

Autumn Book Review

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You're Looking Very Well - Lewis Wolpert (Faber and Faber, 2011)

It may alarm you to learn that nobody in the USA has died of old age since 1951. In fact, it has been outlawed. The explanation lies with a government edict concerning the wording on death certificates. For sixty years, American physicians have been encouraged to investigate causes of death in the elderly with a degree of rigour. "Old age" is not deemed a satisfactory biological account of a death. The ageing process, and its relationship to illness, has been thoroughly anatomised. Subsequently, gains in life expectancy have boosted the ranks of the retired, and the implications of this great demographic shift have become hot political news. This book is a response, and a timely one too, to the current state of understanding of the scientific and cultural phenomena that constitute "knocking on a bit".

Professor Wolpert, retired from an illustrious career in developmental biology, and newly finding himself an octogenarian, has written an engaging overview of various aspects of ageing. His style is to amass facts, to display a hoard of information in clear prose, and not to dwell too long on fine analysis. He is a cautious optimist about the ageing process; a gloomy statistic on the prevalence of age-related cognitive impairment will be balanced by a quote from a study extolling the levels of happiness in seventy-four-year olds (significantly higher than in forty-four-year olds, it turns out). Wolpert's study of depression, *Malignant Sadness*, published in 1999, showed his formidable ability to describe with impartiality his own distressing experiences of the disease. Similarly, he is well placed to write honestly about the physical decline and the emotional challenges facing the old. He acknowledges that his own depressive illness was exacerbated by his impending retirement at age sixty-five and by anxiety about a heart condition, a common pattern seen in patients with late-onset depression.

At seventy, a man will hear
An echo of all nothings struck
By his own fear.¹

Wolpert's gift for explanation, and his scientific curiosity, combine most effectively when he describes the evolutionary and molecular principles of ageing. The ability to repair cellular damage seems to underlie the variety of lifespans allotted to different species. Natural selection promotes the organisms that protect the reliability of their germ cells; this allows them to pass on their genetic information intact. The body's somatic cells – everything but the gonads – have no such evolutionary pressures in place, and are allowed to degrade once reproduction has been achieved. Slovenly cellular housekeeping causes the woes of age. About a quarter of us have a gene, APOE4, that predisposes to the formation of neurofibrillary tangles of amyloid, "the curlicues and hopscotch grids / unfurling in your brain"² that cause Alzheimer's dementia. The question remains as to how successfully advances in medicine will counterbalance the genetically pre-ordained degradations of ageing. One theory suggests that even abolishing all disease would add only twenty years to the current life expectancy of around eighty years. This suggests that progressively increasing longevity may be impossible, given the disposable nature of the body, this quintessence of dust that evolution has laid on for us.

There will always be a market for those who promise eternal life, and a more profitable one still for those who offer us eternal youth. The quotation from bio-ethicist Leon Kass, concerning the desire to prolong youthfulness as "a childish and narcissistic wish incompatible with devotion to posterity" is rousing. His message is that to try to weasel out of decrepitude, whether it be through calorific reduction, low-level alcohol ingestion or religious devotion, is to transform oneself into a selfish parasite. Tough luck if you have just booked yourself in for a spa mini-break.

Should you remain resolute in your search for a panacea, it seems that carrying a bit of weight is the easiest way to mask facial wrinkles. The \$57 billion industry of cosmetic anti-ageing products offers many other ideas, mostly affordable, many more or less guaranteed to knock miles off your clock.

An unintended irony arises when, defending the abilities and energies of older leaders, Wolpert references “the president of Egypt, Hozni Mubarak, [who] at the age of 81, has been in power for 28 years”. Now aged 83, the bed-bound Mubarak has been deposed and indicted by the youthful Arab Spring. Does this prove that despotism is a young man’s game, and stepping back from power politics is the only sensible course of action in one’s ninth decade? King Lear, given his time again, might disagree. There is a serious related point, concerning the increasing tensions between generations. Populations of working-age adults will, increasingly, struggle to raise enough taxes to support ever-growing numbers of pensioners. The influence of the elderly at the ballot boxes will also swell, giving democratically elected governments less incentive to rebalance the books in favour of the young. More positively, age discrimination, and the scandals of poor care of vulnerable older people, could be reduced if campaigning were to redirect the political agenda. Energetic retirees should turn themselves into expert lobbyists as a matter of urgency.

The prospect of a society where the elderly have, through sheer weight of numbers, shed their historically apolitical role, and are directly competing for resources with the young, remains far-fetched. The recent report from the Commission on Funding of Care and Support³, chaired by Andrew Dilnot, proposed an approach to socialising the welfare of the elderly in England, at a reasonable cost to an overburdened state. It will be interesting to see whether the report finds the government receptive to its recommendations, or if it is dismissed as

unaffordable. The Scottish model of elderly social care – free at the point of need – may remain as a tempting reason for emigration from an England where many of the elderly are consigned to penury and lonely decline.

a long life’s mass
coming to rest, a settling that churns up
grief in a rounding cloud.⁴

The ability to control the ending of one’s life is the most live of ethical questions. Choosing where one wishes to die has become feasible, with the establishment of sensitive and responsive hospice care pathways. The logical next step, choosing when and how one is to die, is still under debate. Wolpert is a supporter of euthanasia, but he has not chosen to use this book as a platform for his beliefs. Given the core relevance of this issue to the lived experience of growing old, this feels like a missed opportunity. Perhaps he is keeping his powder dry for another book. Here’s hoping, and may many productive years of provocative writing lie ahead of him.

Wolpert uses many quotations from poems and novels to illustrate his points. The Forward Book of Poetry 2011, published by Faber & Faber, is a collection of the poems short-listed for the annual prize. It contains several poems with a theme of ageing and dying, the sources of the extracts that punctuate this review. This last extract, catching at the vagaries of memory, is by a poet who didn’t make old bones, and died on the Western Front in 1917.

I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember ⁵

- 1 John Fuller – Three Times (p77, Forward Book of Poetry 2011)
- 2 Jo Shapcott – Somewhat Unravelling (p32, Forward Book of Poetry 2011)
- 3 <http://www.dilnotcommission.dh.gov.uk/>
- 4 Sam Willetts–Trick (p48, Forward Book of Poetry 2011)
- 5 Edward Thomas – Old Man (Selected Poems, Faber & Faber, 2011)