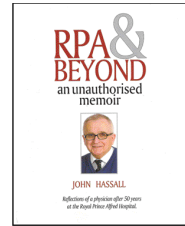


Book review

RPA and Beyond: An Unauthorised Memoir

By John Hassall. Published by Phillip Mathews Book Publishers, Sydney, 2010. 169 pages, index. To purchase contact <http://rpaandbeyond.tumblr.com>.

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Reading this memoir elicited many impressions and memories in one who spent several formative years as a researcher and young specialist at this great institution. I had a chance to know Dr John Hassall as a young physician and could appreciate the cut and thrust of his life in that place, never at rest. Having left Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPA), Sydney for another post in 1969 and participating in the transition phase of leadership in teaching hospitals from the dominance of the honoraries to academic headship, it is possible to truly appreciate the sentiments that he expresses.

Dr Hassall's concern with detail, commitment to history and insight into his fellow men are the qualities that emerge in this work. As a youth, he joined the post-war surge into medicine and managed to navigate the classic six-year course and find his way to RPA, where he remained for his career. He participated, observed, commented, taught, practised and shone in one of the most competitive clinical environments to be found.

He traces the passage from generalist to specialist physician and the demise of the general medical unit with a little irony and a wistful glance at the reverence in which we held our old masters from the previous era. The transition was painful for some, but it is clear from his experience that benefits outweighed the disadvantages that came with the explosion of techniques and the shifts in influence. He writes touchingly about the challenges that face the physician VMO but his own career lends certainty to the capacity for success in spite of the sacrifices entailed.

There was pain in the 1980s as old institutions lost their independence and, in the case of Sydney Hospital, almost their existence. RPA was particularly affected and morale declined but it is no surprise that, with the talent available, a new generation took the challenge and the institution flourished.

There are several telling reflective documents. Dr Hassall discusses basic issues of etiquette and relationships in the hospital setting, emphasising respect as the determinant between clinicians and their patients; all of this taking place in an era of transitions in work practices and behaviours, causes of some bewilderment in those with long experience.

Dr Hassall's prose is elegant. He is a master of the cryptic phrase and its counterpoint in inversion – 'things that we have all had to learn but that cannot be taught'.

His reflections in lectures, contributions and papers in the second part of the memoir date from 1969 to 2007. These touch on most matters of interest to clinicians of any hue, from career development to Medicare to specialisation, to interpersonals, costs and benefits, psyche and soma, whither medicine and a touching adieu to his rheumatology colleagues of 50 years.

A must read for those of us who reflect on what we are and where we might go.

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