

**Lawrence I Conrad, Michael Neve, Vivian Nutton, Roy Porter, Andrew Wear, *The western medical tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. xiv, 556, illus., £60.00, \$89.95 (hardback 0-521-47564-3), £24.95, \$34.95 (paperback 0-521-47564-3).**

Thirty years ago historians of medicine generally showed little interest in the development of western medicine before the birth of the modern hospital and laboratory-based medical science in the course of the nineteenth century. Although historians might acknowledge the existence of important individuals such as Harvey from an earlier period, these figures were only of interest as precursors of modern biomedicine. Broadly-speaking, historians assumed that until the turn of the eighteenth century at least the science and practice of medicine in Europe was dominated by the medical philosophy of Galen and in consequence was of little importance to those attempting to trace the heroic story of the creation of a modern efficacious medical science. Since 1970, however, the year which saw the appearance of Lester King's significantly entitled *The road to medical enlightenment*, the history of medicine, like the history of science in general, has become increasingly the preserve of social and cultural historians who have largely abandoned the Whiggish assumptions of earlier medical historians and set out to study the science and practice of medicine in their historical context, in much the same way as other historians study political and religious thought. As a result, a clutch of primarily Anglophone historians, whose research has been largely supported by the munificence of the Wellcome Trust, have turned their attention to the history of medicine in the centuries before 1800, regardless of the relevance or irrelevance of the dominant medical paradigm to modern science. Using the information to be found in a wide variety of sources—surviving medical texts, contemporary literature of all kinds, parish records, archaeological evidence, and so on—they have successfully resurrected the medical

world we have lost and hitherto largely dismissed. This present volume, written by five of the leading contributors to this revolution in medical history, is the first attempt to weave together the results of three decades of research into a coherent and truly historical account of the history of medicine in Europe from the Greeks to the end of the eighteenth century.

The volume is divided into four chronological parts, each prefaced with a useful chronological table of significant medical and non-medical events. The first part covers the history of western medicine from the Greeks to the early middle ages; the second deals with the Arab-Islamic medical tradition and medicine in the era of the medieval university; the third and fourth (which comprise over half of the book) take the story through the early modern period and the eighteenth century. In each part the science and practice of medicine is given as comprehensive a treatment as our present state of knowledge permits: in each case we are introduced to the patterns of disease and mortality, the field of medical practice and the range of medical theories. The volume is completed by a short conclusion that reminds us of the importance of contextualizing pre-1800 medicine and not reducing its history to a hunt for precocious signs of modernity. Throughout, the authors are content to present a readable and informative synthesis of the present state of research: they leave the reader to make of the material what he or she will and make no attempt to telegraph a particular interpretative line. None the less, it is possible to isolate two recurring leitmotifs that give the volume a definite unity.

In the first place, the authors are uniformly pessimistic about the efficacy of pre-1800 medical practice. Although always sensitive to the commitment of pre-modern medical practitioners, the authors are never tempted to turn the volume into an apology for the medical world we have lost. The demographic and epidemiological evidence is repeatedly used to emphasize just how bleak and unforgiving an environment our ancestors inhabited. We may now know much more about the pre-1800 epidemiological landscape

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than an earlier generation of medical historians, but their judgement on the inefficacy of pre-modern medicine is not reversed. The authors continually point out that medical practitioners before the modern age, learned or unlearned, were helpless in the face of disease. If a malady was occasionally successfully conquered, this usually owed nothing to the doctors: thus, it was the administrators who defeated the plague by rigorously enforcing quarantine procedures, not medical men with their useless nostrums. Perhaps only the discovery of the benefits of smallpox inoculation in the eighteenth century could be laid at the doctors' door.

Secondly, and in a clear departure from the traditional Whiggish view of their predecessors, the authors consistently emphasize the fragility and limited authority of the dominant Galenic paradigm. On the one hand, the authors insist on the influence throughout the period of alternative non-rational philosophies of healing associated with magic, popular cures and divine intervention. On the other hand, from the time of the Greeks, they introduce the reader to a variety of rival medical philosophies with which Galen and his followers had to vie for dominance. Indeed, Galenism (and then in an Arabic gloss) was really the dominant secular and rational medical philosophy in the west only in the late middle ages. From the beginning of the sixteenth century it was being challenged by Paracelsianism, which drew on alternative popular, alchemical and neo-Platonic traditions, and from the end of the seventeenth century it was to be destroyed once and for all with the popularization of mechanical models of health and disease first developed in the ancient world by Erasistratus then resurrected by Descartes and his followers. By this reading the eighteenth century is not part of the Galenic era at all (as it was for Temkin) but a vibrant period of theoretical speculation and research which anticipated the birth of modern medicine through its consistent advocacy of secular explanations and its rejection of mechanical reductionism in favour of some form of materialistic vitalism.

*The western medical tradition* is an extremely important publication which is certain to remain the best introduction to the history of pre-1800 western medicine for the next decade. Elegantly written and beautifully illustrated, it is a delight to read and re-read. Even the copious index is a work of art. There are occasional typographical errors and errors of fact (the restructuring of French medicine dates from 1803 not 1805, for instance), but these can easily be put right for the second edition. If this reviewer has one criticism, it is that the work is not ambitious enough. Having made it quite clear that medicine pre-1800 was inefficacious, it is surely beholden on the authors to explain why Galenism, given the existence of so many equally useless alternatives, ever became the dominant medical philosophy at all. The interpretative thrust of the volume cries out for some kind of Foucaultian explanation based perhaps around an analysis of the acceptability of Galenism to the Church (both Catholic and Protestant) and the Galenists' monopolization of the centres of intellectual authority and medical power, the university and the medical guilds.

Significantly, the history of the institutionalization of medicine in the period 1200 to 1800 is the weakest part of the book. Although the reader's attention is drawn in several chapters to the development of university medicine and the creation and expansion of a corporative medical community in most parts of Europe from the late middle ages, these trends are never explored at length. Above all, the fact that the Galenism of the Schools was a Christianized medical philosophy, arguably different from the Galenism of antiquity, is never remarked upon, although it is difficult to see how the doctrine could ever have gained the blessing of the Church had it not shed its original materialistic patina. (There again, little attention is paid to Galen's ideas *tout court*, even in the chapter on Roman medicine.) This, then, is a history of pre-1800 medicine that tends to ignore the structure of medical practice, although the study of its organization and legitimization might go a long way to comprehending both the rise and fall of

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Galenism as the dominant medical philosophy in the later middle ages and early modern period. It is a history in turn that assumes that this was always an age of patient-led medicine. This was certainly the case in large parts of Europe in the eighteenth century (and not just in England), for medical corporations in many countries after 1700 lost their traditional power to police medical practice and limit access to medical information. In earlier centuries, in contrast, simply because the Galenists monopolized legitimate medical discourse, patient-freedom was heavily circumscribed: approved by the Church and easily internalized by the laity, Galenism could dominate the medical landscape, even to the extent of colouring popular culture, regardless of the fact that graduate Galenist physicians had only a small share of the medical market.

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**Anne Harrington,** *Reenchanting science: holism in German culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler*, Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. xxiv, 309, illus., £29.95, \$39.50 (0-691-02142-2).

Little has been written systematically about the history of the brain sciences and western culture in the twentieth century, though these sciences offered great challenges to Christian and idealist conceptions of human nature. In this book, Anne Harrington, who earlier wrote on the history of the double brain, links studies of four major German-language scientists, Jakob von Uexküll, Constantin von Monakow, Max Wertheimer and Kurt Goldstein, and makes a major contribution to such a history. The book provides a most readable, interesting and controlled description of the work of scientists—Monakow and Goldstein, among others discussed, were of course also neurologists—who were intensely concerned that knowledge should encompass the values that give dignity to human existence. Quite what “should encompass” meant is the

substance of the book, but all the chosen authors thought that values must in some way be in the content of the world objectively studied by science. Their belief was not the one conventional in the English-speaking world (and, after 1945, in much of continental Europe too), that scientific knowledge concerns facts not values, but rather that a true objectivity reveals values which are inherent in nature. This is Harrington’s “reenchanting science”, the holistic natural philosophy prominent in German-language responses to the perceived “crisis of culture” on either side of World War I.

The book is an introduction to the cultural value of “wholeness”, a value much remarked on by other historians, through four exemplars who have previously been poorly studied, along with comments on many others, such as Hans Driesch and Christian von Ehrenfels. (Wertheimer is also a major figure in Mitchell G Ash’s parallel study of gestalt psychology.) Much of the introduction covers familiar ground—such as the machine as metaphor for inhuman science, the *fin de siècle* malaise, the youth movement’s hunger “for life”, and the image of “the Jew”. But this is an excellent overview, especially as it seamlessly integrates the work of scientists into the picture. The four main chapters on holistic philosophies—each chapter is a short intellectual biography—informatively and without theoretical fuss show how the conceptual framework of each scientist’s thought is explicable by reference to wider cultural and political debates. The accounts of Monakow’s and Goldstein’s arguments for the organic unity of the brain, and against cerebral localization, followed by Monakow’s retreat into the Swiss mountains in search of spiritual enlightenment and Goldstein’s re-orientation to North-American culture, where he contributed to humanistic psychology, are especially valuable.

Like virtually all studies of the Germanic culture of this period, this book is overshadowed by the events of the Third Reich. Harrington is explicit about this and concludes with a chapter on ‘Nazi wholeness’. Her discussion is the result of much thought—and