“Let wisdom guide”—what message did the Royal College of Psychiatrists intend by choosing this motto for its coat of arms? “Wisdom” means the ability to make the right use of knowledge, and what constitutes genuine psychiatric knowledge is the main subject of this disturbing (in the positive sense) and edifying little book.

In 12 chapters, 10 contributors challenge the whole spectrum of current psychiatric thinking and practice. The dominance of biomedical psychiatry (which has solidified over the last 50 years) as well as (at the other end of the spectrum) the evolutionary stages of psychotherapy are equally scrutinised. In so doing, Critical Psychiatry claims to expose a lack of evidence justifying biological psychiatry’s predominance, rolls in big guns like Kant and Foucault to rough up psychotherapy, and explores the increasing influence of the pharmaceutical industry on psychiatry’s development. Bracken and Thomas’s chapter, explaining how the psychiatric profession was initially reluctant to respond to the overtures of the British government (when the latter sought to develop a new Mental Health Act in the early 20th century) is particularly enlightening. Ensuing decades have witnessed increasing interdependence of government and psychiatry, regarding the management of severe mental illness (the difficult birth of England’s new Mental Health Act), and this chapter alone is essential reading for any trainee psychiatrist.

The book makes several points. It argues that mental illness is a psychological, not a biological, process and that biological psychiatry is excessively reductionist (thereby removing a patient’s free will). It is biological psychiatry’s predominance, rolls in big guns like Kant and Foucault to rough up psychotherapy, and explores the increasing influence of the pharmaceutical industry on psychiatry’s development. Bracken and Thomas’s chapter, explaining how the psychiatric profession was initially reluctant to respond to the overtures of the British government (when the latter sought to develop a new Mental Health Act in the early 20th century) is particularly enlightening. Ensuing decades have witnessed increasing interdependence of government and psychiatry, regarding the management of severe mental illness (the difficult birth of England’s new Mental Health Act), and this chapter alone is essential reading for any trainee psychiatrist.

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