

## Media Review

### Film Review: *Walking in the Footsteps of Others*

*Walking in the Footsteps of Others*, Professor Andrew Williams's third film about children's care throughout the nearly three centuries of history at the Northampton General Hospital (NGH), is both ambitious and wide-ranging for a short documentary, though it certainly makes no claim to be an exhaustive view of the subject. Instead, it foregrounds the role of young members of the NGH Hospital Archive Club, the so-called 'Little Professors' (and mostly very engaging), as browsers and seekers within the hospital's extensive physical archive. Professor Williams is himself the curator of the hospital's archive as well as a consultant paediatrician to many if not all of the Little Professors. We viewers follow these junior researchers as they explore the records (both print and digital) and artefacts held within the archive.

The archive at NGH covers the 275 years of the hospital's operation, and *Walking in the Footsteps of Others* offers a dip into the wealth of information regarding children's health care during that history. The Little Professors begin by looking into the hospital's very first child patient, Thomasin Grace, and tracing her care in the wards as well as documentary evidence about the succeeding course of her life. These data points are used as opportunities to discuss what life was like in a mid-eighteenth century hospital ward, and how that experience differs from life in the same hospital now. These sorts of comparisons and contrasts are general throughout this and indeed all of Professor Williams's films.

From this beginning, *Walking in the Footsteps of Others* touches on a wide variety of topics, including the hospital's herb and vegetable gardens, patient nutrition, the hospital's role in safeguarding children from harm and neglect, the overall costs of the hospital's operation (there is a nice self-aware bit about 'everyone's favorite topic, health economics'), the gradual professionalisation of the nursing staff, the establishment of a fund for the care of local indigent children, and the history of smallpox and other vaccinations at NGH. Along the way, the Little Professors share archival films of hospital operations from the 1930s through to the 1960s, and they highlight the growth of innovative services like care for premature infants and treatments for jaundice in newborns, as well as the Childhood Development Centre, which opened in 1974.

Professor Williams's most recent film is a manifestly more ambitious undertaking than his previous two films, which I have also reviewed here. It is both longer and has a larger cast than the earlier short subjects. Though this film does touch on information presented in those films (e.g. the case of Thomasin Grace and the establishment of the Northampton Crippled Children's Fund, among others), this new documentary never simply re-uses footage from them, opting instead to find new ways of conveying this archival material for both returning and new audiences. *Walking in the Footsteps of Others* even goes so far as to incorporate a hand puppet (Priscilla the puppet) into the film as a friendlier substitute for an authoritative narrator. It also makes good use of Liam Ruse's guitar skills on the soundtrack. However, it is also the case that this newest film feels less focused than the previous two. For instance, the viewer is never presented with a clear thesis or guiding principle for the film and is consequently forced to produce one of

their own. This presents a particular challenge for documentary media, particularly a half-hour film ostensibly aimed at a youth audience. The more material on offer, the stronger the organising framework needs to be to allow the viewer to correlate the contents in a meaningful way. Without such a framework (for example, a narrative or a question), the resulting film is apt to meander through its presentation, inevitably straining the attention of its audience. The increased ambition evident in *Walking in the Footsteps of Others* is a welcome development, and I am confident that the next film will work even harder to direct the viewers' attention in productive and meaningful ways.

*Walking in the Footsteps of Others*, like Professor Williams's previous films, will be of interest to anyone with wide-ranging interests in children's health and welfare, especially in the United Kingdom. If you have yet to view any of Williams's films, I would recommend beginning with both of the previous short documentaries. *The First Day* (2015) is a short film about the very early history of paediatric care at Northampton General Hospital in the mid-eighteenth century, and *Now Walks Like Others* (2019) is a film about the history and legacy of the Northampton Cripple Children's Fund (NCCF). Both of these films are available for viewing on YouTube.

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