

Book Reviews

The Music Room, by William Fiennes. 216pp. Picador 2009, £14.99.

This book will delight all those who know and love Broughton Castle and the Fiennes family. It is a poignant book, written by William Fiennes, one of the younger sons of our President the current Lord Saye and Sele. In it he documents his childhood recollections of life in the castle – in many respects a world away from the life of wealth and ease one imagines is led by the aristocracy – and his relationship with his much-loved elder brother Richard, who suffered from a severe form of epilepsy.

It is a very personal book, tackling a difficult subject. Many people shy away from talking about subjects such as epilepsy, but William Fiennes has it as a theme running through the book, looking at how epilepsy has been seen through history and in superstition, and giving fascinating snippets about efforts to understand the workings of the brain over the centuries. For example William Fiennes writes that in ancient times epileptics were forbidden from taking baths, wearing black clothes or goat skins, crossing their hands or feet and they must not eat red mullet, eel, goat, deer, mint, garlic or onions but eating seal genitals, tortoise blood and hippopotamus testicles was recommended! He goes on to describe early attempts to produce electricity and the recognition that the brain worked using electrical currents. He makes complex scientific ideas accessible to the layman.

Richard's severe epilepsy had a profound effect on the rest of the family. The drugs he took affected his behavioural patterns, sometimes causing uncontrollable aggression which was far from easy even for the professionals to deal with, but he is shown as a much-loved member of the family, with endearing qualities and a passion for Leeds United!

Another fascinating aspect of the book is the minutiae of life in an important historical building. William was born in Broughton Castle and lived in the family's private apartments but a large building with centuries of history can hold its terrors for a small boy:

"I had a castle to explore whenever I wanted. But I was still afraid of the other end. I had to dare myself to leave our familiar quarters.

Christine Bloxham

The Story of Deddington, Mary Vane Turner, 1933. Reprinted 2008 by Deddington Map Group for Deddington & District History Society, with an introduction by Christopher Day. Card covered, 96pp. £9.00.

This book was first published in 1933 after submission by the local Women's Institute founded in 1925, in a countrywide competition where "more historical collections than analysis" were sought, Setting aside those primary sources, and use of previous local historians' published work such as Wing and Marshall,