

by the doctor and the woman. The mural symbolizes the power of medicine as one of the main driving forces behind the well-being of the country and the hope it

can bring to those in need. It is important to mention that most of the characters in the mural, including the doctors, are dark-skinned Mexicans. The muralist

movement, deeply influenced by the nationalistic politics that followed the Revolution, praised the importance of the indigenous Mexican people in the new world order.¹

Siqueiros' fresco at the National Medical Center in Mexico City is a testament to the power of oncology and an expression of admiration for the happiness and prosperity that medical science can bring to the people.

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This detail of the 26-metre-long mural depicts the destruction of cancer, in the form of monsters, to the delight of the cheering crowd.

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Book review

Age is only another number

Old Endeavour: Scientific and Humanitarian Contributions by Physicians over age 65

William C. Gibson

International Association for Humanitarian Medicine Brock Chisholm; 2007

319 pp \$30.00 ISBN 978-88-902020-1-8

When do we become old? Answering this question is rather like deciding at what point high blood pressure becomes hypertension, or sadness becomes clinical depression. Age is objective, but old age is subjective. Concepts such as frailty help to describe physical and social vulnerability, but there is no easy way to measure that combination of attitude, creativity, flexibility and openness that separates those who are elderly in spirit from those who are, as we often say, young at heart.

In *Old Endeavour*, Dr. William Gibson presents short biographies of over 100 physicians who continued to make significant contributions to medical science past the age of 65. The book is a companion to his earlier book, *Young Endeavour*, published in 1958. Gibson is associated with the Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia, where he contributed to the development of the Department of the History of Medicine and Science. That he completed this book at age 93 shows that important work can be done well into what we think of as old age.

The individual biographies, each fairly brief, include well-known figures such as William Harvey, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Harvey Cushing and William Osler, as well as a number of lesser-known personalities. Accomplishments in the professional sphere

are supplemented with personal information, quotations and anecdotes. It is unexpected, and gratifying, to see so many women represented, especially when one considers that becoming a physician at all was an impressive accomplishment for a woman born in the 19th- or early 20th-century. Readers may also be pleasantly surprised to discover that certain widely recognized names in the Canadian medical community are (or at least were at the time of publication) still alive and actively contributing to medical knowledge in some capacity.

In the introduction, Gibson highlights the “wasted intellectual talent due to enforced retirement.” He points out that age 65 was arbitrarily chosen as the age for retirement in the 1880s, when the average lifespan was shorter. Now, the average life expectancy is hovering around 80, and the declining

birth rate means that there are fewer young people relative to the number of seniors. As the population of Canada ages, it becomes ever more important to consider how society can continue to benefit from the abilities and experiences of our older citizens.

Interestingly, the renowned Canadian physician Sir William Osler, whose biography is included in this book, was not a strong proponent of productivity in old age. He believed that most significant contributions are made before age 40 and, in fact, at one point was mistakenly believed to be promoting euthanasia for the elderly.¹

Most readers of *Old Endeavour* will probably use it as a reference book. The entries are arranged in alphabetical order, but for some reason, the book lists the names at the end of the book in an index rather than in a table of contents at the beginning. It might have been useful if the index provided additional means of referencing the entries, for example, by specialty or nationality. As well, some of the entries do not clearly indicate what contributions the subject made after age 65. If this information had been provided in point form, for example, this book would be easier to use. In addition, it is unfortunate that the book does not include photographs of the subjects.

As Gibson himself points out, there are important questions about productivity in old age that cannot be answered by a collection of biographies. Does continued activity lead to greater discoveries? Why do some physicians continue to work and do research beyond the point when most of their colleagues have retired to the south of France or the golf courses of Florida? And perhaps most importantly, how can the profession accommodate and encourage senior physicians to remain vital and valued members of the medical community well into the latter part of life?

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Book review

Evolution at the St. John Ambulance

The Maple Leaf and the White Cross

Christopher McCreery

Dundurn Press; 2008

332 pp \$50 ISBN 978-1-55002-740-2

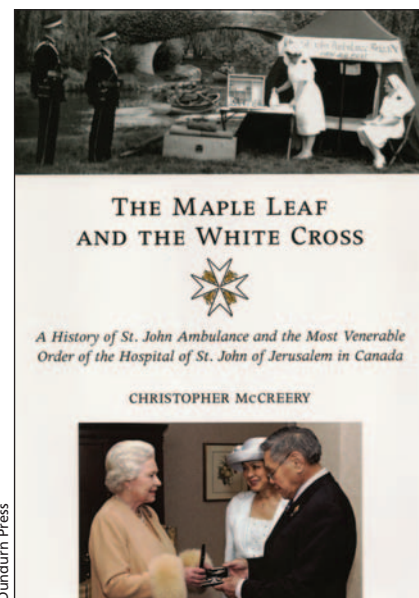
The St. John Ambulance has been providing Canadians with first-aid training since 1883, but relatively little has been written about its work. This year, as it celebrates 125 years in Canada, the Order of St. John decided to change that by publishing *The Maple Leaf and the White Cross*, Christopher McCreery's well-structured history of an organization that came of age in the last century and is searching for new roles in this one.

The Order's roots stretch back to a group of monks founded in 12th-century Jerusalem to treat pilgrims making the trek to the Holy Land. Almost 1000 years later, the Canadian "priory" of the St. John Ambulance provides everything from therapy dog services to emergency preparedness programs. However, its bread-and-butter work has always been first-aid training.

The St. John Ambulance — or at least the work it does — is well known to many of Canada's emergency physicians and first responders because its 6000 certified instructors train more than 550 000 Canadians in first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation every year.

The book recounts one physician's reaction a century ago when a railway employee's life was saved by a quick-thinking conductor who had received such training. "I have not the least doubt but that Sectionman Courchaine would have bled to death had it not been for the timely and efficient assistant of Mr. Leach...", he said. "All railroad men should be so trained."

The book devotes separate chapters to the organization's extensive involvement in both world wars. In the First World War, the St. John Ambulance in Canada sent more than 400 voluntary aid detachment personnel overseas. These mostly "Anglo-Protestant, middle class, unmar-



ried women, ranging in age from mid-twenties to early thirties," provided nursing, rehabilitation and other help.

The book also opens a window onto Canadian medical history, particularly horrific events such as the Halifax explosion of 1917, where St. John Ambulance staff treated patients whose faces had been "torn to tatters as if clawed by a tiger." Eight staff members were given the unenviable task of searching for 140 missing children.

The St. John Ambulance has had some tough times recently, particularly early this century when the technology sector's flameout hit its investments "particularly hard" and led to the sale of its national headquarters in Ottawa. Today, it is trying to adapt to a changing world by searching for new markets. One example is the 72 Hour Emergency Ready Kit, which is designed to provide support during the first 3 days of a natural disaster or similar crisis. More than 30 000 kits were purchased in 2006.

This well-referenced history does justice to an organization that has served Canada well.

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