There are, however, some real treasures here. The opening quintet of essays relating to gastrointestinal physiology are by Baron, Wold, Davenport, Wingate, and Gregory — surely some of the most beautiful writers ever to have interested themselves in the human gut. Yet each of these is surpassed by Chris Booth whose piece on ‘What has technology done for gastroenterology?’ is the piece of finest writing ever to have graced the pages of this journal (Gut 1985; 26: 1088–94). This essay is required reading for those embarking on a career in clinical gastroenterology who may be tempted to the view that skills in fibroptic endoscopy are somehow the end rather than the means to an end.

If you can live with this book’s misnomer, you will find several further treasures. Find out that both Hippocrates and Aretaeus the Cappadocian have described Crohn’s disease before Christ (let alone Crohn). You can learn how Benevienus (1442–1502) described the features of ileus. He was also a physician to the Borgias so had plenty of time in his study a la Borgias. Problems in the study of many subjects so frequently believed to have finally killed after a nice family meal. We have to move into the 18th century to learn how our colleagues of former time, Reamur, Hunter, and Spallanzani worked out that the stomach secretes acid. They did, however, have some difficulty in determining the type of acid—phosphoric and lactic were prominent contenders before the right answer emerged.

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of this book is that we are constantly reminded that we work in a specialty that is steeped in history and occasionally in antiquity. We spend so much of our time at the frontier between the present and the future, that is to say, between what is known and what is not known, that it is easy to overlook the lessons of the past.

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