



## **Welcome to our February book, *Historians!***

We will be meeting on Tuesday, February 9 at 6:30 on Zoom to discuss *The Butchering Art: Joseph Lister's Quest to Transform the Grisly World of Victorian Medicine* by Lindsey Fitzharris published in 2017. Fitzharris is a medical historian, an American with a Ph.D. from Oxford University and the host of a popular show on The Smithsonian Channel, "The Curious Life and Death Of" as well as a popular blog on medical history, The Surgeon's Apprentice. I mention both of these so that you can study more if you are interested in Victorian medicine.

*The Butchering Art* is the story of Joseph Lister told against the backdrop of Victorian medicine. Lister became a medical student in 1844 and spent his working life at Glasgow Royal Infirmary where he divided his time between surgery and scientific research. Using Lister's letters, Fitzharris tells the story of his quest to first discover why so many patients died after "successful" surgeries and then, after his discovery of germs in the hospital, Lister's quest to convince doctors in Great Britain and the United States of the importance of cleanliness and infection control.

Fitzharris tells Lister's story through his letters. He was fortunate to have an inventor father who gifted him with a microscope capable of seeing the small animals described by Louis Pasteur. And Lister was fortunate to have a wife, the daughter of a doctor, who believed in and actively supported him in his research. Other characters in this story are the germs and the hospitals of the time as well as the colorful characters who made up the medical community, "a motley assortment of mad mavericks and bizarre beliefs" as described by one critic. There will be moments when reading this book that you will not know whether to laugh or to recoil in horror!

As you read, pay attention to the larger story of the medical community of the time. Yes, there are egos involved in the resistance to new ideas as well as an understandable reluctance on the part of doctors to admit that they have been doing everything wrong. But Fitzharris also describes a reality that has an echo in our own time. There is a resistance to science over homegrown beliefs and a sense that yes, people die, but that is just the cost of doing business. And if you cannot afford the cost, you will almost certainly die. What lessons can we take from this?

*The Butchering Art* is also a reassuring book. Fitzharris makes clear just how much dedication and persistence can do to change the entire medical community and the people who depend on it for good care. When Lister's ideas are adopted and death rates after surgery plunge, people are quick to forget their old fears and prejudices. And that is a reassuring message for our own time.

Fitzharris has written a fascinating story, skillfully weaving together narrative and historical fact. You will learn a lot reading *The Butchering Art* and you will enjoy doing it. One word of warning. It is somewhat grisly! I look forward to discussing this fascinating book when we meet on Tuesday, February 9 at 6:30, central time, on Zoom. See you there!

*Donna McBride*