

Book Reviews

morbidity and mortality rates to aged morbidity and mortality and from the infectious illness regime to the chronic degenerative one, from illness as setback to illness as career, a generation earlier than among the lower classes. And as the *Black Report* and its recent supplements have shown, that gap persists. Riley's work, with its strong actuarial foundation, is an important aid to probing the evolution of these disparities.

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TERRA ZIPORYN, *Disease in the popular American press: the case of diphtheria, typhoid fever, and syphilis, 1870–1920*, Contributions in Medical Studies 24, New York, Westport, and London, Greenwood Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. xi, 192, £37.95.

In *Disease in the popular American press*, Terra Ziporyn addresses the critical question of how the public knows about scientific and medical issues. She focuses on public knowledge about three diseases: diphtheria, typhoid fever, and syphilis, exploring how information about these diseases was disseminated in the popular press from 1870 to 1920.

She begins with a brief social history of the popularization of science, observing the importance of the contemporary social context in shaping media coverage of scientific information. She highlights a fundamental and persistent problem in the popularization of scientific medicine—the inherent conflict in the philosophy of journalism and the norms of science.

In this context, she examines the coverage of each disease against a background of the technical information available at the time. The information conveyed to the public through popular magazines, she finds, is coloured by social stereotypes and cultural beliefs as well as medical details about the disease, its vectors of transmission, and therapeutic measures. The very quantity of coverage reflects social variables. In the case of diphtheria, the press showed little interest in this “disease of the innocent” until the discovery of the antitoxin that provided the possibility of a therapy. Typhoid, because of its epidemic proportions, was far more newsworthy. The popular coverage of syphilis was, of course, shaped by its definition as a moral as well as a medical problem. Social taboos limited its mention in polite society. Yet there was considerable awareness of the need for popular education. Many of the articles that did appear in the popular press had a moralistic tone emphasizing the importance of living chastely. Ziporyn traces the relative emphasis on moral, social, and medical perspectives in different periods to find that most magazines, concerned with righteousness, scrupulously avoided explicit medical detail.

Not surprisingly, Ziporyn finds that the public learned little about science or medicine from reading about disease. Concerned with relevance, certainty, and optimism, writers covered disease for its moral or socio-economic implications, and especially for its importance to the reader's daily life.

Contemporary science writing often suffers from a similar concern with relevance. But many journalists today take off from the public's considerable interest in health and disease to explain aspects of scientific medicine. Clearly the press coverage of AIDS has provided a great deal of scientific information, both about the nature of the virus and the technicalities of various therapeutic measures. But one must ask whether the popular press is in any case the appropriate vehicle for teaching about science. Is it not realistic for popular writers to focus on the relevance of particular diseases for their readers? Can one really expect much more?

This is an interesting history of medical popularization, but written, unfortunately, much in the style of a thesis. The rich and colourful material one finds in the media coverage of disease could have been conveyed far more readably, making her argument far more convincing.

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