

Book Reviews

demonstration that surgical innovation was slow and often uncertain when chronicled day by day. It is a pity that the author, having surveyed such vast information and having gained such insight into the realities of innovation, should not have attempted some analysis or synthesis of his material. Perhaps another volume is in preparation: let us hope it is a slimmer one.

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JEAN-PIERRE GOUBERT (editor), *La médicalisation de la société française 1770–1830*, Waterloo, Ontario, Historical Reflections Press, 1982, 8vo, pp. 304, \$Cdn.19.00 (\$8.00 paperback).

The attraction of this collection of sixteen essays looking chiefly, though not exclusively, at medical developments in France around the turn of the nineteenth century is that – unlike many similar volumes – this one is welded together by a powerful conceptual rivet: the concept of “medicalization”. Goubert himself in his introduction clearly expresses his faith both in the historical reality of the phenomenon (the period constitutes for him “la première croisade médicale”), and in the explanatory power of the concept itself; and his collaborators take it up with equal enthusiasm, even in their titles (for example, W. R. Albury writes on ‘J. N. Corvisart and the medicalization of life’, an elegant essay on the fate of the “healing power of nature”, and Jan Brügelmann on ‘Observations on the process of medicalization in Germany, 1770–1830, based on medical topographies’). The dividend of the idea is, however, less clear.

We have long been aware, of course, through the work of scholars such as Ackerknecht and Foucault, of the internal transformations of French medicine in this epoch, relating to the “birth of the clinic”, the rise of pathology, and the clinical extension of medical technology; and several of these essays elaborate these themes informatively. Lydie Boule, for example, in her ‘La médicalisation des hôpitaux parisiens dans la première moitié du XIX^e siècle’ effectively charts the spread of the use of diagnostic techniques such as percussion, palpation, and interrogation, and the growing performance of delicate operations such as hysterectomy. Yet even this essay raises doubts about the degree of “medicalization” claimed. Thus the author asserts, as evidence for her case, that the sum total of hospital beds in Paris increased by fifty-four per cent in the first half of the nineteenth century, without noting that this did not greatly outstrip the rate of population rise (it also makes her contention that “mourir chez soi est un luxe de riche” a grotesque exaggeration).

Indeed, the problem with this collection as a whole is that too many authors take “the medicalization of society” as their remit and merely exemplify it with battalions of supporting facts; tables, histograms, charts, and maps, rather than using evidence to subject the concept to critical scrutiny. Yet the events depicted in several of them give us cause to ponder just how little “medicalization” was actually taking place, or enjoying success or having lasting effects. For example, the essay by Bénédicte Dehillerin and Jean-Pierre Goubert, ‘A la conquête du monopole pharmaceutique: Le Collège Pharmacie de Paris (1777–1796)’, reminds us of the role of the French Revolution precisely as iconoclast – as an anti-professional, anti-corporalist force. Evelyn Bernette Ackerman’s ‘The activities of a country doctor in New York state: Dr. Elias Cornelius of Somers, 1794–1803’ shows that what patients wanted was a reliable fellow as practitioner (even if he also doubled as farmer and tradesman) rather than the man with an array of qualifications. Barbara Tunis’s analysis of public vaccination in Canada shows the strength of public opposition to imposed medicalization (the programme lapsed after less than eight years); and Matthew Ramsay’s subtle study of the regulation of secret remedies towards the end of the *ancien régime* demonstrates that medical supervision was counter-productive. Far from squashing the vogue for proprietary medicines, it only gave them the seal of approval.

Concepts such as “the medicalization of society” can prove illuminating; but they can easily become blinkers, which concentrate the vision and facilitate qualification only at the cost of blocking out most of the view. It is a pity that this collection misses the opportunity to put the concept to the test and to refine its use.

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