

H-Net Reviews

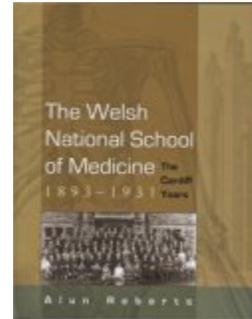
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alun Roberts. *The Welsh National School of Medicine: The Cardiff Years, 1893-1931*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008. xxiv + 389 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7083-2174-4.

Reviewed by Mark Oromaner

Published on H-Education (February, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



The Early Years of One Nation's Medical School

Alun Roberts is the ideal author of a book concerning the history of the Welsh National School of Medicine. Educated as a historian, he served in administrative positions (registrar and secretary) at the school from 1984 to 1996, and until his retirement in 2004, as director of its National Health Service Liaison Unit. Roberts is the author of *Welsh National Heroes* (2002) and *Discovering Welsh Graves* (2002). Although he was not present during the formative period (1893-1931) of the school, he has applied the tools of the historian and his writing skills to produce a readable, informative, and scholarly work.

In 1883, the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire was established, and within ten years (1893), the university's medical school came into being. In 1884, 1,957 students entered medical school in the United Kingdom (896 in England, 617 in Scotland, 444 in Ireland, and 0 in Wales). Welsh medical students had to go to one of the other states. In its initial year (1893 to 1894), the Cardiff Medical School enrolled 12 students; by the academic year of 1903 to 1904 there were 43 students; and by the end of the Cardiff Years (1930 to 1931), there were 192 students.

During this formative period, from 1921 to 1931, the school changed from an institution that offered Welsh students preclinical medical training in Wales to a full medical school. Then, the school divided its preclinical programs (University College, Cardiff) and its clinical programs (within the federated University of Wales). The medical school was now known as the Welsh Na-

tional School of Medicine. As one can see, the change in name of the school requires close attention of the reader not familiar with its history.

There was a gap of fifty years between the end of the "Cardiff Years" (1931) and the beginning of Roberts' affiliation (1984) with the school. His experience provides lessons for all historians. The most important of these was his failure to record the reminiscences of two graduates he had met a few years earlier. The meeting took place in the context of fundraising; however, given his training, he makes a good point that any history of the college during the time in question "would have been enriched by their reminiscences" (p. xx).

Roberts is fortunate to have a range of written material available for analysis. Included are internal documents, such as student records, minutes of committees, student publications, files of correspondence, and press clippings about the college. In addition, he searched the archives of external medical institutions, and medical books and journals; one of his aims was to situate this institutional history "into a wider context, looking particularly at what was going on in other medical schools at the same time" (p. xxxiii). For the reader interested in pursuing any facet of this work, he offers an extensive bibliography of primary sources, official papers, reports, newspapers and periodicals, books, and articles.

A relatively minor stylistic critique that I have is that, at times, Roberts provides extraneous information in his attempt to ensure that the book is readable and infor-

mative. For instance, when explaining why he accepted the invitation to “write a history of the college so that its achievements, and failures, would be preserved for posterity,” he refers to his professional reasons and adds a personal reason, “a great-uncle, two uncles and a cousin, all on my mother’s side, studied there, two of them during the ‘Cardiff Years’ ” (p. xiii). And, in reference to a faculty member, Ewan John Maclean, readers are informed that “his nephew in due course achieved notoriety as the spy Donald Maclean” (p. 122).

In their foreword, Stephen Tomlinson and David Grant state that this book “is not a dry chronology but a fascinating account of struggle, failure and success, innovation and progress” (p. x). I believe that in his attempt to avoid a “dry chronology,” Roberts may have relied too much on the role and personalities of “great medical men” (p. xvi). However, I agree that he has given readers a “fascinating account” of the complex development of the Cardiff Years of the Welsh National School of Medicine.

Roberts suggests that given the present stress on cultural and social history, “some readers may regard my book as rather old-fashioned” (p. xvi). Here he is referring to the fact that he “dwells on the importance of ‘great medical men’ in the origins and development” of the school (p. xvi). Although he does emphasize the role of individuals, he does not neglect social, cultural, professional, and organizational conflicts and struggles, such as Welsh nationalism, funding, location in Cardiff, role of instructor, hospital vs. college, structure of education, and diversity of students. In terms of gender diversity, the charter of the medical school proclaimed the equality of the sexes. Even though only two women registered as medical students from 1893 to 1894, in reality, “with the obvious exception of the London School of Medicine for

Women, the doors of the London medical schools were firmly shut until the First World War” (p. 29).

The most significant conflict in the early history of the school is explored in the final chapter: “Parting of the Ways.” After a sometimes latent and sometimes manifest conflict between the college and the infirmary (teaching hospital), an “Agreement Between The University College of South Wales And Monmouthshire And The Cardiff Royal Infirmary Dated 1 July 1929,” reproduced in appendix 4, was signed. The agreement “ended ... a crisis unparalleled in the modern history of medical education in the United Kingdom” (p. 298). Indeed, in the 1928 to 1929 academic year, the authorities of the infirmary excluded students and staff from using hospital facilities. However, by 1931, a growing sense of Welsh nationalism now favored an all-Wales medical school and supported the creation of an independent Welsh School of Medicine within the University of Wales. Clinical training was to be separated from University College, Cardiff.

The audiences for this well-written and well-documented book are limited by its approach and subject; it is an intensive “biography of an institution” over four decades (p. xvi). However, Roberts is successful in writing a book that is likely to appeal to a number of audiences. Primary among these are students, graduates, and staff of the school; students and scholars interested in the history of medical education in the United Kingdom, in general, and in Wales, in particular; and, to a lesser degree, students and scholars interested in the history of health and medicine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Cardiff Years ended in 1931. Therefore, the history of the past eighty years of medical education in Wales awaits the skills and dedication of Roberts or of a historian of equal skills and dedication.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

Citation: Mark Oromaner. Review of Roberts, Alun, *The Welsh National School of Medicine: The Cardiff Years, 1893-1931*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34344>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.