

JAMES T. PATTERSON, *The dread disease: cancer and modern American culture*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1987, 8vo, pp xiii, 380, illus., \$25.95 (US), £20.75/\$31.25 (Europe).

Our recent experiences with AIDS have stimulated historians to analyse more closely the social responses to specific diseases. While the changing patterns of illness are themselves rooted in a complex ecology of biological and social factors, their perception and categorization are shaped by an equally broad range of cultural values and political interests. Thus the study of disease, why and how it affected a particular society, how it was understood and dealt with, has become an important tool for unravelling the meanings and concerns of popular culture.

Patterson's work focuses on the problem of cancer in America for the past century. Indeed, his prologue exposes the dread of the disease reflected in the exceptional publicity about the malignancy suffered by General Ulysses S. Grant, who died in 1885. Although provided with a cellular theory and recourse to antiseptic surgery, physicians remained puzzled about the causes and clinical course of a relentless, deadly disease which struck without warning. Was it the result of local "irritations" or another infectious sickness? The public saw it as an alien invader, ravaging the insides of its victims; and those affected often felt guilty of some form of misbehaviour. The stigma was especially attached to women, whose breasts and sexual organs were at higher risk.

The book gradually moves from the late nineteenth-century American phobias of cancer to turn of the century views of the ailment which stressed its close association with civilization, luxurious life-styles, and faulty diets. As infectious diseases gradually faded, and life expectancy increased, an expanding elderly population began to fall prey to cancers, allowing epidemiologists to point out a growing menace. By 1913, the American Society for the Control of Cancer was established to educate the public about the perils posed by the disease and the utility of early detection for successful treatment. As with similar campaigns for other scourges, the message inflamed prevailing fears with horror stories while simultaneously attempting to convey the hopes of successful medical management.

During the 1920s and 1930s, cancer remained an enigmatic and generally incurable disease in the minds of most Americans. While cures were forever announced, by medical professionals as well as quacks, cancer remained "the greatest scourge in the world". Even physicians were fatalistic. A public opinion poll before World War II revealed that nearly half of the respondents still thought that cancer was somehow contagious. The stigma surrounding it prompted physicians to withhold the diagnosis from their patients and even to falsify death certificates. However, as Patterson concludes, "cancer cruelly contradicted American optimism." A society that prided itself on its ability to solve most social, economic, and medical problems could not remain despondent and passive in the midst of such an unprecedented onslaught.

Subsequent chapters examine the new role of government in the battle against cancer—the National Cancer Institute was established in 1937—and the proliferation after World War II of cancer research foundations and hospitals. Public reticence about the disease waned, especially in the wake of such highly publicized cases as the golfer Babe Didrikson Zacharias, the actor Humphrey Bogart, and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Another chapter is devoted to smoking and cancer, covering Wynder's epidemiological studies as well as the activities of the tobacco industry.

In the end, Patterson manages to provide us with a perceptive and well documented account of the ups and downs of America's anti-cancer alliance, an elite composed of medical professionals, scientists, government officials, and prominent laypersons. Its eternal optimism about repeated "breakthroughs" suffered setbacks in the 1970s in spite of Nixon's official "war on cancer". The alliance is now recovering as molecular biology is rapidly unravelling the secrets of cellular structure and function.

On the other side is America's counter-culture, which earlier challenged the medical therapeutic impotence with a long list of panaceas, from patent medicines to Krebiozen and Laetrile. Feeding on enduring popular fears and superstitions, these gloomier attitudes exposed the profound ambivalence about industrial civilization and its "blessings": Agent Orange in Vietnam, pesticides, and carcinogens everywhere in the air, soil, and food. For the pessimists, government-supported cancer research had been over-sold.

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In the end, Patterson's historical perspective on cancer tells us much about shifting American values and attitudes, about physicians and scientists, politicians and environmentalists, journalists and laypersons. Deeply imbedded in our culture, the cancer story, like Ariadne's thread, is a valuable guide to American fears, hopes, and foibles.

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ALINE ROUSSELLE, *Porneia: on desire and the body in antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988, 8vo, pp. x, 213, £19.95.

This is a provocative, innovative, and erudite study of attitudes towards the body in antiquity, and, in particular, in the Roman Empire during the transition from paganism to Christianity from the second to the fifth century. Dr Rousselle breaks away from the usual range of literary sources in her attempt to reconstruct the *mentalité* of late antiquity. She contrasts information contained in the medical encyclopaedia of Oribasius, a militant pagan writing c. 360, with Roman legal decisions on marriage and fornication, and with the *Apophtegmata Patrum*, a collection of sayings and stories of Egyptian monks in the desert. Not surprisingly, the ensuing picture is both more varied and more lifelike than one based largely upon poetry or sermons. The fluent English translation adds to the delight of discovering these unusual sidelights.

Yet, for all its many virtues, this is an ultimately unconvincing book. Chronology is not Dr Rousselle's strong point, and some of her medical authorities are placed in the wrong century. More seriously, by taking Oribasius and, as far as can be seen, not checking back on his sources where they exist, she falls into the trap of losing the context of the original statements. As with the law codes, she interprets the prescriptions of the doctors as if they were universally followed, with some curious consequences. Thus, having brilliantly shown how an unwanted child could be disposed of at birth, she argues that most female children were disposed of swiftly. Later on, however, she discovers a superfluity of women available for legitimate sex (not all of whom could be out-of-work actresses). Her notion that a Roman male before intercourse took careful account of the legal status of his partner for fear of severe punishment he might suffer if he picked the wrong person is a charming antiquarian fancy. Her claim that women were largely treated by women, which neglects the evidence for male midwives, Galen, and the comic and deontological traditions of the doctor having sex with his patient, is on a par with her belief that Roman women, unlike their counterparts in Hippocratic Greece, stopped examining their own bodies. In short, while Dr Rousselle has given us much food for thought, a more critical attitude to her sources would have provided a sounder basis for her theorizing. Her account of a transition from pagan to Christian may, in the end, be no more than a change in the type of literature on which she relies, for Christian (and Muslim) physicians continued to repeat many of the same prescriptions as Oribasius with apparent unconcern for an altered religious climate.

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GUY SABBAH, PIERRE-PAUL CORSETTI, and KLAUS-DIETRICH FISCHER (editors), *Bibliographie des textes médicaux latins. Antiquité et haut moyen âge*, Centre Jean-Palerne, Mémoires 6, St. Étienne, Publications de l'Université de St. Étienne, 1987, 8vo, pp. 174, [no price stated], (paperback).

Latin medicine has always been the poor relation of Greek, not least in the accessibility of its texts. Few, even among classicists, know of more than Cato and Celsus; still fewer have read even these authors. To help remedy this ignorance, the Centre Jean-Palerne has published this excellent bibliography of Latin medical writings down to the time of Salerno. It is clearly organized, well printed, and with very few errors. The bibliography lists only texts, editions, and translations; studies of the contents of the texts are not included. There are valuable indexes and cross references to manuscripts, perhaps pointing towards a revision of Beccaria's list of pre-Salernitan manuscripts of medicine. I have already found it of great value in attempting to identify fragments of the (in part pseudo-)Galenic corpus in Latin in a Durham manuscript.