

## Book Reviews

by my students as a lonely, therapeutic humanist in the midst of hundreds of scientific medics, a solo historian waging a solitary campaign against a menacing and self-congratulatory establishment that they nevertheless admire and seek to join” (p. 447). Sherwin B Nuland redundantly pleads with medical historians to write for general audiences. (Some do.) In conclusion, Allan M Brandt knowledgeably engages with the important issue of relationships between past and present in the shaping of health policy.

A cluster of these essays—notably those by Nutton, Fee and Brown, Amsterdamska and Hiddinga, Anderson, Cooter, Labisch and Brandt—are first-rate. Despite its autobiographical longeurs, Reverby and Rosner’s contribution says a lot about where we started and where we are now. Too many of the other articles veer towards self-consciously meaningful reminiscence. (Academics are surely just as boring—perhaps more so?—as most other people talking about themselves and their problems.) The final section is particularly weak and fails systematically to engage with many of the major debates that have preoccupied and divided members of the mainstream historical community over the last twenty-five years. The volume is exceptionally well edited and introduced and beautifully produced.

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**Gabrielle Hatfield,** *Encyclopedia of folk medicine: old world and new world traditions*, Santa Barbara, CA, ABC–CLIO, 2004, pp. xx, 392, illus., £56.95 (hardback 1-57607-874-4).

This volume comprises a short introduction and alphabetically arranged entries (abortion to yew, each around a half to two pages) mostly on plants, illnesses and health problems, but with a sprinkling on botanists/folklorists and on general topics.

Hatfield’s entries are generally eclectic. Although certain “recurrent themes” in folk medicine are noted in the introduction, they are not pursued consistently in the entries. Perhaps

this reflects Hatfield’s debatable view that “generalizations in folk medicine are largely meaningless” (p. xviii). Her reasons include the blurring of traditions, cross-borrowing between folk and official medicine, and that “for every folk remedy that we have today on record, there are many that have been forgotten, as the chain of oral tradition has been snapped”. She notes: “The best we can do is to attempt to record for posterity what is left” (p. xviii). Overall, she hopes “that this book will arouse further interest and curiosity in this once undervalued aspect of human culture” (p. xx).

Unfortunately, I feel that, despite the author’s documentation from a wide range of sources and a clear historical sense, it is questionable whether the book will arouse any more interest than countless popular books on herbs that have appeared in recent years. This feeling arises because Hatfield has not really overcome the enormous problem of distilling a vast amount of relevant folklore into brief synopses. Thus, entries often tend to become rather disparate lists—virtual potpourris—of remedies or conditions.

Despite her caution over generalizations, Hatfield might have synthesized her material more effectively if she had pursued concepts and themes (e.g., transference of disease) consistently. She might, too, have been more critical in making British–North American comparisons. Unfortunately, by failing to offer a sense of regional differences, her comparisons lack real meaning. The absence of regional recognition is especially unfortunate, in so far as a significant number of relevant studies have been published in recent years. This reviewer is particularly disappointed that, perhaps mindful of her American publisher, Hatfield sees “North America” as virtually synonymous with the United States. The occasional reference to Canadian sources offers no sense of the richness of Canadian medical lore and the opportunities it offers for explorations of transatlantic transmission, of cultural interchange, and the development of novel folk practices. A key element of cultural interchange in North America naturally includes the traditions of First Nations’ peoples; Hatfield dutifully notices these in many entries, but again without any sense of regional

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variations, or that the amount of medical knowledge transmitted to white people remains debatable.

Since Hatfield emphasizes a responsibility to record information for posterity, it is also a pity that, in using the important University of California Los Angeles Folklore Archives, she does not provide any information on the informants or on the regional nature of her citations.

My general disappointments with the volume and its failure to really grasp the sub-title of “old

world and new world traditions”, does not mean that I will not consult the book, or to suggest that it should not have a place on library shelves. It does pull together useful information, some on topics rarely brought together in this type of volume. Even then a more comprehensive index would have added to the book’s utility for the serious student.

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