

***Surgical Limits: The Life of Gordon Murray.* By Shelley McKellar. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. x + 272 p. ISBN 0-8020-3739-9 \$45.)**

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***Surgical Limits: The Life of Gordon Murray.* By Shelley McKellar.**  
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This book is the biography of an important Canadian surgeon, Gordon Murray, who lived from 1894 to 1976. He became famous for his bold surgical endeavors that were celebrated by the popular press until his false claims of therapeutic success later on finally cost him his reputation. Medical historian Shelley McKellar traces Murray's trajectory, starting with his childhood and professional training in Canada and Britain and his experience in the First World War. After surgical training in England, he started his career in Toronto in 1926. His first medical achievement was the introduction of the anticoagulant substance heparin into vascular surgery. His prowess in vascular surgery led him to become one of the pioneers of heart surgery in the 1940s and 1950s. He made it to the title pages of newspapers as the savior of "blue babies"—i.e. children born with a malformation of the heart that interferes with the normal flow of

blood through the hearts and lungs. At the same time he developed an artificial kidney which, however successful, was soon to be made obsolete by other competing models. For his research Murray was able to get his own private laboratory funded in 1949. This move made him independent of the University of Toronto with which he was in conflict from early on.

From the start Murray's difficult personality made it hard for him to cooperate successfully with others. His life is full of smaller and larger professional squabbles, power struggles driven by his unsatisfied, and maybe even insatiable, thirst for recognition. From 1950 onwards, Murray started to treat patients with an anti-cancer serum that he had developed on his own. Trying to find an immunological cure for cancer was at that time already a lost cause. Others had been trying to do so for decades and had failed. Murray was as naïve on the technical aspects of immunology as he was about measuring the effects of his treatment. Lacking a basis in animal experiments, his therapeutic experiments were also ethically questionable. His last big effort at leaving his mark on medical history would cost him what had remained of his good reputation. Already in his seventies, Murray claimed to be able to cure paraplegia by inducing severed spinal cords nerves to grow together again. His claims turned out to be false. The way he got into this awkward situation and the manner he handled it shows how isolated this once celebrated surgeon had become from the reality of modern scientific medicine.

McKellar offers a very personal account of this intriguing story. Most of her attention is turned towards the protagonist, Murray, and his feelings, motivations, etc. To get to this level of description she artfully uses a whole array of archival sources, articles, books and interviews. Through this approach she manages to create a vivid and dense picture of events, as seen from Murray's perspective. Murray's quirky personality is also McKellar's principal explanation for his successes and failures. This is probably an inherent feature of any biographical approach, but it limits the explanatory power of her account in some respects. In many places one could have added another explanatory level. Thus, for example, one could try to understand Murray's limited success with his artificial kidney by analyzing the conditions necessary for other artificial kidneys to actually become the standard models on an international level. A more generalized approach would also help to explain better why Murray's other attempts at medical innovation either failed or succeeded. In any case, technical innovation could have been the general sub-theme of this book, but it is not being addressed in a systematic and theory-guided manner.

However, this was not the author's aim in the first place. She wanted to write an accessible biography of a great but controversial surgeon, and she is very successful in delivering this kind of account. While following Murray's life story, the reader learns a lot about twentieth century medical history. For all of Murray's diverse projects McKelley gives a competent historical survey. In addition, she patiently explains the technical intricacies of Murray's diverse endeavors, and she does it in a language that makes the most complicated medical facts easy to understand. Through her lively style she also succeeds in creating a certain level of suspense, especially when relating crucial events or episodes, such as the first use of the artificial kidney, in a detailed and engaged manner that is worthy of a thriller. All in all, this is a fun book to read for everyone interested in the life of this remarkable Canadian pioneer in surgery.

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