

## Book Reviews

**Ann Anderson**, *Snake oil, hustlers and hambones: the American medicine show*, Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Co., 2000, pp. 190, illus., £30.40 (hardback 0-7864-0800-6). Distributed in the UK by Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gardens, Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN.

This book is an informative and entertaining history of the American medicine show. The first chapter briefly describes the European antecedents of the medicine show, such as Italian mountebanks, and the rest of the book traces the evolution of the institution in America from colonial times to the twentieth century. These shows ranged in size from a single performer to large-scale wild west or variety shows, but in each case the purpose was the same, to use some form of entertainment to lure potential customers and encourage them to buy the medicinal products on sale. Mostly these products were typical patent medicines of the period, whether home brewed or purchased from pharmaceutical manufacturers.

Anderson's book provides a lively and largely accurate introduction to the subject for the general reader. It will be of less interest to scholars in the history of medicine because it is drawn very heavily from secondary sources, such as James Harvey Young's *Toadstool millionaires* (1961) and Brooks McNamara's *Step right up* (1976). While she does make use of autobiographical memoirs written by medicine show performers and owners, such as Violet McNeal's *Four white horses and a brass band* (1947), Anderson does not cite any manuscript sources in her notes or bibliography.

Anderson is an actress, and her profession is reflected in the book, which is long on the entertainment aspects of these shows and short on the medical aspects. Its strength is in the detailed and fascinating accounts of the "show business" side of the trade, and in her efforts to relate the performances of the medicine shows to the

broader history of American theatre. Readers who are more interested in the patent medicines themselves, and less in the entertainment, are better advised to consult the classic studies of James Harvey Young on the subject.

The book contains some minor errors and inconsistencies, but no more than might be expected in an account of such broad scope. For example, Elixir of Sulfanilamide (which caused over a hundred deaths in the United States in 1937) was not diethylene glycol, but contained the latter as a solvent. Also, Anderson's contention that Elixir of Sulfanilamide was a prescription drug can be challenged, since the Food and Drug Administration had no legal basis for classifying drugs as "prescription only" before the passage of the 1938 Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act. On the whole, however, this is a very readable book which, although not contributing much that is new to scholarship in medical history, provides a useful overview of the interesting phenomenon of the American medicine show.

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**Edgar Jones**, *The business of medicine: the extraordinary history of Glaxo, a baby food producer, which became one of the world's most successful pharmaceutical companies*, London, Profile Books, 2001, pp. xxiii, 520, illus., £25.00 (hardback 186197340-3).

Edgar Jones's history of Glaxo is well produced, with beautiful colour and black-and-white photographs, as well as organigrams and graphs throughout the text. It is informative on the history of the company, especially after 1962, the end-date for R Davenport-Hines and J Slinn's earlier volume, *Glaxo: a history to 1962* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), and the information it provides is rich and varied.

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However, because its structure makes it difficult to use as a research tool, and because it presents what is essentially an internalist account of the company's expansion in the post-war period, its chief value is as a work of reference.

The central thesis of the book is laid out in the Preface. According to Jones, new products are the life blood of all major pharmaceutical companies. However, Glaxo, like other British firms, realized this relatively late, in the 1950s, when it was drawn into two expanding therapeutic areas, steroids and cephalosporins. Jones attributes the company's early reluctance to invest in research to Sir Harry Jephcott's conservative attitude towards innovation. This interpretation is based partly on Davenport-Hines and Slinn's earlier history, and partly on interviews with eminent company scientists, notably Sir David Jack. Nevertheless, in the 1950s, after "a change of heart", which Jones never really explains (p. 113), Glaxo embarked on innovative research, almost in spite of itself, while still under Jephcott's chairmanship. From the 1960s to the 1980s, there followed a period of restructuring, rationalization and whole-hearted commitment to innovation, to which Jones attributes the company's current success.

Unfortunately, the book's structure, which is both or, rather, neither thematic nor chronological, means that the thesis soon becomes lost in the detail. It also means that the book is difficult to use as a research tool because the development of drugs, which has underpinned much of the company's success, is impossible to follow without relying heavily on the index. A more strictly chronological structure might

have given this complex story greater coherence.

Although one catches glimpses of the wider economic and political context in chapters on the Beechams take-over bid and on government regulation and the market, Jones makes relatively little reference to the wider medical context, which might have helped to explain why in the 1950s the company began carrying out innovative research in the fields of steroids and cephalosporins. Therefore one could dispute whether the title, *The business of medicine*, truly reflects the content of the book. On the other hand, Jones succeeds in painting a vivid picture of the corporate cultures of Glaxo, characterized by a meritocratic atmosphere, and of associated companies, in particular Allen & Hanburys, which Glaxo acquired in 1958.

There are some minor imperfections: unlike the organigrams and graphs, which are included in the text, the tables are at the end of the book. Moreover, chapter headings are not accompanied by numbers, which makes it difficult to relate each chapter to the table of contents. I must also point out an error: Derek Barton, who played a major role in the development of Glaxo's first truly novel medicine, the topical steroid Betnovate, is referred to as "D.H.R. Birkbeck", the name of his college! (p. 316).

Despite its faults, pharmaceuticals have played such an important part in the history of medicine since the Second World War that Jones's book serves a useful function as a work of reference on the history of a major British pharmaceutical company.

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