

SELECTIONS FROM DISCOVERIES IN PHARMACOLOGY

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Our present scientific climate and hostile surroundings may induce many of us to believe that our beloved "Age of Reasoning" may again be drawing to a close. The "fever" of enlightenment generated over the past few centuries may finally, and inevitably, be going the same way as that of the ancient Egyptians or Greeks. Take heed. For in retrospect those who were actually infected with this glorious "fever" appear to be few. Few amongst many who pursued the scientific way of life for other, less noble reasons, best known to themselves. The romantic view of the golden age of scientific yesteryear may not be entirely correct!

In the chapter entitled, "The sleep of innocence", the author relates how three of the main American protagonists responsible for the development and eventual acceptance of anaesthesia, had to operate within an unsympathetic and unappreciative environment of pompous public ridicule and disbelief. Horace Wells, an advocate of nitrous oxide anaesthesia, committed suicide at 33 years of age due to pressure of (incorrect) popular opinion. William Morton died bitter and penniless after extensive legal battles concerning the invention of ether anaesthesia. His adversary, Charles Jackson, descended into severe mental disturbance and had to be confined to an asylum for the last seven year of his life. What price scientific achievement?

This book offers a selection of eight essays written by authors who have more than a little passion for their subject. Chapters clearly unfolding the stories of the discovery and development of milestones in medical advancement. The anaesthetics, aspirin, digitalis, antibiotics and the contraceptive pill. The development of our understanding of the nature of chemical transmission of nerve impulses and the development of the receptor theory are also detailed. A wealth of information excellently interwoven with anecdotes from the personal experiences of the authors, presented as exciting adventure stories which emphasise the human aspects, the frailties, the humour, the joy and the despair of these journeys of discovery.

The first chapter entitled, "Folklore, druglore and serendipity in pharmacology" underlines the role that chance can play in scientific discovery. It relates that several discoveries started with oddities and that it is quite probable that many "might-have-been" discoveries have never been made, because the initial observation appeared too odd to have been followed up (or published). A quote from A.A. Milne's "The House at Pooh Corner", used in the chapter, serves to underline the essence of serendipity.

"How would it be?" said Pooh slowly, "if, as soon as we're out of sight of this Pit, we try to find it again?"

"What's the good of that?" said Rabbit.

"Well", said Pooh, "we keep looking for Home and not finding it so I thought that if we looked for this Pit, we'd be sure not to find it, which would be a Good Thing, because then we might find something that *we weren't* looking for, which might be just what we *were* looking for, really".

An excellent book and recommended reading for all scientifically minded individuals who wish to peer behind the facade into the true nature of science.

Reviewed by Dr. S.C. Mitchell, St. Mary's Hospital Medical Center.