

Book Review

July 26, 1987 60¢
© 1987 The New York Times



A Life of Ellen Terry.
Review, page 11.

The Tribe That Wears White

BECOMING A DOCTOR

A Journey of Initiation in Medical School.
By Melvin Konner.
390 pp. New York:
Elisabeth Sifton Books/Viking. \$19.95.

By Gerald Weissmann

MELVIN KONNER is an anthropologist and writer of some distinction who interrupted his career at the age of 34 to attend what many believe to be the best medical school in Boston. The author of the well-received "The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit" has now written an engaging memoir of his coming of age at the bedside. The Harvard Medical School — thinly disguised in "Becoming a Doctor" — cannot be faulted for lack of

attention to belletristic talent among its applicants. Indeed, Dr. Konner's is the fourth account of medical studies at Harvard to have been published recently; the others are by Charles LeBaron, Stephen A. Hoffman and Perri Klass. Of this quartet, Dr. Konner's is the best written and most tightly reasoned; perhaps because of those virtues it is to me the most disturbing.

Dr. Konner gives "an account of the process of socialization of young physicians [by] an anthropologist trained to study odd and complex social worlds through the marvelous prism of participant observation." He focuses on his third year of medical school, when, in the traditional American curric-

Gerald Weissmann, a professor of medicine at New York University Medical Center, is the author of two collections of essays, "The Woods Hole Cantata" and "They All Laughed at Christopher Columbus."

ulum, the student becomes a full-time apprentice on the wards. Flanked by a chapter of autobiography and a closing essay on the flaws of modern medical instruction, the bulk of this book is a diary of that year on the lowest rung of the medical hierarchy as the student is exposed to surgery, anesthesia, neurology, psychiatry, pediatrics, obstetrics, internal medicine, etc. Dr. Konner describes with grace and skill those moments of learning when the crunch of clinical insight joins the how of practice to the why of theory. He amply fulfills his pledge to give "an objective account of what I experienced" rather than of "what happened."

The narrative aspects of this memoir are propelled by brief case histories of encounters with patients, doctors and nurses; clinical anecdotes are briskly recorded; difficult science is reduced to clear prose; and the jargon of medical discourse is neatly explained. A brief glossary of hospital slang

Continued on page 2



DR. KONNER laces his memoir with references from the wider culture when he compares a compensatory pause in the heartbeat to the liberty taken by a pianist in a Chopin étude, or the bond among house officers (interns and residents) to Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship. But the author's most acute perceptions are appropriately derived from his background as an anthropologist, the profession to which he has now returned at Emory University in Atlanta.

He draws on his experience with the !Kung San (bushmen) in the Kalahari Desert of South Africa to explain the utility of stressful, indeed painful, training in which overwork and fatigue are the norm. Agreeing that lack of sleep, constant reprimands and clinical detachment pose risks to both doctor and patient, Dr. Konner observes that the !Kung healers also "take great risks and experience great pain — especially when they are learning. Their souls may leave their bodies never to return. Injury, pain, and death are part of the expected risk of learning to heal. . . . As a sometime apprentice in both systems — the !Kung and the American — I can say that the confidence to heal comes in part through the pain; that you feel justified in exercising such terrible power over your fellow human beings to the extent that you have suffered to get the power; and, last but not least, your patients feel it too."

In its mix of deft prose and everyday gossip, of barracks slang and social comment, "Becoming a Doctor" falls into that genre of military memoir in which the writer watches his comrades perform heroic deeds in the service of clumsy chiefs. This is the genre of George Orwell's "Homage to Catalonia" or "The Mint" by T. E. Lawrence. It is also the genre of Robert Graves's "Goodbye to All That," which Dr. Konner evokes as he leaves his colleagues who, he writes, "despite their impressive experience and heavy responsibilities . . . often remain eternal adolescents, sadly locked in a thrilling and important but somehow still collegiate sort of enterprise."

What disturbs me about this book is not Dr. Konner's critique of medical education as we now conduct it. He may be correct that our system tends to produce young doctors who have lost touch with the pastoral aspects of medicine, who lack patience, humanity and compassion. In effect, he argues that if you put a bunch of bright, competitive people in white coats and scrub suits, expect them to have memorized human genetics but skipped Homer and permit them to treat very sick people they've never met in street clothes, they are unlikely to present themselves as Dr. Albert Schweitzers. He may be right; but the European humanistic tradition also produced Dr. Mengele, and I'm by no means certain that today's students are less philanthropic than those of my generation or than their contemporaries in other lands.

What is more disturbing is that for reasons that remain unclear, Dr. Konner seems to have missed the ro-



Melvin Konner with his youngest child, Sarah, moments after her birth in January.

MARLORE SHOSTAK

mance of medicine, that mixture of fervor and compassion that is the reward for all that "risk and pain." Perhaps because he never consummated his affair with the profession, Dr. Konner does not deal with the intellectual adventure of training in medical science at a great university. From his book we would not know why thousands of young doctors would give their eyeteeth to spend underpaid years in Boston, New York, Dallas or Palo Alto, would sacrifice a good part of their youth to join the biological revolution that has transformed the craft. We would never guess that Dr. Konner's teachers, in these days of miracle and wonder, had designed enzymes that when harvested from the genes of bacteria could dissolve clots in the hearts of dying poets.

We miss what William James called the "higher excitement" of discovery. Dr. Konner did not find it at Harvard and warns a sociologist in his mid-40's who is considering applying to medical school that medicine will not live up to his expectations: "Practical work that was basically a holding action against a tide of chaos was not necessarily more satisfying than intellectual work that had some hope of making the world a better place." It might be argued that at least one of Dr. Konner's professors — trotted out as a caricature in the book — has by dint of his impact on the treatment of heart disease done more than the whole discipline of sociology to make the world a better place.

I am also disturbed that Dr. Konner, whose empathy with the sick shines through these pages, displays

too often a mean condescension to fellow medical students and doctors. He pictures them as narrow, uncultivated louts who seem unaware that passing among them for a time was that special creature, a writer: "Hardly anybody I worked with at the hospital even knew I had written a book, much less one that was considered to be quite good. They greeted this news with a universal lack of curiosity."

BE that as it may, this disturbing book is nevertheless a valuable and unique contribution to the growing literature of medical culture. Informed by the spirit of anthropology, Dr. Konner has obeyed the advice of Diderot in his comment on a journey taken by the explorer Bougainville to "put on the costume of the country you visit, but keep the suit of clothes you will need to go home in." Having kept the clothes of scholarship while pursuing his fieldwork in scrub suits, he has produced an account of medical education that is in the best tradition of his anecdotal discipline.

But perhaps this memoir was written too soon after he returned from his journey of initiation. I look forward to reading Dr. Konner on medicine 10 years from now, when he looks back through the glass of sentiment to the days when he wore the native costume of white. Perhaps he will speak more kindly of his visit to the settlements where the holding action against the tides of chaos was directed by the rude chieftains of Harvard. □