

## Book Reviews

In a chapter on ‘Local knowledge: medical geography and the intellectual hinterland’, Valenčius explores the production of that most common of nineteenth-century medical treatises, ‘On the medical topography of X’. These articles, which could cover “a seemingly bewildering array of topics” including geological formation, weather patterns, topography, prevailing diseases, and local ethnicity, formed important research products for nineteenth-century American medicine. Particularly when applied to novel locations, such research answered crucial questions about “how people could live, and where” (pp. 160–1).

Many of the settlers who came to Arkansas and Missouri came from areas of the United States that were colder and drier. They viewed their new homes as tropical in comparison, and worried about how the hot, wet climate would transform their bodies. In this process, “racial and individual identity were vulnerable: the changes unleashed in new territory threatened the coherence and clarity of physical differentiation demanded by the racial economy of antebellum America” (p. 230). Whites grew brown under the relentless sun; “black” children often showed signs of white parentage; and mixing with Native Americans provided further confusion. The blurring of racial boundaries created anxieties made worse by the inherent disorder of the frontier.

In this sensitive analysis of antebellum frontier thought, Valenčius succeeds in recreating a world in which body and land were intimately linked, a world in which metaphors of health and disease, balance and imbalance applied seamlessly to both people and their inhabited landscapes. One might quibble about the insensitivity to chronology here—did these concepts not change at all in the first six decades of the nineteenth century? But the answer may well be: “Not much.” This volume takes the historiography of American medicine in a startling new direction, a remarkable feat for any historian, not to mention for one at the beginning of her career. Having a such a blazed path before them, others will follow into this new frontier.

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**Mike Jay**, *The air loom gang: the strange and true story of James Tilly Matthews and his visionary madness*, London and New York, Bantam Press, 2003, pp. xiv, 306, illus, £12.99 (hardback 0-593-04997-7); £7.99 (paperback 0-553-81485-0).

For a man who spent much of his life incarcerated in English asylums and French prisons, James Tilly Matthews enjoyed a remarkable and varied career. A sometime tea-merchant, peace activist, secret agent, draughtsman, mesmerized pawn, lunatic and self-styled “Omni-Imperious Arch-Grand-Arch Emperor Supreme”, he is now better remembered as a psychiatric exemplar: joining Freud’s Dora, Judge Schreber, Sally Beauchamp and Mary Barnes in the addled pantheon of representative case histories on which psychiatrists and historians draw in their arguments over the nature of illness and politics of diagnosis. Yet in Matthews’ case, the academic co-option of his troubled life does, for once, seem oddly appropriate. As Mike Jay shows in this brilliant historical account, Matthews’ biography can be characterized as a struggle for self-determination within the competing philosophical schemes and political agendas of Hanoverian England.

Matthews is now remembered as a prototypical schizophrenic. A philosophical radical and follower of the eminent Welsh republican, David Williams, he had devoted his energies to preventing the threatened war between England and revolutionary France. His mission would end in disaster. A self-elected intermediary, he was imprisoned by the Jacobins as an English spy. Freed after three and a half years, he returned to London only to find himself reincarcerated within the walls of Bethlem. Matthews recognized the source of his misfortunes. At each step of his sorry progress, he had been frustrated by the secret machinations of the “Air Loom”: a mesmeric mechanism which could control action and thought. Words would suddenly fail him. Sympathetic audiences would abruptly lose interest. Politicians, who must have known the details of his peace mission, were mysteriously rendered ignorant. His

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struggle for peace and self expression was subverted by invisible forces, with agendas quite different to his own.

Clandestine mesmerists were not the only group interested in conscripting Tilly Matthews. At Bethlem, he fell under the control of James Haslam, an ambitious apothecary determined to establish his reputation within the nascent discipline of psychological medicine. Theirs was to be an unhappy relationship. Haslam was harassed by Matthews' wife, who, over the course of a decade, repeatedly raised his detention with Bethlem's governors and issued a writ of *habeas corpus* against the asylum. Believing that his professional authority was being impugned in these proceedings, Haslam responded with a detailed history of Matthews' delusions: *Illustrations of madness: exhibiting a singular case of insanity and a no less remarkable difference in medical opinion: . . . with a description of the tortures experienced by bomb-bursting, lobster-cracking and lengthening the brain* (1810). It was the first book-length study of an individual's madness published in England. If Bethlem had been intended to silence Matthews, its staff would end up preserving his voice.

Haslam might have wanted to convict Matthews out his own mouth but, as Jay demonstrates in his penetrating analysis of *Illustrations*, many other readings are possible. "It is a book that cannot simply be read: but demands to be hijacked" Jay writes, and as Haslam had forced new meanings from Matthews' life, Jay reveals the unintended significance of the *Illustrations*. Jay takes the description of the air loom, not simply as a deranged fantasy, but as a metaphor for the individual's loss of agency within an asylum system bent on breaking the patient's will upon the physician's reason. If Matthews had been a pawn in the mesmerists' scheme, so too was he used by Haslam to advance his own medical agenda. Yet he was never entirely defeated. From his cell he would draw up new plans for Bethlem, which would later be incorporated in the rebuilding of the asylum. From his deathbed, his description of his forced detention would inspire the Parliamentary Select Committee's

investigations into the asylum, investigations that would wreck the career Haslam had so ruthlessly pursued. It is a salutary lesson for those who would give a voice to the mad, whether mesmerists, psychiatrists or historians. Such work demands the same kind of sympathy and insight as Jay demonstrates in his riveting account of *The air loom gang*.

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**Christopher C Booth**, *A physician reflects: Herman Boerhaave and other essays*, Occasional Publication No. 2, London, Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, 2003, pp. xiii, 206, £15.00 (paperback 0-85484-093-1).

Sir Christopher Booth has had a distinguished career both as an academic physician/gastroenterologist and as an historian of medicine. Yet he has always been and remains a challenger of the medical establishment, as some essays in this collection make clear. The essay is not a common literary form at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet it has much to recommend it, including brevity and its informality of style. Above all an essay is primarily an expression of personality and, without doubt, Chris Booth's personality shines out from this book.

The collection opens with several remarkable historical pieces. They focus upon great men such as Herman Boerhaave, Samuel Johnson, J C Lettsom, the two Fothergills and Robert Willan. These are scholarly opinionated essays with the special insights of an author who is both a physician and an historian. However, the particular strengths of this collection lie in his personal reflections and interpretations, as he himself was a major player in the development of British academic medicine in the second half of the twentieth century. This includes his appointment as the Sir Arthur Sims Commonwealth Travelling Professor. So for Australians and New Zealanders his account of his visit to the Antipodes in 1968, is of special interest as it reveals that Booth has remarkable