

A lady's hand

For those who attempt literary criticism, reviewing a book that is also a material monument is to add one sort of task to another. Bourguery's *Complete Treatise of Human Anatomy* – given a new title, *Atlas of Human Anatomy and Surgery*, in this trilingual edition – was, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a testament to science, surgical skill, anatomical exploration and publishing (to start with the easy ones). To these can be added: the culture of professional expertise, bourgeois values, gender difference, democracy, heroism, colonial expansion and modern methods of warfare. But in its massive format and with its lavish illustrations this book was also a physical monument that celebrated all these things. In a minor way, by the end of the century, it was also a tombstone.

Jean-Baptiste Marc Bourguery (1797–1849) was awarded a doctorate in medicine in Paris 1827. In 1830, in cooperation with Nicolas Henri Jacob (1782–1871), a student of Jacques Louis David, he began work on a huge, illustrated tribute to the anatomical splendours of the body and to the recently created surgical science that aspired to correct the endless deformities to which the human form was seen to be prone. Eight volumes were published over the next quarter-century. They were adorned by 709 spectacular, hand-coloured lithographs. In the second

CHRISTOPHER LAWRENCE

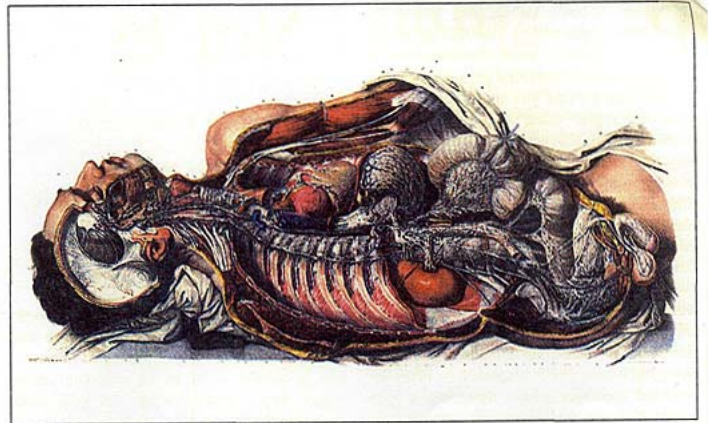
J. M. Bourguery and
N. H. Jacob

ATLAS OF HUMAN ANATOMY AND
SURGERY

The complete coloured plates of 1831–1854
English/French/German edition
Edited by Jean-Marie Le Minor and Henry Sick
714pp. Cologne: Taschen. £100.
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edition (1866–71), colour lithography was employed. The new Taschen edition (almost but not quite a reprint of the second) is no less a monument in its own way than its predecessors were.

Modern surgery was forged in a world of unlimited medical experience: the hospitals of post-Revolutionary Paris. The new surgery that was made there extended far beyond technique. In 1983, Elizabeth Johns, in her unsurpassed analysis of Thomas Eakins's magnificent oil painting "The Gross Clinic", argued that, for Americans, surgeons were heroes of everyday life. Gigantic, yet down-to-earth, these sons of the soil, these daring and dashing men embodied the new democratic order. The Americans, however, got this ideology from Paris. But if French nineteenth-century surgeons were the



An anatomical illustration from the book under review

embodiments of democratic ideals, egalitarians they were not. It was their access to thousands of poor patients, with no requirements for permission to invade their bodies, that allowed French doctors to create operations of such complexity that foreign visitors were left in awe. The Gallic callousness displayed under such conditions horrified American students. Samuel Gross, dominating though he was in Eakins's portrait, struck a far more humane figure. American and British surgeons were also seeking to be gentlemen.

By the end of the nineteenth century, surgeons, alongside explorers and military com-

manders, were role models: a mix of the masculine courage needed to face danger, and the feminine tenderness required to deal with the sufferings and innate misfortunes of the poor and lesser races. Traditionally, it was said, surgeons should have "a lion's heart, a hawk's eye and a lady's hand". The values and cultural metaphors that surgery endorsed, wittingly or not, are visible in the illustrations of J. M. Bourguery and N. H. Jacob's *Atlas*. The anatomical plates speak volumes about exploration. They are maps to assist navigation within the Dark Continent of the body. Without atlases, neither the surgeon

nor the African explorer could find his way, nor could they recover specimens, place them in museums, colonize and take possession. Descriptive natural history was the key science of surgery and geographical discovery.

The healing metaphors that made modern surgery thinkable were also the wounding metaphors that made the creation of the nineteenth-century war machine possible. The language of surgery is deeply freighted with the language of combat, destruction and invasion. The cultures that created modern armies created modern surgery. Recently a surgeon suggested that the use of yoghurt on wounds might help combat MRSA. Beyond his empirical observation lay the unspoken suggestion that the way we consider the body might need re-evaluation; perhaps we should help it heal, not destroy it with fallout. Joseph Lister, undoubtedly the most famous surgeon of the nineteenth century,

whether or not he knew of yoghurt, could not have had such a thought. Germs for him were invaders, and they were to be fought with the agents of chemical warfare. The terrible, smelly, caustic agent carbolic acid was the SAM of nineteenth-century surgery.

Somehow surgery had to be ring-fenced off from such dreadful connections and seen only as a healing art. Invading the bodies of the poor with impunity may have been possible in the Hôtel-Dieu but it was not so easily accomplished, among a Victorian and Edwardian population, many members of which found even inoculation against smallpox intrusive. The technical genius, but persisting coarse associations, of mid-century surgery had to be disarticulated. The operators of Bourguery's era lacked gentility, and this perceived deficit is easily traced in the descriptions of Victorian novelists. Ironically, the economic rewards and social suc-

cess of later surgeons (Lister was made a Lord) were partly achieved by a degree of professional parricide. It was these men who created the myth, loved by popularizers today, that anaesthesia and antiseptics had transformed surgery from butchery to late Victorian "rocket science" (today, of course, displacing brain surgery as the metaphor for knowledge and skills beyond the humdrum). These two technologies – anaesthesia and antiseptics – did not alone revolutionize surgery. The great Swiss-American historian of medicine, Henry E. Sigerist, made the point powerfully, albeit teleologically: "surgery became great, not because anaesthesia and antiseptics were introduced but anaesthesia and antiseptics were found because surgery was to become great". The *Atlas of Human Anatomy and Surgery* is ample testimony to that. The plates in it are not for the squeamish, but they demonstrate on page after page that, before anaesthesia

was barely born (1846) and antiseptics was, comparatively, light years away, surgeons could perform incredibly delicate operations on the ear and the eye, carry out intricate investigations of joints and genitals, and even mend damaged abdominal viscera (a task routinely regarded as impossible before the twentieth century). There must be a Ronnie Barker joke here about how, if you gave yourself a hernia lifting this giant volume, it would at least show you how to repair it.

At first sight, this remarkable book is for, at the minimum, the enthusiast, the collector, the historian of printing and the surgeon. The student of bodily representation in our own time, however, may wish to ponder its reappearance and monumental significance. Will it lie on the same coffee table that holds the books on the publisher's home page: *Artists and Prostitutes*, *Fashion Now 2*, *Diana Princess of Wales* and *Six Decades of Centrefolds*?