

essential reading for years to come for anyone with a scholarly interest in its subject.

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Louise Hill Curth (ed.), *From physick to pharmacology: five hundred years of British drug retailing*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006, pp. xii, 174, £50.00 (hardback 978-0-7546-3597-0).

This well-constructed edited collection provides an overview of five centuries of British drug distribution through a series of chapters organized in chronological order, each written by a specialist in the field. By the same token, it allows the reader a glimpse of the evolution of the drugs themselves, and of drug consumption through the ages and across a number of regions, under the influence of urbanization, changes in welfare provision, the tightening of drug regulation, and the shift from a holistic to a biomedical model in medicine.

In the introduction, Louise Hill Curth distinguishes between five overlapping phases. Each of these is represented in the book by one or two chapters. The second and third chapters, by Patrick Wallis and Curth respectively, are on the first phase, referred to by Curth as that of the “kitchen physick”, when most remedies were still being prepared in the home from natural ingredients. Nevertheless, in the period covered by these two essays, i.e. the early modern period, commercially made and promoted proprietary medicines made their appearance. In the second phase, that is the eighteenth century, a veritable commercial revolution occurred. This was characterized by a growing sophistication in retailing techniques, and by the professionalization of groups involved in the construction of a “medical marketplace” (p. 6). However, in chapter 4, Steve King highlights the disparity between regions in terms of access to medicines, contrasting the more isolated communities of the west of England with Northamptonshire—both urban and rural—where drugs were not only more available, but their supply more reliable.

In a neat transition, King’s essay is followed by Hilary Marland’s (chapter 5), which describes the rise of the chemist and druggist in nineteenth-century manufacturing districts, that is to say the third stage in the evolution of British drug retailing. This was a period when the foundations of modern pharmacology were laid, coinciding with a spectacular increase in the number of shops selling both patent and prescription medicines, and with growing concerns over drug safety. But it was not until the last two phases, from the late-nineteenth to the late-twentieth century, which are covered by Stewart Anderson’s and Judy Slinn’s essays (chapters 6 and 7 respectively), that drug safety regulation began to shape the production and distribution of medicines. This occurred at a time when scientific research became integrated within the pharmaceutical industry, which acquired its multinational character in the period between the wars.

Thus, *From physick to pharmacology* largely succeeds in doing what its editor set out in the introduction, i.e. describe the evolution of British drug retailing from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. However, to make it easier for the reader to grasp the relationship between its successive phases and the different chapters in the book, as well as keep track of the chronology, a table would have been helpful. Illustrations, of drug advertisements for example, would also have been welcomed. *From physick to pharmacology* is neither an economic history of drug retailing, nor a scientific history of drug development, but rather—and in my view therein lies its originality—a history of the parallel, and to some extent convergent, evolution of medical ideas and drug distribution and consumption. Thus, for me a significant conclusion of the book is “the immense variety of the channels through which ‘patients’ have received and acquired ‘drugs’, and the equally complex strategies of diagnosis and treatment, with self-medication consistently being the most common variety” (p. 3). I therefore feel confident that readers of *Medical History* will find much of interest in this volume, which I heartily recommend.

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