Apart from the main London, Scottish and provincial hospitals, local hospital histories usually have local or private publishers - or recently the A.H.A. itself. This is to be expected, since such histories have only limited local appeal. Such histories would appear to be of use and interest to local residents who might wish to know more of an institution which has dominated their town, not only architecturally but also economically and socially. Current workers within the institution can acquire a sense of pride and identity in their institution.

Do hospital histories have a wider historical value? Before an answer can be attempted to such a question, it is necessary to consider the content and sources of such histories. Content may be conditioned by the author's background; the genre itself; the projected audience; local publication as well as the potential national importance of the institution itself. But perhaps more importantly, it is dictated by the sources themselves.

It is possible to construct a stereotype for a 'typical' hospital history. Such a history has either a strictly developmental or thematic form. The latter has chapters covering broad eras of time with subject headings such as 'The Doctors', 'The Patients', 'Finance' etc. The book begins with the impetus for foundation and the immediate milieu of the hospital's setting. Next comes the first committee, the physicians' appointments and the foundation stone ceremony. The text is filled with prints of buildings, architects' plans, subscribers' lists, rules, diet sheets and job descriptions. Details of annual financial returns, statistics for bed occupancy notes, staff-patient ratios and in-and-out patient statistical returns. Portraits of 'worthies' co-exist with potted careers of medical characters. The bad publicity of scandals is contrasted with the good resulting from royal visits, etc. Key medical and nursing events are always recorded. The first x-ray department (always a photograph); the first nurse superintendent; the first nurse-tutor, etc. Trivial but enlivening oddities are included: the evacuation of nurses or matron's cat hunts. Within the text are photographs of nurses, either in groups or singly in uniform, or taking centre stage in a ward at Christmas. The World Wars often lend opportunity for descriptions of bomb damage or change to a military function. Most histories conclude with the National Health Service and a very detailed description of the contemporary institution, staff and buildings.

Such a stereotype gives some idea of the type of sources used in a hospital history. It shows the heavy reliance on 'internal' evidence: the minute books of the House or Medical Committee, or the Board of Governors meeting weekly or monthly, supplemented by the Annual Reports. There might be reference to nurse registers or journals of the local Nurses' League.(4) These 'medical' sources are supported by local newspapers, Victoria County or miscellaneous local histories, and sometimes Directories. Standard medical and nursing histories or medical journals, for example The Lancet or the British Medical Journal fill in the gaps.(5) Illustrative material usually comprises maps, prints, plans and aerial photographs; ward, operating, or exterior prints.

All histories rely on minute books and annual reports: yet few footnote this in the text or even list them in the bibliography. Although the authors acknowledge the gaps, they never tabulate the specific omissions.