Preface

My interest in the history of medical sociability goes back a long way. I first came across the subject in the medical history seminars and master’s courses I followed at the universities of Leuven and Minnesota between 2008 and 2010 – the latter training only made possible by a generous fellowship of the Belgian American Educational Foundation. In those years, the idea took shape to study nineteenth-century medical societies as spaces of scientific practice rather than as professional organizations. Thanks to a doctoral fellowship of the Flanders Research Foundation (2010–2014), I was able to put this idea into practice and start a research project titled ‘Scientific Medicine in the City: The Scientific Practices and Urban Embeddedness of Medical Societies in Belgium, 1830–1914.’ A postdoctoral fellowship of the Special Research Funds of the University of Leuven (2015) allowed me to conduct additional research (e.g. on the networks and publishing practices of these societies).

I was given the opportunity to present this research at many venues in Belgium, the Netherlands and elsewhere. My work has benefited enormously from the comments I received at these meetings and my gratitude goes out to all those who took an interest in my work. Two people merit a special word of thanks. Kaat Wils has encouraged me to pursue my research from the very start. She proved a dedicated supervisor of my doctoral research. My conversations with her have shaped my understanding of nineteenth-century science and medicine, and she has been a meticulous reader of all the chapters in this book. Frank Huisman’s sharp analytical comments, conceptual advice and apt literature suggestions kept me on track. I also thank him for enabling me to spend several months at the Descartes Centre for the History and
Philosophy of the Sciences in Utrecht, a visit during which I benefited from the advice of Wijnand Mijnhardt and Bert Theunissen. Several colleagues have taken a special interest in my work by commenting on chapters at different stages. I am grateful in particular to Michael Brown, Raf De Bont, Josephine Hoegaerts, Matthias Meirlaen, Evert Peeters, Jo Tollebeek, Jacob Steere-Williams, Truus Van Bosstraeten, Geert Vanpaemel and Karel Velle. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of their help. Without a doubt, many of the concepts I have used in this book to analyze how science was practiced in medical societies are the product of my conversations with them. Upon reading this book, I hope they will find their advice reflected in the way I have paid attention to performance, to (unwritten) codes of conduct, to the construction of ‘expertise’ or to the mechanisms of commemoration in nineteenth-century scientific sociability.

The Cultural History since 1750 Research Group at the University of Leuven proved a stimulating context for my research. Studying medical history amidst cultural historians who are working on topics such as the history of universities, museums, shopping or historical culture – an exchange stimulated by monthly seminars to discuss work in progress – proved a constant reminder of the social and cultural milieu in which physicians were embedded. If I originally studied the urban nature of medical societies in terms of geography and the presence of scientific infrastructure in the city, such as libraries and universities, I came to understand – inspired by this shared tradition of cultural history – this urban embeddedness of medical societies much more in terms of physicians’ participation in an urban-based civil society. These insights allowed me to open up my research and make links with contemporary political and historical culture. They are the product not only of formal seminars, but also of many informal chats in the office or over lunch and during several leisure trips to museums, for which I want to thank Bram Van Nieuwenhuyze, Liesbet Nys and Elwin Hofman, among many other colleagues from the Leuven History Department. A parallel project on the history of anatomy in Belgium enabled me to discuss my findings with experts in medical history on an almost daily basis. While these exchanges have left their traces throughout the book, this is particularly the case for the chapter on networks and collections, in which I explore how anatomists used societies to gather specimens. I therefore want to thank Veronique Deblon,
Tinne Claes, Jolien Gijbels, Pieter Huistra and Sokhieng Au in particular. As my research advanced, a certain esprit de corps grew among us as medical historians in Belgium, a sentiment that was reinforced as we teamed up with colleagues from the Free University of Brussels to establish the Network of Belgian Medical History. Its meetings offered valuable opportunities to discuss work in progress, for which I want to thank in particular Renaud Bardez, Valérie Leclercq, Julie De Ganck, Kenneth Bertrams and Benoît Majerus.

When doing the research for this book, I spent many solitary days browsing through medical periodicals, many of which are preserved in the rich collections of the university libraries of Leuven and Ghent. The staff members of these libraries helped me locate the right titles, find missing volumes and proved flexible in bringing out materials again, sometimes on short notice. I want to thank them also for their assistance in preparing the illustrations for this book. The published meeting reports of societies, the key sources of this study, proved difficult to master. Written in French and in a somewhat high-flown style, they are typical of Belgian intellectual and political life in the nineteenth century. In this book, I chose to translate all citations into English to improve readability. I am grateful to Michelle Ostyn, with whom I followed evening courses in French for several years, for her help in translating some of the most difficult French citations in this book into English.

The editors and reviewers of Manchester University Press made valuable suggestions to improve and clarify my argument and to better present my research to an international audience, of which many are unfamiliar with Belgian history. It took an outsider’s view to make me realize the importance of Belgium’s status as a young, developing nation-state in the nineteenth century for my research. Readers will hopefully find themselves quickly up to speed after reading the introduction and the first chapter, in which I have tried to sketch Belgium’s early political history in relation to developments in the medical field.

Friends and family, finally, were equally essential to this book. My parents Katelijne and Hans, grandfather René, brother Jasper and his wife Tine as well as my family-in-law Ronny, Hilde, Steven and Stephanie never ceased to support me and have listened to my stories about this research with remarkable patience. My final word of thanks goes to my partner Miranda. She has witnessed the genesis of this study from close by. I dedicate this book to her.