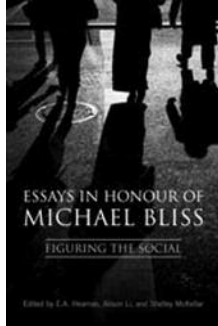


BOOK REVIEW



Book Review by Christine Zadorozny, McGill University,
by Haeman, Li and McKellar, eds

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Michael Bliss taught and wrote upon a few basic historical themes – medicine, business, and politics – in analyses that were alternatively framed as large-scale events or as individual life stories. In his own academic career, he moved from one special subject to another, showing a certain defiance of narrow academic boundaries.

Thus reads the introduction to *Figuring the Social*, a collection of essays published by the University of Toronto Press in honour of Canadian historian Michael Bliss. This anthology, edited by E.A. Heaman, Alison Li and Shelley McKellar, consists of dissertations written by students and colleagues of Bliss, who has produced notable works such as *The Discovery of Insulin*, *Plague: A Story of Smallpox in Montreal* and a biography of Sir William Osler, entitled *William Osler: A Life in Medicine*. In addition to his work in the area of medical history in Canada, Bliss has also written extensively about the business and political history of this country. It is, perhaps, due to the wide scope of Bliss's work that the essays presented in this anthology resist categorization under any particular theme. Rather, they vary quite widely in both style and subject matter, from one author's reflection on his professional relationship with Bliss to another's examination of the relationship between Charles Gordon (also known as novelist "Ralph Conner") and Gordon's son, King. While Bliss' dexterity with a wide variety of subjects is to be lauded, however, the attempt of the editors to mirror this diversity results in a compilation of essays that can seem out of place next to one another – a little more thematic cohesion would have given the collection more strength. That being said, there are some thought-provoking essays in this book that are well worth a read by anyone who is interested in Bliss' work, in his philosophies, or in the history of medicine in Canada.

The first essay in the collection is an autobiographical piece by Bliss himself. In it, he describes the course that his career prospects and world-view have taken since his childhood. The son of a physician, Bliss reports that "from the time I could talk I would automatically say that I wanted to grow up to be a doctor." However, he changed his mind at the age of fourteen:

... there was a Sunday afternoon when Dad's and my Scrabble game was interrupted by the appearance at the office door of a policeman with a drunk in tow, the drunk having been in a fight and suffering a badly slashed face. Dad had to sew him up, suturing both inside and outside the cheek, and invited me to watch what would be a demonstration of his surgical skill [...] with blood and alcohol fumes everywhere, reflecting on my own complete disinterest in and lack of manual skills, I decided that this was not what I wanted to do in life. And that was the end of my ambition to be a doctor.

Bliss parallels this moment of revelation with a similar decision made by famous physician, teacher and essayist Sir William Osler. Bliss reports that Osler, the son of a Minister, also forsook his father's trade for another – with the belief that "man's redemption of man" could mean more on earth than the type of redemption that a Minister offered to his parishioners. Bliss situates himself firmly within this tradition, saying that "in looking at the history of medicine we are studying, revealing, and, when it is appropriate, celebrating human achievement aimed at the redemption and salvation of humankind. This is the great satisfaction I find in doing medical history." An excellent essay by Allison Li on the transformation of endocrinology brought on by insulin further highlights Bliss' fascination with the revivifying possibilities afforded by medicine, quoting him as saying that the effects of insulin were the "closest approach to the resurrection of the body that our secular society can achieve."

Figuring the Social contains essays on the subject of Michael Bliss' career path and influence as well as dissertations on subjects in politics, business, religion, family, health policy and the practice of medicine in Canada. This latter section contains historical pieces on subjects such as the response of the Canadian

government to the thalidomide tragedy, the origins of the Connaught Medical Research Laboratories in Toronto and their influence on Canadian Public Health Policy, and an essay entitled “Comfort, Security, Dignity: Home Care for Canada’s Aging Veterans, 1977-2004,” which provides an overview on Canada’s policies on veteran health care during this time period. Other articles on the subject of health include a history of lobotomy in Ontario, a discussion of medical biography and autobiography as a genre, and an account of the pursuit to develop a mechanical heart undertaken by William Kolff, inventor of the artificial kidney.

This anthology might have been stronger if it had focused on one particular aspect of Bliss’ work. For instance, Bliss’ discussion of medical history in his essay is well paired with the historical accounts found in the later chapters on health in Canada. If, as Bliss describes, medicine is an attempt at “man’s redemption of man” on earth, which is more successful: the practice of medicine itself or its figuration and chronicling in history? Medicine can prolong the life of individuals – history prolongs our memory of them and can figure them in new ways, beyond what is possible in a lifetime. According to Bliss,

There is the immensely frustrating fact that health care offers only temporary salvation. It buys time, but the time always runs out – even for

those virtually resurrected children who outlived every one of the discoverers of insulin. They’re all dead now. We can assault morbidity, we can postpone mortality, but we can’t change the absolute mortality rate, which is permanently stuck at 100 per cent. Which means, of course, that the deal Osler offers us, of salvation through physical health and health care – he called it a “ministry of health” – is hugely unsatisfactory compared to what Osler’s father peddled, which was life everlasting.

The strength of this anthology lies in its exploration of medicine’s pursuit to preserve life. This is a goal that is both absolutely worth striving for and, as is illustrated by the dramatic outcomes of the discovery of insulin, is one that medicine can definitely achieve. And yet, as Bliss points out, it is eventually bound to fail as human life cannot be prolonged indefinitely. This is where the historian steps in to record and present these achievements to the generation to come, endowing them with a “life everlasting” of their own.

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