

The NHS: Beginning, Middle and End? The autobiography of Dr John Marks by John Marks with a foreword by Nicholas Timmins. Radcliffe Publishing Ltd 2008.

I should start this review by admitting to knowing Dr Marks, not especially well, but enough to have enjoyed his company on several occasions. Even in old age he is a powerful figure, passionate, opinionated and highly amusing.

John Marks pegs his professional autobiography to the NHS because he qualified on July 5th 1948, the day that the NHS began, and he was intimately involved with all the major developments within the NHS until his retirement in the mid 1990s. But he commences his story with early memories of his family, Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe who came to Britain in the late 1800s. Marks graduated from Edinburgh, did his National Service in Egypt (by all accounts time highly enjoyably spent) and then returned to Britain where he became a GP just two months before marrying Dr Shirley Nathan, which he describes as 'the most important thing I did in my life'.

John Marks' involvement in medical politics, which he would conclude as a national figure, began with the debate over David Steel's Abortion Act of 1967, and evolved over the years through a number of increasingly important positions until he was elected Chairman of the BMA in 1984. The timing of his election ensured that he would be intimately involved with the Tory government's reforms of the NHS, reforms which Marks led the BMA in opposing. John Mark's gives some fascinating insights into the workings of government and particularly the behaviour of the Health Minister, Kenneth Clarke, with whom he frequently clashed: the information he gives reflects well on Marks and badly on Clarke, which anyone who remembers the old bruiser well (Clarke not Marks!) will find all too credible.

Most political autobiographies seem to be opportunities to settle scores with old enemies and make the author look as good as possible, but although John Marks was a medical politician, and although he is unsparing in his comments about those who behaved ill-advisedly, or stupidly, in government or the medical profession, The NHS: Beginning, Middle and End comes across as the work of a man of the highest integrity who cared passionately about his profession, and about the NHS with which he started his career.

It is undoubtedly because of his having been a thorn in the side of the Conservatives that John Marks was not awarded the knighthood to which his years of service to the medical profession entitled him, and any reader of this autobiography will share a sense of disgust at the pettiness of government in denying him a national honour that he so richly and obviously deserved.

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