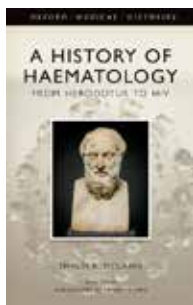


## Book Reviews

### **A HISTORY OF HAEMATOLOGY. FROM HERODOTUS TO HIV (OXFORD MEDICAL HISTORIES).**

Shaun R McCann, Oxford University Press 2016, ISBN 978-0-19-102714-7. RRP £39.99 Hardback



Did you know that some 17th century physicians suggested blood transfusion between spouses as a treatment for marital disharmony? Neither did I before reading “A History of Haematology from Herodotus to HIV” by Professor Shaun McCann, Professor Emeritus of Haematology and Academic Medicine at Trinity College Dublin. Although Haematologists make up a very small proportion of the medical workforce, most doctors have dealings with “blood” in their daily practice and should therefore find this well written book interesting and stimulating.

In his preface, Professor McCann tells of how he first met the editor of this series of books, Dr Christopher Gardner-Thorpe, at a dinner on the terrace of a mutual friend’s house in Tuscany. He readily admits that the idea for the book was subsequently consolidated over an excellent lunch in London. The tone and style of the resulting book suggests that the dinner conversations on these occasions were enthusiastic, philosophical, wide ranging and entertaining. “A History of Haematology” is comprehensive and authoritative but never tiresome. When McCann tells us that in 500 BC Herodotus stated that “each person remembers something different-different and differently” he isn’t revisiting the subject of marital disharmony, but preparing us for the fact that this is *his* history of haematology with emphasis on topics which he has judged to deserve attention. It is a thoughtful approach which rewards the reader.

He tells of his long-held fascination of the phenomenon of “people being written out of history” and certainly sets the record straight for many unsung heroes whose work continues to guide daily medical practice. I particularly enjoyed the story of Canadian blood transfusion pioneer Dr Norman Bethune (1890-1939), whose communist political outlook seem to have contributed to his omission from the historical record hitherto. McCann brings Bethune’s story to life, setting the scene by telling us of his belief in the association between poverty and tuberculosis “ideas not widely held by the medical profession” at the time. Bethune’s outlook was further influenced at a medical conference in Leningrad in the summer of 1935 by the idea that treatment was a “right of the individual, and not a charity”. The swashbuckling Canadian took himself off to the Spanish Civil war to lead a surgical team to care for the wounded. where he developed a centralised blood bank in Madrid. He recognised the importance of transfusing casualties early, before they were transported behind lines to a hospital. He equipped a station wagon with an incubator, a fridge and an autoclave, establishing a mobile transfusion service across a 1000km war front. Bethune’s premature return to Canada was caused by a combination of his reluctance to follow orders, his resistance to central control of his transfusion service, his heavy drinking and a number of sexual indiscretions. He ended up emigrating to China to work for Mao Zedong and is buried in the Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery in Shijiazhuang.

I found this book to be full of interesting facts, anecdotes, stories and opinions which provided me with stimulating topics for conversation over dinner in Derry/Londonderry. The book is dedicated to his wife; it seems that transfusion between spouses isn’t required in the McCann household! “A History of Haematology” is highly recommended.

Dr F.McNicholl, Consultant Haematologist.

