

A little man made good

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Edward Jenner 1749 – 1823. By Richard B. Fisher. *André Deutsch*. Pp.341. £17.99.

EDWARD Jenner: biographer's dream or nightmare? He is, in some ways, the most commemorable figure in the entire history of medicine, for smallpox vaccination has surely saved more lives than any other prophylactic breakthrough, and the global eradication of the disease within recent times is a success story without equal. And he remains a heart-warming prototype of the 'little man made good'. Jenner, after all, was no eighteenth-century precursor of a grandee, grant-swinging professor or research-director; he was, rather, a retiring, slow-talking country doctor, practising in darkest Gloucestershire, whose earlier enquiries had been into the hibernation of the hedgehog and the murderous habits of the cuckoo. His great discovery arose, endearingly and edifyingly, from attentiveness to humble things; milkmaids who had contracted cowpox from infected udders subsequently escaped, he noticed, the ravages of "the speckled monster". This was widespread country wisdom, but Jenner had the curiosity to turn it to science, grasping the immunizing properties of the bovine disorder, and displaying a fine practical bent for developing a safe and simple variolating technique.

Yet Jenner also poses his biographer intractable problems. For one thing, he was not a man who thought with his pen (he often employed literary assistants). Though he lived more than 70 years and achieved immortality, long passages of his life remain ill recorded. He spent the bulk of his days, before and after the wonder years around 1800, engaged in the routine daily calls of a provincial practitioner, tending sore throats and sick babies. Precious little is known about his inner musings, or his relations with his deeply pious wife and his children, beyond the general impression of a conventional gentleman, temperamentally well suited to village obscurity down by the Severn Estuary.

And how can one avoid the feeling of anticlimax? John Hunter, Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch – all had careers of lasting creativity, studded with multiple discoveries; Jenner, by contrast, was a one-hit man. He was, as Richard Fisher, his latest biographer, ruefully notes, an ordinary man struck by one colossal lightning-bolt of serendipity.

Fisher has trawled some new materials, but they have not led to any dramatic revelations. Hence, it is not surprising that his telling, though agreeably written, does not wholly overcome the problem of sustaining interest over long stretches of rather humdrum doings. But he does offer a convincing reading of Jenner's rather ambivalent

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character.

What should have been Jenner's decade of triumph turned bitter upon him. He was soon being fêted in London. Parliament voted him an award of £10,000 – a cool million or two in modern values – and when the Royal Jennerian Society was founded in 1802, he was made president of its medical council. (What other doctor had a royal society named in his honour during his lifetime?) Nevertheless, the letters of this period are those of a soul in purgatory. Why?

Catapulted to greatness, Jenner found it hard to handle. Prompted equally by duty and pride, he wished to be at the thick of things in London, promoting vaccination, or at least stopping such rivals as George Pearson from stealing his thunder. But he also longed to slip

back into "domestic peace" and rustic anonymity. He wasn't psychologically smart enough to elevate himself, like a figurehead, above controversy; but his interventions in the business of the metropolitan vaccination institutions proved damagingly disruptive, and he had no head for bustle or bureaucracy. He was a man torn and troubled.

Above all, he could not cope with criticism. Glorifying in the role of benefactor of mankind, Jenner was inclined to treat all doubts about vaccination as personal insults to his probity, the splenetic outpourings of cranks and mercenary inoculators. Partly for this reason, he was never able to face head-on the big question: did vaccination, like inoculation, confer life-long immunity? Thus pressurized, he grew more tetchy, even (suggests Fisher, maybe using too strong a term) "paranoid".

Why such acute sensitivity? Fisher comes up with two plausible suggestions. Jenner was a truly tender man. Every reported smallpox death of a vaccinated subject hurt him to the quick. But he also had his fair share of vanity. Perhaps spoilt by his parents, he had certainly become, while studying in London, the great John Hunter's darling pupil, and never lost the backing of that founder of scientific surgery. Though rather indolent by disposition, he nevertheless expected to step into his master's shoes, and so viewed the world's plaudits as no less than his due. Unlike Hunter himself, he had no salutary schooling in adversity.

Aside from the light thus thrown on Jenner's psyche, this book tells us much about the milieu of medical science around 1800. The Georgian century is sometimes dismissed as a fallow period in medical inquiry, in which Jenner shines out as some lone genius. But the truth, as Fisher rightly perceives, was far different. There

was a healthy buzz of medical inquiry around Jenner's Gloucestershire – Thomas Beddoes (of TB fame) in Bristol, Caleb Parry in Bath. Such provincials achieved an *esprit de corps* through medical societies, and were in close touch with the capital, thanks, not least, to that new invention, the medical journal. They made the most of local opportunities to study epidemics and animal diseases. If Fisher cannot, alas, add much to the story as told for instance in Paul Saunders' *Edward Jenner: The Cheltenham Years* (University Press of New England, London, 1982), he is, at least, highly successful in setting his hero in his medical landscape. □

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