorganisation also brought closures which were a powerful impetus for writing. Failing a convenient anniversary, the 1948 and 1974 dates prompted many a dedicated enthusiast to write up a local history.