

Book Reviews

should be encouraged to read this book. Sadly many will ignore it in their haste to push forward the frontiers of science, not understanding that the accounts here are from the creators of the modern science they pursue so relentlessly. More mature neuroscientists will undoubtedly relish the reminiscences. David Hubel's description of painstaking experiments, carried out in a "slapdash set-up" makes particularly thoughtful reading for a modern scientist obsessed with state-of-the-art equipment. Even more thought-provoking, to scientists and historians, are Hubel's observations on scientific research in the 1960s and in the 1990s, the difficulty nowadays of getting, and keeping, financial support; of grant proposals that took him a couple of days to write, now taking months to prepare; and of over-crowding in each research field. Almost unbelievably to modern neuroscientists, he remarks laconically "in 1960 . . . we virtually had the visual cortex to ourselves".

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Elfriede Grabner, *Krankheit und Heilen. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Volksmedizin in den Ostalpen*, Vienna, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997, pp. iv, 329, illus., ÖS 390.00 (3-7001-0730-7).

The increasing interest in alternative medicine and mild treatments for disease has stimulated debate on how illnesses were treated in the past and on the value of traditional cures. The interest of the folklorist and art historian Elfriede Grabner in folk medicine was first stimulated in the 1960s by the work of her former teacher Leopold Kretzenbacher, later the head of the Institute of European Ethnology in Munich. She describes in an interesting and easily accessible manner certain folkloristic concepts concerning disease. Writing from a historico-cultural point of view, she focuses on the symptoms and causes of disease, and on cures and medical procedures. Her field of research centres on the eastern

Alps of Austria, especially Styria, from the middle ages to the twentieth century.

Grabner's book begins with a brief background chapter on the history and the current state of research on folk medicine, touching on the major problems in this field: the lack of any serious research before the end of the nineteenth century. Even then, as she mentioned in her 1968 article 'The history of research in folk medicine in German-speaking countries' (*Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Indiana University, 1968, 5: 152–7), such research was carried out by professional physicians rather than by historians, folklorists or ethnologists. A period of enthusiasm began in the 1930s led by medical historians like Paul Diepgen in Berlin, but after World War II interest in folk medicine declined when its scientific legitimacy was questioned. Now that the divisions between superstition, mysticism, custom, ritual, and science have gradually become less distinct, confidence in the relevance of folk medical practices to modern medicine is being restored.

In her second chapter about concepts of disease (an important part of traditional knowledge of folk medicine in the east Alps), Grabner describes different folkloristic concepts of fever as well as a number of childhood diseases whose names and interpretations differ in most cases from the orthodox ones. Different terms for fevers, often found in a cryptic form like the "72", "77", or "99" fevers, explained the severity of a disease. Richard-Ernst Bader also tried to interpret the origins and meaning of these magical numbers in his article 'Wurzeln der Iatromagie: Die Zaubersahlen 77 und 72' (*Medizinhistorisches Journal*, 1992, 27: 98–112).

A further chapter deals with diagnosis and prognosis. Grabner mentions that there are special ways in folk medicine to diagnose and predict the outcome of a disease, and she pays attention to two main variants. One is uroscopy, the other the theory that psychological and physical health must be in balance. Folk concepts of disease—that is to say causes, classification and effects—cannot be compared with practices in modern medicine. In folk

medical procedures some curious practices were and in some cases still may be found: for example the belief that treatments are affected by the phases of the moon, or that a worm in the tooth causes the ache.

Chapter Five deals with herbal, animal and mineral protective agents from the folk pharmacopoeia, the latter partly used for antiseptic and styptic effects. Her concluding chapter on empirical and magical practices draws the reader into a world of mystical and superstitious cures.

A number of striking illustrations in the appendix present a vivid picture of folk medical practices. Grabner, herself an art historian, makes use of such iconographic evidence to extend our insight into folk medicine. Her book is a wide-ranging and important compendium of research on folk medicine focusing on its naturalistic aspects. Despite the absence of a bibliography, it is rich in facts and examples, drawn not only from other German-speaking areas but from all around the world. This is a book for everyone interested in folk medicine.

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Christoph Mörgeli (ed.), *Europas Medizin im Biedermeier: anhand der Reiseberichte des Zürcher Arztes Conrad Meyer-Hofmeister 1827–1831*, Basel, Schwabe, 1997, pp. 814, illus., SFr 80.00, DM 96.00 (3-7965-1033-7).

Meyer-Hofmeister's travel-accounts are sure to appeal to anyone interested in the history of medical practice, the history of the body or the history of acute physical discomfort. I read this book on holiday and found it not only more compelling than the novels I had packed for light entertainment but also well worth every ounce it added to my luggage—a considerable achievement given that the book measures three bricks in size. This lavishly illustrated and richly annotated edition of a Swiss physician's medical *Wanderjahre* through Germany, Austria, Italy,

France, England, Scotland, Ireland, and the Netherlands offers a vivid portrait of the diverse forms of medical practice, education and thought cultivated in Europe around 1830.

Although Mörgeli, the editor, treats the diary as a kind of unmediated representation of the state of medicine in *Biedermeier* Europe, I would argue that its strength lies in precisely the opposite direction, namely in its being a highly selective representation of Europe as it appeared to a man who was, on Mörgeli's account, as archly *Biedermeier* as they come (p. 19). For those unfamiliar with the term, *Biedermeier* refers to a social-cultural movement associated with the values of inwardness, domesticity and political provincialism which flourished in Germany roughly between 1815 and 1848.

Consider, for example, the following account of an instrument in use at one of the German spas. In Meyer-Hofmeister's words: it is "shaped liked a penis . . . and water squirts out the far end. A woman who wants to use it holds the cylinder between her labia and water is pumped more or less vigorously as required in the circumstances". A bell allows patients to signal when the water-pressure is agreeable and the resident physician "dares not administer this marvellous treatment to unmarried women" (p. 306). For the author, not a hint of scandal attached to this treatment or the establishment in which it was employed.

Such passages, and there are many more, reveal that the diary not only provides a reflection of the state of European medicine but of the author himself, not so much as a psychological subject but as a cultural one. Yet without a general understanding of the *Biedermeier* phenomenon, the reader is left guessing at how any given observation might be representative of the more general cultural situation. And Mörgeli does not come to the reader's aid. Nor should he, given that he is less interested in the general situation than in the specific meaning of "*Biedermeier* medicine" as understood by a highly specialized audience of medical historians.

So it is regrettable that Mörgeli has removed all portions of the diary not of immediate