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Since I am reviewing this book for H-War, these comments are to evaluate the book’s usefulness to military historians, although, I believe that the author intended to write a history of an academic chair at a university. Academic historians will have to evaluate the book’s value for that specialty.

The Regius Chair of Military Surgery was endowed by His Majesty’s Government at the University of Edinburgh in 1806, when hostilities with France established the need for a military hospital and physicians trained in military medicine. John Thomson, a distinguished lecturer of surgery, was appointed to the chair despite his lack of service in the military. He was responsible for teaching two courses each year that were offered free of charge to surgeons in the Army, Navy or Indian Health Service. Although these courses were not required to earn a Doctorate of Medicine, they were popular with students since they included information not available elsewhere in the Edinburgh curriculum and many were inspired to public service as a result.

Upon his resignation in 1822, Thomson was succeeded by George Ballingall. Ballingall, who had served with the British Army during the Peninsular War as well as in campaigns in India and Java, modified the course based on his experiences in the Army. He was responsible for teaching two courses each year that were offered free of charge to surgeons in the Army, Navy or Indian Health Service. Although these courses were not required to earn a Doctorate of Medicine, they were popular with students since they included information not available elsewhere in the Edinburgh curriculum and many were inspired to public service as a result.

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There are a number of strengths to this book. The author should be applauded for pursuing and bringing our attention to a relatively unknown topic. This is a well-written book that makes effective use of primary sources to tell the story. The author explains how medical students earned their Medical Doctor degrees at the university and explores the politics of the University of Edinburgh. He looks at the course from the perspective of the students in addition to that of the professors. The author’s careful evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages that a medical career in the Army, Navy and Indian Health Service would entail for the graduates of the course is probably the book’s strongest contribution for the military historian.

However, the book is vaguely dissatisfying. The years 1806 to 1855 included many significant milestones in the history of military medicine from Dominique Jean Larrey’s *Ambulances Volante*, which enabled the wounded to be taken off the battlefield for treatment, to the medical debacle during the Crimean War that launched the nursing profession.

The book fails to put this academic chair into the context of military medicine. The author’s primary case for the success of the program is mostly based on testimonials from the Army Medical Department and the number of students who later sought careers in military medicine. However, he fails to consider other possible metrics. What happened to Thomson’s and Ballingall’s students during their military careers? Did they reach influential positions? How long did they stay in service? What role did their students play in the Crimean War?
The decisive test during this period was the Crimean War and military medicine was found wanting. Did it fail because of this system of training personnel or in spite of it? While the author suggests the withdrawal of funding was related to reforms of the medical department resulting from the war, he never completely proves or refutes the charge. It is not clear if Professor Ballingall gave his students the information they would need to deal with the medical situation in Crimea or if he, as he was charged, merely taught his students how to chop off arms and legs. The author neither provides a detailed analysis of the curriculum in light of the conditions found during the Crimean War nor does he raise the issue of whether pre-germ theory medical education could have prepared a physician for wartime diseases and sanitation issues.

One gripe I have with the layout of the book is its use of endnotes. The author includes wonderful annotations that should have been given their due prominence as footnotes where the reader could more easily appreciate them.

The book has limited value to the military historian, confined mainly to those studying military training issues and exploring the interaction between academia and the military. It is a topic that is worth a more critical study that will place the chair into the context of military medicine and give the reader a better chance to understand its successes and failures.

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