

Book Reviews

This comprehensive study, covering every aspect of medical provision from the perspectives of the client and the provider, gives new insights into health care in the nineteenth century. Self-help appears to predominate over institutional provision. However, the most important overall conclusion is that such local comparative study “enables us to learn more about the relationship between medicine, history and society”.

John Woodward, University of Sheffield

JEAN-PIERRE GOUBERT, *The conquest of water: the advent of health in the industrial age*, with an Introduction by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, trans. Andrew Wilson, Princeton University Press and Oxford, Polity Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. iv, 293, illus., £29.50.

In 1884, the French Ministry of Public Education declared: “It must be admitted first of all that, of all the civilised nations, ours is one of those which cares least about cleanliness . . .” (p. 157). In the same vein, one retired French physician interviewed by Jean-Pierre Goubert asserted that “French people are naturally dirty” (p. 144). Both these statements reflect what seems to have been up to the mid-twentieth century a longstanding French preference for dirt and strong odours. Indeed, among the nineteenth-century French peasantry dirt was considered a disease preventive, while strong bodily odours were associated with sexual potency.

In this sociocultural history of water, Goubert explains that the French remained “the unwashed” not just from cultural preference but also for practical reasons related to scarcity and expense of water and badly heated dwellings. To combat the French prejudice against bathing and washing, physician-hygienists preached the gospel of hygienism, emphasizing public health and private hygiene. Hygienists encouraged the use of water to combat, first, disease-causing miasms and, later, Pasteurian microbes. Hygienism also served broader sociopolitical aims. Hygiene—incorporating the “cleanliness is next to godliness” philosophy—was one response to the nineteenth-century “social question”: how were the lower classes, urban and rural, to be managed and controlled—indeed civilized? The answer, according to physician-hygienists and Third Republic politicians, was “Make them like us!” or *embourgeoisement*. Hygienists would inculcate the habits, values, and morals of the middle class into the lower social orders. In this way physicians and educators could carry out *la mission civilisatrice* to the barbarians and savages within metropolitan France.

The main theme of Goubert’s book is the notion of a dual revolution: the scientific revolution which accompanied new knowledge of water—with the advent of epidemiology and bacteriology; and the cultural revolution in French citizens’ attitudes towards water and habits related to its use. Central to this dual revolution were the physician-hygienists, who functioned as agents of medicalization—the priests of the new secular religion of hygiene—and who defined water and the appropriate habits and standards of behaviour associated with its use.

Looking at water as idea, substance, and tradition, Goubert examines changing historical concepts of water. Nineteenth-century scientists objectified water, making it a substance to be studied by chemists, epidemiologists, and bacteriologists. Subsequently, water became a commodity to be industrialized and commercialized. During the nineteenth century water evolved from a luxury item for the affluent classes to an essential commodity required by all. As France became secularized, democratized, and industrialized, so did water. In the course of the century, scientists first defined and then redefined water from a healthy, pure substance to a medium for the breeding of pathogenic micro-organisms and the transmission of disease. At the same time hygienists promoted water as a major disease preventive in the nineteenth-century public health campaign. Physicians also continued to emphasize the traditional therapeutic properties of water. A wide cultural gap, however, removed the majority of French citizens—the peasantry—from the ideas and values promoted by the ruling political and scientific élite. The peasantry held far different attitudes toward water. Among the peasantry water carried strong religious and symbolic overtones and had traditionally been associated with purity and major life events. At the same time, however, peasants resisted water and cleanliness because of tenaciously held ideas about the protective value of dirt.

Book Reviews

Water, as portrayed in Goubert's study, strikes me as a quintessential Latourian non-human actor, which was "conquered" and transformed by architects, town planners, engineers, hygienists, physicians, and chemists, but which also made its own "conquest", dramatically changing the scientific and cultural landscape of nineteenth- and twentieth-century France. Thus, Goubert argues that a cultural and scientific revolution reconceptualized water and its uses, and water—objectified, democratized, medicalized, industrialized, and commercialized—changed people's lifestyles and ways of thinking. Water and its promoters brought about a revolution in *mentalités*, and the environment underwent profound changes with the new sociosanitary infrastructure of post-Pasteurian, Third Republic France.

This innovative and imaginative book, amply illustrated with marvellous examples of "water culture", will be welcomed by historians of medicine and public health and historians of modern France who seek novel, interdisciplinary ways to study health and disease in history. As an excellent example of *histoire des mentalités*, Goubert's work joins studies in the same genre such as Alain Corbin's *Le Miasme et la jonquille: L'odorat et l'imaginaire social* (1982), Georges Vigarello's *Le Propre et le sale. L'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen Age* (1985), and Guy Thuillier's *Pour une histoire du quotidien au XIXe siècle en Nivernais* (1977) in enriching our understanding of sociocultural history: habits, attitudes, prejudices, and values and their relationship to health and disease.

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ARTHUR WROBEL (ed.), *Pseudo-science and society in nineteenth-century America*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1987, 8vo, pp. 245, illus., \$24.00.

This collection illustrates the difficulties intellectual historians can face in examining unorthodox science. Several of these studies of sectarian science in nineteenth-century America look closely at prominent sectarian thinkers. Arthur Wrobel's fine analysis, for example, convincingly explains why many intellectuals were drawn to phrenology as a mirror of political and religious impulses in American life. In an essay full of insight, Robert W. Delp traces the complex relationship between sectarian science, popular audiences, and middle-class intellectuals, showing that the advocates of spiritualism who turned to the popular lecture circuit were attacked by such intellectuals as the philosopher and lecturer Andrew Jackson Davis for offering the public entertainment rather than enlightenment.

Despite a professed interest in the popular appeal of sectarian science, however, this collection seldom looks hard at the public mind and behaviour, which have attracted sophisticated attention in recent historiography. Marshall Scott Legan's outline of the familiar story of hydropathy misses the voices of patients and advocates, especially women, whom Susan Cayleff and Jane Donegan have shown played a critical part in promoting this medical alternative. Harold Aspiz's study of sexual reformers relies heavily on prescriptive literature, leaving unexplored the question of how these texts were read. John L. Greenaway's study of the fervent public interest in electrotherapy is particularly disappointing. Americans who brought Dr Scott's Electric Hair-Brush or the Harness's Electric Corsets were, he suggests, unhappy with their physicians' inadequate and unscientific treatments. But this argument does not fit well with the recent work of Charles Rosenberg and John Harley Warner, who have shown that physicians and many patients shared the medical belief system that made orthodox therapies efficacious.

The use by the editor of the awkward term "pseudo-science" reinforces the contributors' vague and shifting notions of the relationship between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy. Taylor Stoehrer finds mesmerism attracted those who rejected the reductionism of orthodox science; Greenaway, on the other hand, argues that physicians were attracted by electrotherapy's association with mainstream physiology and the experimentalist programme of Claude Bernard. Sectarians, clearly, were sometimes on the fringe of orthodox science, and sometimes at its heart. A number of these authors are uneasy about the pragmatic and anti-intellectual