

resisted inappropriate treatment by men. Her book offers many interesting side-lights on issues of female surgery, on the practice of antisepsis, on the use or abuse of the speculum, and on craniotomy as a technique in childbirth. She recognizes the complexities of her subject, and neither adulates physicians as infallible scientific titans nor lapses into the crude petulance of other medical historians who tend to present all patients as the victims of despotic medical authority.

This monograph is the latest volume in the Cambridge History of Medicine series, which is reliably distinguished by scrupulous research and fine historical judgement. (Moscucci is writing the anniversary history of Britain's Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.) *The Science of Woman* maintains the quality of the Cambridge series, and although it has too much of the tautness of a PhD dissertation, it is imaginative and well-written. Moscucci's insights have been enriched by her reading in modern feminist historiography, but she dissents from some of its orthodoxies in passages which are notably reflective and honourable. The integrity of her ideas and the honesty of her doubts are as impressive as the range and power of her research. □

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Wearing sheep's clothing

Peter Coles

Trois Pattes pour un Canard (Souvenirs d'un biologiste). By Etienne Wolff. Editions de la Fondation Singer-Polignac, Paris: 1990. Pp. 201. FF130.

A CELEBRATED experimental embryologist, former director of the respected Collège de France and member of the Académie Française, Etienne Wolff has been nicknamed "the monster man". Although he dislikes — and rather resents — the title, it was inevitable. His most well-known work has been to produce live monsters in the laboratory — cyclopean chicks, a duck with a third leg where its tail should be, birds with heads sprouting from their intestines and others, equally grotesque. Commonplace in contemporary embryology, teratology was an unfashionable and little explored domain in the 1920s. Now, at the age of 86, Wolff has written a set of 'biographical essays' and a short note on his research to allow us a peek behind the off-putting nickname.

The image Wolff gives us of himself is sometimes candid, but the 'essays' remain mostly rather superficial and arbitrary. The overall theme is autobiographical, but the essays do not fall into chronological order.

Sandwiched in between "childhood" and "orientation of my studies and career", for example, is a chapter on "Judaism and anti-semitism". After a lifeless and rather banal description of his trips to Japan, the United States and the Soviet Union, there is a chapter on "animals and me", where he defends animal experimentation, saying that real cruelty is found in the commercial exploitation of animals, not in the laboratory. But accusations of cruelty associated with his research obviously weigh heavily, despite his light-hearted self-mockery, since almost too much space is given to show he is an animal lover. While the front cover shows a disturbing picture of a three-legged duck, the back cover has a picture of the author cuddling his own cat, "Grouillot".

At the beginning we are treated to anecdotes about Wolff's childhood and his early education, including descriptions of a Paris with steam trams and open-topped buses. Yet these do not really come alive, partly because the manuscript does not appear to have been edited, leaving a cumbersome and repetitive prose. Then there is a sketch of the meandering university studies that led from a degree in letters to a research post — rare at the time — at the Institute of Embryology of the University of Strasbourg. Here began his

initiation to embryology and the encouragement to explore the largely uncharted area of experimental teratology.

Early in his career, Wolff made some remarkable discoveries. He found that sex hormones, not proteins, determine the sex of chicks and that gender can be changed in mid-course of development. He also found that very specific damage to an embryo at a given date in histogenesis consistently produces a given 'monstrosity'. With the outbreak of war Wolff's career was suddenly interrupted and in 1940 he was taken prisoner. He spent the next five years in prisoner-of-war camps in Austria and Germany where, with a handful of fellow academics, he set up a 'mini-university', giving lectures to other soldiers. His two books, "Sex Changes" and "The Science of Monsters", published after the war, were both written in a camp in Germany. Returning to Strasbourg after the liberation, he built up a thriving laboratory with a staff of 50. This doubled when he was awarded a chair at the Collège de France in Paris, where his laboratory in the Bois de Vincennes became known as the Mecca of Embryology.

Wolff says very little about his research in this book. In a mere 50 pages out of the 200 he describes how he could produce, regularly and systematically, 'single' and 'double' monsters, cyclops and omphalocephalic chicks (with heads in their breasts). Other work included growing organ cultures *in vitro* and changing the sex of chicks. But although he is keen to dispel the idea that he is a kind of "Dr Frankenstein" — most of his monsters appear spontaneously in nature — we are not told why this work is important.

Much space is devoted to eulogies to Wolff's teachers, to friends made in the prisoner-of-war camps, and to his colleagues, yet even these sometimes lack depth. Similarly, for a Jew who found himself in the hands of the Nazis — and who also experienced the antisemitism of Pétainist France — Wolff's chapter on antisemitism is surprisingly incoherent and even comes across as an apology. He resents the word 'Jew', preferring to be called an Israelite — ironically one of the terms used by Arab antisemites.

All in all, this book will please Wolff's friends, colleagues and fellow academicians. But it does little to "sell" embryology to a broader public and gives a disappointingly reluctant, or over-modest, account of the life of one of the leading twentieth-century French biologists. One cannot help but come away with the impression of a brilliant, but very sensitive man who, while having enjoyed the highest accolade from his peers, has never come to terms with the abuse from his detractors. □

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