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For all that, Donegan’s work, too, is a milestone.

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David Gagan’s new book concisely analyzes the development of the general hospital at Owen Sound from its beginnings as a local charitable enterprise in 1893 to its emergence in the age of medicare as the central institution in an integrated web of regional medical resources. An excellent introduction solidly places the hospital’s history in its broader context: the twentieth-century transformation of North American hospitals from “charity” shelters for the sick poor to efficient, scientific and enormously expensive dispensers of care. This case study is particularly valuable in that the operation of these forces in Canada is still largely unexplored.

The observation has become commonplace that the subsequent involvement of the provincial and federal governments, first in hospital and then in general medical insurance, has not solved all of Canada’s health care problems and may, indeed, have created some. But Gagan’s exploration of the hospital’s history between 1960 and 1985, covering about fifteen pages, is far too short and sketchy to shed much light on these issues. For earlier periods, changing patterns of hospital income and patient utilization are given in helpful statistical summaries integrated with the text, and should offer a sound basis for comparison in studies of other Canadian hospitals. Discussion of the earliest years of the G & M are also supplemented with a richly detailed picture of daily life in the hospital, where student nurses, who had “virtually complete charge of the wards” during their 12-hour shifts, attended classes in their “free” time; and where patients were faced with a bewildering array of rules governing behaviour whose violation could bring discharge. Unfortunately, this descriptive account is not sustained into later periods, and hence there is little sense of changes in actual patient experience to counterbalance the hospital’s changing administrative and financial condition. In fact, less emphasis might have been given overall to the minutiae of the G & M’s financial woes. While the description of funding sources makes an essential point about the perceived role of the institution in the community, even readers quite undaunted by long discussions involving debentures, bonds and sinking funds might wish for a more lively style, and more balance with the changing social context.

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