

Book Reviews

K. CODELL CARTER (translator and editor), *Ignaz Semmelweis: The etiology, concept, and prophylaxis of childbed fever*, Madison and London, University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, 8vo, pp. xii, 263, \$35.00 (\$10.95 paperback); £29.75 (£9.30 paperback).

This splendid little book provides two services. One, it again makes Semmelweis available to an English-speaking audience, the only previous edition, Frank Murphy's 1941 translation in *Medical Classics*, being somewhat cumbersome. This time Carter has given us an abridged text, cleansed of much of the repetitiousness, the distracting references, and the awkwardness of expression which made the original 1860 German version so inaccessible (doubtless helping guarantee that it would remain largely unread). As Carter points out, one problem plaguing both historians and contemporaries in Semmelweis scholarship is that few have taken the trouble actually to consult the 1860 work and see what Semmelweis said. Now we have Semmelweis's tables all clearly numbered, his references pinned down, contemporaries identified – all in all, a model of the editor's art.

Second, in a fifty-eight page translator's introduction, Carter tries to assess Semmelweis's work within the broader history of medical thought. He reviews theories of postpartum infection before Semmelweis, takes us in detail over the original announcement in 1847 of the startling reduction of mortality in the famous "first obstetrical clinic", and finally surveys the reception in the 1850s of Semmelweis's views, noting the irony that only the man's enemies truly understood what he was actually saying: *all* cases of puerperal fever were caused by "the resorption of decaying animal-organic matter" (p. 38). Semmelweis's friends, by contrast, found such a sweeping assertion ludicrous and preferred to argue that the man had mainly discovered how to prevent infection in hospital clinics. Carter's thesis, thus, is that Semmelweis emerges in the history of medicine as the discoverer of an entirely new scientific concept, that diseases had definite, specific causes. Indeed, this is an entirely new notion of disease, but my feeling is that it was demonstrated systematically (which is the essence of "discovery") first by the bacteriologists of the 1870s and 80s, and that Carter overstates considerably the case for his hero.

In emphasizing Semmelweis's dogmatic insistence upon all cases being the result of decaying organic matter, Carter does, however, say the latest and one hopes final word in the dreary "priority conflict" between Semmelweis and Oliver Wendell Holmes. The difference between the two men is like "the difference between night and day", Carter writes. Holmes's account had no "real theoretical or scientific interest. By contrast, Semmelweis provides not merely practical advice for conducting certain cases . . . but a complete scientific theory" (p. 39).

Indeed, Carter becomes so enthusiastic about Semmelweis's scientific distinctiveness that he disparages all who attempt to see the man as belonging to a scholarly tradition of any kind. Accordingly, he finds unsatisfactory Erna Lesky's endeavour to make Semmelweis a product of the Vienna medical school, a student of Karl Rokitansky, and so forth.¹ Carter goes so far as to claim that "Semmelweis's doctrine repudiates the concept of pathological anatomy" (p. 45), for Semmelweis saw only *one* cause of puerperal fever, whereas the pathological anatomists, in identifying numerous forms of pathologic change in body organs, potentially admitted many causes. I think it much more reasonable to see Semmelweis as extending, or complementing, pathological anatomy, rather than repudiating it. Carter has been, perhaps, a bit carried away in the heat of editorship. Yet this literate, scholarly edition remains a fine piece of work, and every historian of medicine will want to buy it, especially when the paperback price is so inexpensive.

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¹ Erna Lesky, *Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis und die Wiener medizinische Schule*, Vienna, Böfitaus, 1964.