

perhaps best forgotten by those who are toiling on from day to day, and getting by as best they can. Causation, or its opposite, is itself an unsettling matter for the unscientific mind. Which would you rather feel: that your cancer has been genetically programmed, induced by stress or caused by viruses? Brought about by your own folly in smoking cigarettes, or — as Kirkwood himself appears to take for granted — brought about casually and spontaneously through the operation of chance? If it is put before them in this way, most people would rather not think about the matter at all.

Kirkwood — who is professor of gerontology at Manchester University — takes a different view, maintaining that the more we know about the ageing process the more we can “exercise a greater degree of personal control”. Common sense certainly tells us oldies to take it easy, to cut down a bit on food and alcohol and strenuous exercise, but we know this from the feel of our bodies rather than from what we read about the progress of science.

To declare an interest of my own, my wife, Iris Murdoch, died recently. For four years she had been suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, a brain disorder. Research was trying to find out why people died apparently not of, but with, this disease: what were the factors involved that produced a life-threatening situation? Apart from her mental troubles my wife had seemed to be in good health, eating and functioning normally. In a sense she seemed young rather than old, and I fed her, washed and cared for her as one would a three-year-old child. She seemed herself to attempt to adapt to this situation, to become good at it, just as she herself had been a good

person, as well as a great novelist and writer.

But quite suddenly, and as if more brain cells had switched off their circuitry, she stopped eating and drinking. My impression was that she wanted to be good at this too, as if swiftly to produce its best result. She died peacefully and quietly in my arms, and the medical certificate gave the cause as broncho-pneumonia. The doctor told me, between ourselves, that there was no sign of this, but one could hardly write down “starvation and dehydration”.

The function of consciousness in this ending remained mysterious, at least to me. One could hardly feel that Iris had retained any capacity “to exercise a degree of personal control”. But her body seemed to know what it wanted, and how to set about getting it. No doubt an illusion of the outsider, like the red light in the cockpit being the cause of the trouble, but it was strangely comforting to feel that in this most helpless and hopeless of disorders the body was not just dependent for its decisions on cellular malfunction or termination.

One of the charms of Kirkwood’s book is the vitality and insight conferred by its humour (humour that also survived in a 79-year-old woman transformed back into a three-year-old child). The best thing about growing old might be to have a good chuckle at it. As W. C. Fields, a lifelong hater of temperance-obsessed Philadelphia, did when he decided to make them write on his gravestone: “On the whole I’d rather be in Philadelphia”. That is one of the jokes Kirkwood tells in the course of an immensely shrewd but also light-hearted survey of our current prospects and situation, agewise:

and, as he more controversially maintains, what we ourselves ought to know and to do about it.

I feel sure he would agree with what might be termed the law of conservation of trouble. If we do live longer, remain more healthy and more alert, the young, for one thing, are not going to like it at all. They would much rather look after us than have to compete with us. Kirkwood, who evidently knows Africa well, has some pertinent concluding remarks on the current grave difficulties in tribal societies where the authority of the old, once questioned, is today not so much challenged as ignored. To the young there who want to live and work in go-ahead towns, the old have become irrelevant. It would be an irony if we could all start to expect to live to 100, and yet have to be sensibly programmed in some future social and scientific Utopia to die at 60.

One of Kirkwood’s engaging habits in this book is to preface his chapters with some suitable quotation from wise old poetry. (However young poets may die, poetry always knows how to grow old gracefully.) He omits, however, the ending of the Swinburne lyric, which thanks “whatever gods may be”;

*That no man lives for ever
That dead men rise up never
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.* □

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Sans hair, sans teeth . . .

A Means to an End: The Biological Basis of Aging and Death

by William R. Clark

Oxford University Press, £18.99, \$27.50

For those who want more of the same medicine, this immunologist and experienced popular-science writer’s latest book is on ageing. And he covers mostly the same scientific ground as Kirkwood in a similar way.

Molecular Biology of Aging

edited by Vilhelm A. Bohr, Brian F. C. Clark & Tinna Stevnsner

Munksgaard, Dkr400

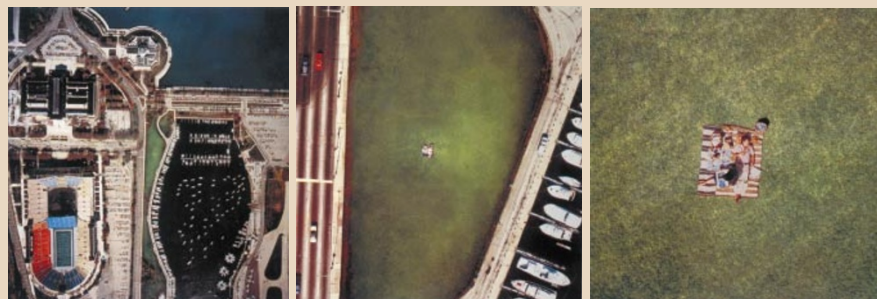
For the specialist, the edited papers presented at the 44th Alfred Benzon symposium held in Copenhagen in June 1998.

How and Why We Age

by Leonard Hayflick

Ballantine, \$14, £8.99

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