

Essays in the History of Canadian Medicine edited by Wendy Mitchinson and Janice Dickin McGinnis, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1988. The Canadian Social History Series. Pp 163, endnotes, selected bibliography. ISBN 0-7710-6063-7.

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Essays in the History of Canadian Medicine edited by Wendy Mitchinson and Janice Dickin McGinnis, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1988. The Canadian Social History Series. Pp 163, endnotes, selected bibliography. ISBN 0-7710-6063-7.

This slim volume of seven essays is a welcome addition to the history of Canadian medicine. The essays have been gathered here under the rubric of social history and share a concern with the interaction of medicine and Canadian society. While some authors have taken on questions that are typical of social history, others have chosen subjects that may equally well be described as biographical, institutional or political. This collection is a loose aggregate of studies that are narrowly focused in subject matter, time period and locale. However, it is precisely their narrow focus that allow these studies their richly-detailed texture and makes them convincing challenges to traditional interpretations of the history of medicine. In their introduction, the editors Mitchinson and McGinnis weave these diverse accounts into their historiographic context.

One of the concerns of social historians has been to examine the issues of health and medicine from the perspective of the patient. The case records of medical institutions are used to good effect in the essays by Wendy Mitchinson and Suzann Buckley. Mitchinson examines the records of a mid-nineteenth-century Ontario insane asylum to determine the reasons for committal. The complex reality that she uncovers demonstrates that both the social reform and the social control interpretations of asylums have been overly simplistic. Buckley's analysis of the records of a maternity hospital offers strong evidence against the claim that the decline of maternal mortality after the 1930s can be attributed solely to the introduction of sulfa drugs. She shows that when cases are examined on an individual basis, it is possible to see that social and economic factors were significant in determining the outcome.

Jean-Claude Robert analyses the mortality statistics of Montreal from 1821 to 1871 in order to assess the actual state of health of its citizens and to suggest that the onset of industrialization in the 1870s only exacerbated existing conditions of poor health rather than creating them. He acknowledges the methodological problems of performing a demographic study on a period before statistics series were collected but demonstrates that the information from parish records can be successfully used to tie variations in mortality rates to class and ethnicity.

Kenneth Pryke and Heather MacDougall examine the response of government and the medical profession to threats to the health of the community. Pryke presents a case study of an unsuccessful bid by local doctors to have a permanent general hospital built in early nineteenth-century Halifax. He reveals that the debate about how to deal with contagious disease is intimately bound up with professional and political interests and with societal attitudes towards immigrants and the poor. MacDougall traces the development of public health activities and the gradual adoption of the British 'sanitary idea' in the City of Toronto. She demonstrates the distinctly local nature of the political and professional conflicts involved in introducing a foreign idea to a Canadian environment.

The two final essays demonstrate that medical science can also be fruitfully examined through the perspective of social history. Michael Bliss establishes the substantial and hitherto neglected role of the biochemist J.B. Collip in the discovery of insulin. By studying the papers and laboratory notebooks of the principal players, Bliss creates a day-by-day account of the activities leading up to the discovery. He shows that the myths that have grown up around this, the premier event in Canadian medical research, have served to obscure the important fact that the work was essentially collaborative in nature. Finally, Janice Dickin McGinnis examines the juncture of medical science and medical practice found in the changing treatment of venereal disease. Because each scientific advance held implications far beyond the purely physiological, its transformation from a

laboratory finding into a therapeutic tool was shaped by professional and legal considerations and by the social attitudes of Canadians.

The volume closes with a selected bibliography that is a valuable introduction to recent historiography and reference materials. Entries are grouped under a number of subject headings which reflect areas of traditional strength in medical history such as biography, professional development and medical institutions, as well as newly-emerging areas of interest such as public health, allied health sciences, mental health and psychiatry and the health of native peoples.

While these seven essays are a diverse lot, if any general theme can be said to emerge from them as a group, it is one of a broader historical vision of health which encompasses not only medical practice but also the social and economic context. As these accounts show, the history of medicine in Canada, while sharing motifs with developments elsewhere, has been uniquely shaped by its local context. This volume offers a tantalizing glimpse of the variety of topics, source materials and methods that await development.

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