

## Book Reviews

**W F Bynum**, *Science and the practice of medicine in the nineteenth century*, Cambridge History of Science series, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. xvi, 283, illus., £40.00, \$54.95 (hardback 0-521-25109-5), £12.95, \$15.95 (paperback 0-521-27205-X).

In this engagingly written book, W F Bynum tackles one of the most interesting questions in recent medical historiography: How important was science in the actual practice of medicine before the twentieth century? Ever since socially minded scholars first discovered a few years ago that the much vaunted discoveries in laboratory science had little immediate impact on the daily lives of patients and doctors, the place of science in nineteenth-century medicine has come under increasing scrutiny and doubt. A whiff of incredulity now hangs over many of the earlier claims for science in public health and medical education, as well as in patient care. The turn-of-the-century vision that medicine was about to become an experimentally based, irresistible science that would sweep all doubts before it now seems at best over-optimistic, if not hopelessly naive.

Bynum's purpose in the volume, he asserts, is to "strike a balance" between the older heroic view of science's importance to medicine and more recent accounts of the manipulative or "rhetorical uses" of science in enhancing the authority and status of the medical profession. He sensibly concludes that science was indeed a critical force in shaping nineteenth-century medicine but that its impact "was more striking on the public face of medicine, and on the diagnostic skills of doctors, than it was on their therapeutic capacities". Fair enough, but few responsible medical leaders of the 1890s would have argued otherwise.

The argument proceeds from a closely reasoned analysis of the largely empirical medicine of 1790 to an increasingly scientific clinical or hospital medicine in the early nineteenth century, then moves to an examination of the impact on thought of the

new "sanitary science" at mid-century, and finally turns to the revolution in expectations that accompanied the spread of laboratory experimentalism at the close of the century. The book is particularly good in its treatment of the actual effects of the "new science" on clinical medicine and practice at the fin de siècle. Scientists by this time had established themselves as a "separate estate" within a medical profession that was being relentlessly changed by science. Did science matter? Indeed it did, even if much of ordinary medical practice was untouched by it.

For medicine, Bynum reminds us, is far more than the mechanical application of "cures" to human ailments. During thousands of years, as well as in our own time, the understanding of disease, where it comes from, how it can be prevented, its prognosis, and its palliation have been principal reasons for consulting a physician. By 1900, science had made enormous gains in understanding ancient afflictions and was gaining in ways to control, palliate, and even cure them.

The strengths of the book are its bold compass, the deep knowledge of the literature on which it is based, and its wise, common-sense approach to a controversial subject. Its weaknesses, according to the author, are its attention to the mainstream of medical practice to the neglect of alternative therapies, and the disproportionate emphasis at times on the British experience. But this reader was not particularly bothered by these shortcomings. The author is concerned, too, that his general approach, which finds an important place for the traditional "heroes" of scientific medicine, may seem too traditional or "Whiggish". How politically sensitive we have all become! He need not be concerned. More recent historiography and the growing realization of how deeply the nineteenth-century scientific ideal has shaped our twentieth-century medicine make his fears seem groundless.

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