Book Review:

‘Our Necessary Shadow’: The Nature and Meaning of Psychiatry


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Here is a wise, moderate and excellently informed tour of psychiatry, its history and its practice, its social functions, and the challenges to it. Burns describes what psychiatrists do and how and why they do it. The subtitle well sums up the content and scope (for the meaning of the main title, read the book!).

The references to old age psychiatry always seem to me sensible and well-judged, but this is not a book particularly for old age psychiatrists; it is for everyone who is touched by psychiatry, as a profession and as a function in society. Amazingly, the author does justice to his big topic in 300 very readable pages.

They are all here - our history and achievements, the scandals, and the contentious territory such as compulsion, institutions and their effects good and
bad, the Scientology wars, the pros and cons of drugs and their marketing, ECT, leucotomy, the psychotherapies (the author’s open-minded and eclectic approach is imbued with a declared sympathy towards psychotherapy).

Burns helps one to order one’s own ideas, and it is fascinating to see how he moves in familiar territory. His tone is friendly, moderate and never haranguing, an undirectiveness which I find very attractive. For instance, he urges readers to pick and choose which chapters to read and in what order; or, having given as fairly as he can the contrasting arguments around an issue, he may (or may not) indicate where he stands, but usually he says: ‘you make up your mind’.

Burns isn’t perfect – he says the Greek for womb is hystros (it isn’t, it’s hyster.a). Which just shows that a reader like me can remain pedantic even when he is enthused! That, I suppose, reflects in a small way the complexity of human nature, into which Tom Burns looks here so well and so sympathetically. Read this book, as a stimulus, as a venture beyond merely our own specialty – and as a pleasure.