

Book Reviews

JOHN D. STOECKLE and GEORGE ABBOTT WHITE, *Plain pictures of plain doctoring. Vernacular expression in New Deal medicine and photography*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, MIT Press, 1985, 4to, pp. xxiii, 250, illus., £21.50.

EMANOEL LEE, *To the bitter end. A photographic history of the Boer War 1899–1902*, London, Viking, 1985, 4to, pp. xii, 226, illus., £12.95.

Books on the history of medicine, with photographs adorning the text, are common enough. *Plain pictures of plain doctoring*, however, is in a different league, and is the most stimulating book to contain medical photographs that I have ever read. This is because the pictures do not illustrate the text, rather the text is there to illuminate the pictures. Between 1935 and 1942, a small number of photographers working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an agency established under Roosevelt's New Deal, produced a quarter of a million pictures of life in the United States. Under the direction of Roy Stryker, an astonishing number of immensely talented photographers, such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, emerged. A small number of the pictures these photographers took were of the FSA's pre-paid health care plan. Eighty of these pictures are the subject of this book. All the images are undoubtedly masterpieces of modern photography, but this book is much more than a simple celebration of the camera, or medicine for that matter. The authors have attempted to read the photographs as texts, rather than naïvely using them as windows into the past. They have asked why the photographers took this picture rather than that and why they composed it in such and such a way. In other words, they have worried about what the *message* was that the pictures were used to convey. Most of the pictures are of intimate patient-doctor encounters, usually between people who are obviously poor and physicians who are represented as technically capable but caring. Using iconographical tools and social histories of the thirties, the authors convincingly show that the photographs were constructed to condemn the activities that gave rise to rural poverty, but also to applaud the interventive policies of the FSA and, more generally, the New Deal. What the authors do not consider, however, is the role of the medical men and women in these pictures. How much say did they have in the representations? What sort of an image of medicine as a profession was being transmitted here? To be fair, this was not their primary concern and would have required a great deal more work, in particular comparing these pictures with other images of the period. In a way, this omission underlines the authors' point, photographs are not simple documents, but are replete with messages that can only be deciphered in context. To have done it in part, especially in such a well-produced volume, is worthy of much praise indeed.

Emanuel Lee's book on the Boer War lies on the other side of the divide which Stoeckle and White have crossed. The Boer War coincided with the production of easily portable roll-film cameras, and Lee's volume is built around a very impressive collection of everyday pictures taken by a large number of participants in the fighting, both Boer and British. Alongside these pictures is a textual history of the war, but Lee makes no attempt to analyse the photographs, to ask what their takers were attempting to say with them. The pictures are dumb witnesses, and, not surprisingly, the reader will put words into their mouths, probably the wrong ones. This large methodological caveat aside, however, this is a very *readable* book. It is largely military history, with some sketching-in of broader political and social issues. It is, however, a military history which is extremely sensitive to the everyday detail of the lives of ordinary soldiers. It is full of well-chosen extracts from war diaries, one of which contains the finest piece of understatement I have ever read. Frederick Porter, a regular medical officer recorded the case of "Poor Stanley", who arrived delirious and with gangrene of the leg. Stanley was told forthwith "he would die in a few hours and . . . nothing could save him". Porter recorded, "Up to this time he felt he was going to get well, so that it must have come as a great blow to him" (p.22). There is much medical detail in this volume, relating to both military surgery and the malnutrition of the concentration camps, a British invention, intended to support dispossessed Boers, which went frighteningly awry.

Christopher Lawrence
Wellcome Institute