

## Book Reviews

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MARY E. FISSELL, *Patients, power and the poor in eighteenth-century Bristol*, Cambridge History of Medicine, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. xi, 266, illus., £35.00, \$54.50 (0-521-49947-3).

This is a model of the local case-study approach to social history. Though grounded in an impressive range and volume of local archives, it is internationally comparative and thoroughly unantiquarian. It could stand as a primer for many of the concerns and questions which have preoccupied social historians of medicine of the early modern period in recent years.

Dr Fissell offers a contextually-orientated account of poor relief and medical provision at local level and an exploration of the changing cultural resonance of the body. The long eighteenth century is presented as a period which saw attitudes towards the body changing markedly. Dr Fissell traces an evolution from circumstances in which “everyone [was] their own physician”—where the language of sickness was drawn from a common stock of images and meanings inscribed in the body—to a situation in which the poor had their bodies administered to in ways rooted in elite and savant culture far beyond their ken. The story is one of the rise of scientific medicine clearly, but instrumental in this change too were the hospital and the medical profession. The hospital is viewed as a place in which the bodies of the poor were confined and contained for social rather than medical reasons—social discipline, mercantilistic concern with a healthy, prosperous and industrious population, and the sustenance of reassuring symbolic values and sociability for the social elite. Over the eighteenth century, however, medical functions came increasingly to prevail over the the social ones: from being “a remedy for debauchery, extravagance, cursing, swearing and contempt of authority” (p. 85), the institution becomes a place in which, with a marked disregard for patient sensitivities, the bodies of the poor are handed over to clinically-aware surgeons—a place, as Dr Fissell puts it, where “medical men sold instruction to other medical men, and patients became teaching aids rather than consumers of medicine” (p. 170).

Though much of the story is familiar, it is told with an exceptionally rich savour of local Bristolian detail. It is also worthy of remark that the story is perhaps more familiar to continental than British historians. The social tasks of the Bristol hospital look surprisingly like those of a continental Hôpital Général, while the trajectory of progressive medicalization recalls Foucault-like “birth of the clinic” arguments. Quite apart from its other merits, this volume should sound a healthy counter-blast against facile acceptance of alleged English exceptionalism.

Colin Jones, University of Exeter

JAMES HARVEY YOUNG, *American health quackery: collected essays*, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. xii, 299, illus., £22.50, \$24.95 (0-691-04782-0).

The special quality of mind that makes James Harvey Young the doyen of quack historians shines forth bright and clear in this collection of essays, most of which have been published over the last twenty-five years. As in his earlier *The toadstool millionaires: a social history of patent medicines in America before federal regulation* (Princeton University Press, 1961) and *The medical messiahs: a social history of health quackery in twentieth-century America* (Princeton University Press, 1967), Young commences from the rock-solid conviction that the medical merchants he surveys are downright frauds, tricksters and swindlers, little better than criminals. Not for him a trendy relativism, in which health and medicine are discursively constructed, sickness largely psychosomatic, and cures mainly due to the placebo effect. Young’s quacks are, so to speak, *bona fide* cheats. Yet, through a deadpan Olympian style, laced with rich irony, Young is simultaneously able, while telling the history of charlatanism, to capture the almost irresistible logic of their appeal and the relentlessness of their success. It is part of Young’s vision to assume that the great American public eagerly colluded in being duped, indeed that there have been powerful traits in the American mind—individualism, optimism, a certain innocence, the championship of liberty fuelled by a bitter hatred of professional monopoly—that positively backed the huckster. In one of the many delightful quack adverts here

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reproduced, Columbus's first sighting of America is a billboard boosting Ayar's Sarsaparilla. Certainly, quacks have always proved adroit at exploiting American sensibilities (angelic infants loom large) and pandering to particularly New World fears, not least that of growing old. Early this century, Duffy's Pure Malt Therapeutic Whiskey widely featured the 106-year-old Mrs Nancy Tighe of Lafayette, Indiana, pictured in the bloom of health, declaring, "I really don't feel like I'm a day over 60. Thanks to Duffy's Pure Malt Whiskey". (But if fears remain the same, certain attitudes change: imagine anyone confessing in an ad these days to feeling sixty!)

Much analysis is decanted into Young's delightfully told stories of Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, Dalley's Magical Pain Extractor, Germ-a-way, Grove's Tasteless [sic] Chill Tonic ("Makes Children and Adults as Fat as Pigs"), and many other preposterous products including Dr Porter's Healing Oil. And amusement at their hyperbole sugars a more serious purpose, for Young is no less anxious to expose contemporary frauds (laetrile and so forth), including the opportunists cashing in on today's AIDS crisis.

What remains tantalizing, here as in all of Young's writings, is his historical perspective on the regulars. In his writings they commonly assume a certain sanctified air by virtue of the verbal lashings Young administers to their foes, the mountebanks, food adulterators and ignoramuses. Were he to train his probing mind and ironic disposition onto the deans of the profession, would they escape whipping?

Be that as it may, the bubbling delight of Young's essays derives from the veneer of seriousness with which he treats topics that would be farcical, had they not jeopardized the health and lives of millions and involved some of the longest-running and most money-spinning con-tricks in history. The fact that Young does not even need to explore the grey area where medical folklore overlaps with medical fakery, but is able to target his attention upon such a vast number of fringe and freaky health fads that were arrant and shameless frauds, itself affords a fascinating commentary upon the particularly American circus of the sick trade.

Roy Porter, Wellcome Institute

TERENCE RANGER and PAUL SLACK (eds), *Epidemics and ideas: essays on the historical perception of pestilence*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. ix, 346, £35, \$49.95 (0-521-40276-X).

This volume contains twelve chapters, eleven of which represent revisions of papers presented at the Past and Present Conference on 'Epidemics and Ideas' in September of 1989 at Exeter College, Oxford. Chronologically they span human history from the great plague of Athens of 430 BC (treated by James Longrigg) to Virginia Berridge's essay on the AIDS epidemic in the United Kingdom of the 1980s. Geographically they are centred in Europe, but range from India and the African continent on one side of the world to Hawaii on the other.

All of the chapters focus on epidemic disease and the reactions they elicited—reactions which some may find startlingly similar over the course of the 2,400 or so years, and across the various cultures and societies under scrutiny. Filthy conditions were usually viewed as spawning an epidemic, although (and not necessarily a contradiction) the supernatural was frequently suspected of visiting punishment on erring humankind. It was generally understood that the pestilence spread from person to person, yet notions of contagion continued to be fuzzy in the public mind right up to the present AIDS epidemic. Flight was a widespread response, as was identifying and blaming disease carriers, with foreigners and the poor the usual targets (although, as Lawrence Conrad makes clear, Islamic societies that tended to view epidemics fatalistically constituted a major exception to both flight and scapegoating). Understandably the scapegoats in turn tended to view epidemics as the outcome of plots by the establishment to thin their numbers. In the midst of widespread morbidity and mortality some turned away from their religions; others embraced them more firmly than ever, while still others headed in new directions, as editor Terence Ranger demonstrates in his discussion of prophetic responses to epidemic disease in eastern and southern Africa.

The chapters, then, are intended as "case studies" of the ways in which peoples, during various times and in various cultures, interpreted their plagues, or "constructed" them. In his introductory