

## Book Reviews

While some of these formulations are not particularly original, the efforts by several contributors to orient them within a broader social context are sometimes illuminating. The book's many explicit personal accounts provide valuable vignettes on a little-known aspect of the social scene in Islamic countries, and often in ways that the authors themselves seem not to have noticed. A "drag" dress-up party in Damascus (pp. 52–3), for example, is unlikely to have anything to do with an indigenous Syrian tradition, and (assuming that it is not to be dismissed as fictional) rather reflects the impact of Western influence.

If the perspective of the "insider", as it were, is in some ways a merit of the book, in others it is clearly problematic. The authors' often outspoken tenor, ubiquitous sexual slang, graphic exposition of sexual episodes, and stress upon exclusively male-male sexual behaviour all tend to mould their assessment of male-male sexuality in the Islamic world into patterns familiar in the West, despite repeated stress on the difference between the two cultures. More importantly, it may be asked whether those aspects of the Islamic male-male sexual world which are familiar and accessible to Western visitors are really representative of the whole. In important ways, one must suspect that they are not. The book stresses, for example, that men who have relations with other males routinely marry and enjoy fulfilling heterosexual relationships revolving around the creation and nurturing of their own nuclear families. But the important issues of socialization which thus arise are hardly adumbrated in the book. It is also curious that while ethnic stereotypes are repeatedly rejected in principle, they are often invoked in practice: "For North Africans and Southwest Asians it is self-evident that men like to penetrate all kinds of beings" (p. 5), "Since a Moroccan has a hard-on all the time . . ." (p. 29), thieving Iranians (p. 63), etc. Such deliverances convey the impression that the Muslim man, in so far as he is really the subject of this book, is here viewed as a mere object of sexual pursuit, and in only a secondary sense is regarded as an individual with personal sexual concerns and interests which need to be understood within the context of his own culture.

Discussion of specifically medical material or issues is almost non-existent in the book, and even AIDS appears only rarely and in an entirely peripheral fashion. This is unfortunate, since in Islamic countries sexual concerns are in fact routinely raised by men with their physicians, and the latter engage in considerable discussion of the causes and consequences of same-sex sexual activity. Again, however, this is an area to which the authors' personal experience and awareness does not seem to extend.

Overall, this work perhaps reveals more about the contemporary Western gay scene's encounter with Islamic culture than it does about the Islamic world itself. What the studies have to offer about the latter is often worth pursuing, but disentangling it from the agenda of the former is in itself no mean task.

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ANNE HARRINGTON (ed.), *So human a brain: knowledge and values in the neurosciences*, Basel, Boston and Berlin, Birkhäuser, 1992, pp. xxiii, 355, illus., SwFr 138.00 (hardback 0–8176–3540–8), (paperback 3–7643–3540–8).

In 1989, the then President and Congress of the United States of America decided that the 1990s were to be the "Decade of the Brain". This remarkable declaration seems to have provided the inspiration for the symposium on which this volume is based. The aim was to bring together scientists, philosophers, sociologists, and historians in an attempt to encourage a dialogue between these diverse and usually insulated groups on some of the cognitive and ethical issues raised by modern neuroscience.

The putative aims of this gathering are embodied in the rather twee title: to seek to establish what is distinctive about the human brain; and to attempt to bridge the void between the sciences which claim to discover the objective facts about the human organism and the disciplines which study the values and social structures which inform and channel human behaviour.

Some contributors give stolidly naturalistic answers to the question of human distinctiveness. The peculiarity of the human brain for Dentley W. Ploog, for example, lies in the unique relations that obtain between the limbic and neo-cortical regions in man compared to other primates. It is these

## Book Reviews

relations that make possible the unique human attribute of language. Paul Maclean meanwhile speculates that it is the recent evolution of the granulo-frontal cortex in man that, in conjunction with the thalamocingulate centre, enables human beings to extrapolate from altruistic feelings for their immediate fellows to a concern for humanity as a whole. Anyone familiar with the history of the neurosciences in the last two hundred years will have no difficulty in finding analogous efforts to locate the anatomical substrate of mental acts or to provide an organic foundation for human values.

At least from the historian's viewpoint a more promising approach to the question of the humanity of the brain is to view the modern version of that organ as the product of human activity in determinate contexts. The question then becomes one of how the particularities of that context have structured the brain as we now know it. A few of the contributors to this volume—Londa Schiebinger, Leigh Star, and Anne Harrington—do accept the challenge of writing a history of the modern brain. Unfortunately all of these essays are slight and derivative pieces which add little to these authors' previous publications.

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JOHN S. HALLER, JR, *Farmcarts to Fords: a history of the military ambulance, 1790–1925*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1992, pp. xiii, 269, illus., \$32.50 (0–8093–817–2).

Is new life emerging from the dry and rather dusty field of military medical history? The publication of John S. Haller Jr's *Farmcarts to Fords*, hard on the heels of Terry Copp's and Bill McAndrew's *Battle exhaustion: soldiers and psychiatrists in the Canadian army, 1939–1945* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) and Richard A. Gabriel and Karen S. Metz's *A history of military medicine* (Greenwood Press, 1992), would seem to suggest so.

In this innovative study, Haller narrates the story of the military ambulance from the battlefields of revolutionary Europe to the aftermath of the First World War. The book's focus is considerably wider than its title suggests. "Ambulance", in military parlance, refers not just to the various technologies employed to transport the sick and wounded from the front, but also to the mobile hospitals which operated just behind (and sometimes within) the field of fire. Focusing primarily on the British and American experience, the author examines the impact on military medical arrangements of changes in weaponry and tactics, innovations in medical science, new modes of transport, and the emergence of philanthropic organizations devoted to medical relief in times of war.

Drawing on a wide range of printed primary sources, Haller has provided a lucid and richly detailed account of a neglected subject. The narrative benefits greatly from frequent comparisons with developments in Germany and France, and is lavishly and usefully illustrated with over fifty plates. Yet Haller's account is, at times, rather superficial. The book lacks an over-arching explanatory framework or thesis, and often fails to develop adequately the many interesting themes it touches upon. Much more might have been made of medicine's importance in maintaining public as well as military morale, or of tensions between combatant and medical officers, for example.

However, it is not for the reviewer to prescribe what should have been written. As it stands, *Farmcarts to Fords* is a well-researched, readable, and welcome addition to the historiography of military medicine. Haller has rescued an important subject from the prolix and often uncritical official histories written on both sides of the Atlantic. His work is sure to stimulate further interest.

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