

Book Reviews

Roger Cooter, Mark Harrison and Steve Sturdy (eds), *War, medicine and modernity*, Thrupp, Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 1998, pp. vi, 258, £45.00 (0-7509-1801-2).

This collection, the editors believe, is the first volume to bring together the themes of war, medicine *and* modernity. By contrast to cultural historians for whom “modernity—and modernism—becomes little more than a prelude to the invention of post-modernity”, theirs is the modernity of Max Weber rather than of Igor Stravinsky—a nexus of government, bureaucracy, the military, and the professions.

The clarity and vigour with which the editors set out the theme only underline the failure of many of their contributors to address it. Bertrand Taithe on the Red Cross in the Franco–Prussian War and Molly Sutphen on the Cape Town plague of 1901, are fascinating, but belong more to “humanity in warfare” and colonial medicine respectively; while Kimberly Jensen and Penny Starns write about the impact of the world wars on American women doctors and British nurses in terms of the gender politics of medicine. The book’s governing idea is, however, fully realized in five important essays on aspects of First World War medicine which have been overshadowed by the recent emphasis on “shell-shock”. Steve Sturdy traces the involvement of British physiologists in chemical warfare research, “as much an organizational as an intellectual or technical achievement”. Roger Cooter elegantly argues that in the Great War the ancient art of malingering was modernized by advances in medical technology, such as testing, and then “psychologised”—but only by the psychologically-inclined elite; front-line medical officers continued to treat “skrimshankers” with old-fashioned toughness. Expertly synthesizing much recent work, Mathew Thomson examines the handling of mental deficiency during the war and Lutz Sauerteig compares the policies of the different armies to venereal

disease. It is good to have Joel Howell’s 1985 paper on ‘Soldier’s heart’ reprinted; but not quite good enough: papers by Oglesby Paul and Allen Christophers and a substantial post-Gulf War literature have moved the subject on.

The major disappointment is the coverage of the Second World War. There is nothing at all on the Germans’ use of drugs and psychology—omitted, too, from Berg and Cocks’ *Medicine and modernity*. On Allied countermeasures, Peter Neushul capably retells the story of penicillin with some vivid new details, and Joanna Bourke takes a wayward stab at psychiatrists’ efforts to discipline fear. Bourke’s method, as in her *Dismembering the male*, is to glean material from a wide variety of sources and contexts and thrust it into a simplistic, ahistorical mould. She scarcely penetrates the surface of the subject. If “psychiatry conformed effortlessly to the military demands of rationalization, standardization, and hierarchical discipline” (p. 232), why were Churchill and General Marshall so unhappy with its role? Why did Patton strike the soldiers on Sicily? Why did Will Menninger admit that his doctors had failed to understand the differences between military and civilian practice? There is also a revealing howler. M Ralph Kaufman was not “the divisional surgeon on Guadalcanal” (p. 233), but a prominent Freudian who became Consultant Psychiatrist in the Pacific a year after that campaign was over. Kaufman’s wartime career—elaborately set out in the volume cited but evidently not *read* by Bourke—embodies the dilemmas of military psychiatry. JH Hexter once accused Christopher Hill of “card-index history”. This is scanner history.

Overall, the volume justifies its hefty price; but is hardly the last word on the subject.

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