This book should be read by assessors and trainees for its 'how-to' procedural instructions. A second edition should follow soon to remedy its deficiencies and to ensure that this useful manual does not become obsolete as the tools it describes evolve. A second edition should also correct some sloppy usage, such as the interchangeable use of competence/s and competency/ies (the General Medical Council favours the former) that occur sometimes in a single paragraph.

This book began life almost a quarter of a century ago as a four-volume, encyclopaedic tome. In the course of publishing the previous editions, it has contracted to a single volume. But, this is not at the expense of quality since it continues to include the full range of psychiatric conditions. With developing specialisation we have an increasingly narrow range of therapeutic skills, making the broad approach of this book even more valuable than its founding fathers might have envisaged.

Each of the 12 sections has an editor and individual contributors, who are experts in their respective fields. The first section includes disorders diagnosed in infancy, childhood and adolescence, followed by delirium and other cognitive disorders, and then substance-related disorders. The subsequent sections cover the major remaining groups such as mood disorders, somatof orm disorders and psychotic illnesses. Within the sections, areas as diverse as paedophilia and body dysmorphic disorder, narcissistic personality disorder and psychiatric rehabilitation are covered in individual chapters with references as recent as 2005. A significant achievement has been the editorial work which has established a consistent style.

This book is not without its problems, the most substantial of which is the absence of specific guidelines for clinicians (as distinct from detailing the studies and outcomes in individual trials, which it does in detail). This scholarly approach shifts it into the category of reference book and prompts the view that it is a textbook of clinical trials with references as recent as 2005. A significant achievement has been the editorial work which has established a consistent style.

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Building a complex theory on an absence is a brave enterprise, even for a neuropsychiatrist specialising in epilepsy. However, for Michael Trimble, the crucial absence is a statistical one: that among the many people suffering from epilepsy there are remarkably few poets. From that negative association, along with a similar absence of poets with schizophrenia and an over-abundance of writers with bipolar disorder, and using a careful linguistic analysis of psychopathology, Trimble’s ‘central aim . . . is to relate . . . religion, poetry and music to their underlying neurological basis’. Indeed, it is an attempt to describe the soul of man, those uniquely human features which together provide a sense of existence, of purpose, of being in the world and of it. And, ‘the thread that unites them [all] . . . is the neurobiology of the non-dominant hemisphere’.

Trimble suggests that although neurology has carefully dissected the left-hemisphere lesions causing the aphasias, the right hemisphere’s contribution to the mood, feeling, rhythm and consonance that underpin poetic language is relatively neglected. This, though, is not yet another ‘simple right-brain
left-brain dichotomy’, for, as Trimble rightly says, normally the hemispheres cooperate, their separate functions only manifesting in the clinic. Nevertheless, Trimble does quote Nietzsche’s suggestion of ‘two chambers of the brain . . . one to experience science and the other non-science’; and science has not done well at thinking about art, music and religion.

The book’s central argument is neuroanatomical and evolutionary, splicing cerebral asymmetry onto MacLean’s triune brain, so that ‘links from the limbic structures to the right hemisphere may have remained or developed to a greater degree than those to the left hemisphere’. From here, one journeys through religious belief to ‘the physicality of listening to music, poetry, and religious incantation, and the shivers down the spine [that] are often associated with tears’. The book’s heart is its two chapters on neurotheology, the author treading carefully in a field with ‘few hard and fast data . . . and [where] most writers . . . recycle the same results from a small number of investigators’.

This scholarly, yet provocative, book from an insightful, observant neurologist, perhaps inevitably written more using the linguistic precision of the left hemisphere than the poetry of the right, is rich with thought-provoking ideas on the unique human characteristics that Trimble calls the ‘seven Ls’ – Language, Laudation, Lying, Laughter, Lachrymation, Lyric and Love – each, as he says, ‘quintessentially driven by the right hemisphere’.

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