These two works, at first glance, share little in common. A History of the Western General Hospital, Edinburgh (WGH) traces the evolution of this medical institution from its poorhouse roots while St. Mary’s, Hamilton: A Social History 1846-1996 offers an account of the development of a local Roman Catholic parish. However different in approach and subject, both studies, to varying degrees, share the limitations that are all too common with either in-house or commemorative institutional studies, namely a focus on local institutional milestones at the expense of reasoned analysis. The effective study of any social institution must take the context of the local community into account. Buildings are dependent upon community relationships for sustenance. Thus, obtaining a sense of place is of primary importance in developing an understanding of both the institution and the constituency it serves.
"A History of the Western General Hospital," is written by two health care professionals, who seemingly lack familiarity with the rigours of the historical method. This study, which is really two works in one, is a standard great men and events history that lacks any interpretive discussion. The first half examines the evolution of the WGH up to and beyond the implementation of government controlled hospital schemes that came with the passage of the National Health Services Act in 1948 while the second half deals with the evolution of specific departments within the institution. To their credit, the authors do a credible job in examining the impact of the Poor Laws on the development of the institution. Much of the ensuing discussion, however, takes place in a vacuum. There is no account of the larger forces responsible for the many different configurations that the institution was to assume before emerging as the Western General in 1932.

The rationale behind the transformation of this structure from poorhouse to military hospital to modern teaching hospital receives short shrift as does the whole question of patient life. Rather than presenting a superficial overview of the WGH as is done here, a broader perspective that incorporates the advent of scientific medicine, the various political agendas at work, the prevailing social conventions that made the hospital an acceptable place to seek care when ill, and the role of the press in facilitating this transformation would have helped to place the WGH in a larger perspective. After
all, the institution was shaped to a large extent by both medicine and the evolution of Edinburgh and the failure to consider the impact that this community had on the hospital is a significant limitation of this work. The study is further marred by sloppy production. The book has segments of text that appear twice in the text (pp. 56, 73 and 72, 148) errors in punctuation and a prose that features one sentence paragraphs, abrupt endings and poor transitions. While this work has far too many shortcomings to be of any use to the specialist interested in hospital historiography, the work will probably be of some appeal to those individuals with an association to the institution. Certainly the many excellent photographs of both the structure and select individuals will refresh memories of yore.

The second study on St. Mary's, Hamilton was published to coincide with its sesquicentennial anniversary and features a collection of essays that strive to explore selected features of parish development. As is to be expected from any collective effort, the quality of the essays vary widely. Martin J. Mitchell's two essays present a very lucid overview into the difficulties of establishing a Catholic mission in a predominantly Protestant land. Making effective use of Father Michael Condon's diaries, he demonstrates the critical role this individual played in the establishment of the Hamilton mission during his tenure as parish priest between 1850-1859. The work also contains an article by Mary McHugh that outlines, in a rather narrow fashion, the development of Catholic education in the years leading up to the passage of
the 1918 (Scotland) Education Act. James Douglas, in a separate piece, haphazardly details the architectural development of the church, a task that would have been facilitated by the use of photographic evidence.

The study concludes with a series of three essays composed by Joseph M. Bradley, that deal with contemporary social and political issues that affect the current church. To be sure, Bradley’s work on morality, inter-marriage and a novel piece on the Italian community make for interesting reading. One must question, however, the methodology as much of the evidence is based upon a highly subjective survey of parish members. The fact that only a small minority of parishioners were consulted raises questions about the representativeness of the sample group. To what extent do their views correspond with those who did not participate in the survey? While the sample of opinion provides evidence to support the characterization of a parish that is “clearly middle class” in orientation, the question remains as to whether these parishioners are indeed typical of the broader church community. Moreover, the larger question as to whether or not St. Mary’s church is characteristic of the Catholic community in Scotland remains unanswered. Indeed, it is apparent that the representativeness of either study for understanding the function of the hospital or parish will not be accurately ascertained without further study or comparison to similar structures in other regions.