

Book Reviews

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 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.

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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