

Book Reviews

ROY PORTER, *Disease, Medicine and Society in England 1550–1860*, Studies in Economic and Social History for the Economic History Society, Basingstoke and London, Macmillan Education, 1987, 8vo, pp. 79, £3.95 (paperback).

In this thought-provoking and eloquent survey (intended largely as an introductory text for students and teachers) Roy Porter has examined a number of interconnected themes in the social history of medicine. These include the effects of disease upon English society, the relationship between orthodox and unorthodox medicine, and the changing status of medical practitioners in a three hundred year period of ubiquitous disease and death, prior to the great advances of the late nineteenth century.

The picture that finally emerges is of a largely impotent and defensive medical establishment, gradually acquiring increased status at the expense of less orthodox but no less popular “alternative” therapies. It is argued, for example, that “alternative medicine continued to grow alongside conventional medicine even during the Georgian and early Victorian period”.

Dr Porter raises many important issues, including the relative indifference of the medical establishment to preventative medicine in the nineteenth century (“public health was a matter of engineering not medicine”), and the notion of the medical authorities as sinister agents of social control (dismissed here on the grounds that this was in an era of considerable “client control”) and concludes with an assessment of the negligible contribution made by medicine to the post-1740 population expansion.

Dr Porter has accomplished the difficult task of encapsulating a three hundred year period of English medical history in sixty-five pages. In the process he has written an informative, stimulating and often entertaining study.

The useful bibliography will undoubtedly encourage further debate.

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JEAN MULHOLLAND, *Medicine, magic and evil spirits. Study of a text on Thai traditional paediatrics*, Faculty of Asian Studies Monographs New Series No. 8, Canberra, Australian National University, 1987, pp. xi, 316, A\$15.00 (paperback). Distributed by Bibliotech, Box 4, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia.

This detailed analysis of *Kamphée prathom chindaa*, a Thai text on the diseases of children, belongs to a group of traditional medical texts first written down during the seventeenth century. Its chief components are Indian Ayurvedic medicine and indigenous Thai medicine. The latter is of special interest through two factors. The first is that diagnosis and prognosis depend on the day of the week a child was born. This seems to be connected with a substrate of folk beliefs, spread over south-east Asia, concerned with the days of the week. For instance, the Burmese have rules about certain foods to be avoided by people born on certain weekdays, and the Kampucheans make a different disease demon responsible for diseases starting on different days of the week. The second factor is an elaboration of the first one, namely, that a certain configuration of pustules appears on a certain part of the body, according to the day of the week on which the sick child was born. As this cannot always be verified in actual cases, a system of minor correspondences has been built in that takes account of the time of day the child was born.

There is a historical introduction, and descriptions of diseases, treatments and plant, animal and mineral remedies, always accompanied by the Thai word for each. Most of the time the author, who has watched the Thai doctors at their work, lets the text speak for itself, an excellent way to introduce a new subject until more texts have been made available and explanations can be attempted.

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