

BOOK REVIEW

Frederick F. Cartwright: *A Social History of Medicine. (Themes in British Social History.* Ed. By Dr. J. Stevenson) (London/New York: Longman, 1977, pp. 209, \$12.95 (cloth); \$7.50 (paper)

Reviewed by

Rajib Roson Ghosal¹

Frederick F. Cartwright's seminal work, *A Social History of Medicine*, serves as a paradigmatic foundation for the study of medical history. Similarly, this volume, the third book in the *Themes in British History* series, provides a comprehensive and rigorous examination of the discipline's foundational underpinnings. Comprising ten erudite chapters, this 219-page treatise elucidates the genesis of medicine and healthcare, charting the trajectory of scientific medicine's emergence and the conceptual evolution of disease. Furthermore, the chapters scrutinize the development of medical education and the professionalization of medicinal treatment, culminating in the establishment of healthcare as a national institution. Through its meticulous and nuanced exploration, this work affords readers a profound comprehension of the complex historical dynamics that have shaped the medical field.

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Visva-Bharati, A Central University, Shantiniketan,Bolpur,West Bengal,India, Email:rajibrghosal92@gmail.com

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The first chapter *The Philosophy of Medicine before Rudolf Virchow and Louise Pasteur*, provides a rich historical context for understanding the evolution of medical thought. The author masterfully weaves various threads of influence, from ancient superstitions to groundbreaking scientific discoveries. The writing is engaging, and the chapter effectively sets the stage for the rest of the book. However, some readers may need to catch up due to the dense historical content. Overall, this chapter is a solid foundation for exploring the philosophy of medicine and its development over time.

The second chapter, *The Care of the Sick Before 1800* examines a fascinating overview of the early history of medical care, showcasing the gradual shift from mystical and spiritual practices to more formalized hospital systems. Cartwright uses the specific examples, such as Aristides' treatment at Pergamon and the development of Christian hospitals, adds depth and interest to the narrative. However, the chapter could benefit from a more precise structure and more concise language to facilitate easier reading. Additionally, some statements, like the claim that monastic infirmaries were not typically hospitals, could be further supported with evidence. Overall, this chapter is a solid foundation for understanding the historical context of medical care.

The third chapter, *Medical Education: The Birth of a Profession*, explores the evolution of medical education and the birth of the medical profession. It highlights the distinction between orthodox and unorthodox practitioners, the importance of education, and the development of professional conduct codes like the Hippocratic Oath. The chapter also discusses the impact of social change, industrialization, and government action on medical education and practice, culminating in the 1858 Medical Act. This chapter provides a comprehensive and engaging analysis of transforming medical practice into a profession. Cartwright skilfully weaves together historical context, social change, and professional development, highlighting the key milestones and players in the evolution of medical education. The critique of the Hippocratic Oath and its modern implications is particularly insightful. However, some sections feel a bit dense, and the transitions between ideas could be smoother. Overall, this chapter is a valuable contribution to the history of medical education and the development of the medical profession.

The fourth chapter, *The Years of Plague*, explores the history of the plague, from its origins in the East to its spread throughout Europe, particularly in England. It discusses the Black Death, its impact on society, and the subsequent epidemics, including the controversial 1361 epidemic. The chapter also examines the eventual disappearance of plague from

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Europe, attributing it to natural processes rather than human intervention. This chapter provides a comprehensive and engaging history of the plague, weaving together historical context, social impact, and epidemiological insights. The author's analysis of the plague's spread and eventual disappearance is particularly compelling, highlighting the complex interplay between human and animal hosts. However, some sections feel dense, and the text could benefit from more apparent transitions and concise language. Overall, this chapter is a valuable contribution to the history of epidemiology and the understanding of infectious diseases.

The fifth chapter, *Prevention of Smallpox*, explores the history of smallpox, from its early descriptions to its impact on society and the development of vaccination as a means of prevention. It discusses the challenges of disentangling smallpox from other diseases, the evolution of nomenclature, and the emergence of vaccination as a public health measure. This chapter provides a rich and nuanced exploration of smallpox, weaving together historical context, social impact, and medical insights. The author's analysis of the development of vaccination and its controversies is particularly compelling, highlighting the complex interplay between individual freedom and public health. The writing is engaging, and the use of historical examples and anecdotes adds depth and interest. Overall, this chapter is a valuable contribution to the history of medicine and public health.

The sixth chapter, *Cholera and Sanitary reform*, explores the impact of rapid population growth and urbanization on sanitation and public health in 18th and 19th-century Britain. It highlights the contributions of John Simon and Edwin Chadwick in shaping sanitary reform and improving living conditions. This chapter provides a compelling narrative on the evolution of public health and sanitation in Britain. The author skilfully weaves together historical context, biographical sketches, and policy developments to create a rich tapestry. The contrast between Simon and Chadwick's approaches and personalities adds depth to the story. The writing is engaging, and the use of vivid language paints a picture of the challenges and triumphs of sanitary reform.

Chapter Seven, *Alcoholism, syphilis and Tuberculosis*, discusses the devastating impact of alcoholism, syphilis, and tuberculosis on the people of industrial Britain. It highlights these diseases' social and economic consequences, including poverty, neglect, and mortality. The chapter also touches on the historical practices of "touching" for scrofula and the eventual decline of tuberculosis through improved diagnosis, vaccination, and treatment. This chapter provides a somber and thought-provoking examination of the social ills that plagued industrial Britain. The author effectively conveys the far-reaching consequences of alcoholism, syphilis, and tuberculosis on individuals and society. The writing is engaging, and the use of historical context and anecdotes adds depth to the narrative. The chapter's focus on the human cost of these diseases makes for a compelling read.

Chapter eight *The Birth of Scientific medicine* discusses the birth of scientific medicine, highlighting the contributions of key figures such as Bichat, Cruvelhier,

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Rokitansky, and Virchow. It explores the development of the cell theory and its impact on understanding disease, as well as the discovery of bacteria and the germ theory. This chapter provides a comprehensive and engaging account of the transformation of medicine from an empirical art to a science. The author skilfully weaves together historical context, biographical sketches, and scientific breakthroughs to create a compelling narrative. The writing is clear and concise, making complex concepts accessible to a broad audience. The chapter's focus on the pioneers of scientific medicine and their contributions to our understanding of disease makes for a fascinating read.

Chapter Ninth, *Towards a National Health Service*, discusses the development of healthcare in the 19th and early 20th centuries, including the transformation of mental illness treatment, the establishment of hospital funds, and the evolution of the doctor-patient relationship. It highlights key figures like Philippe Pinel and Mary Stewart, and significant events like the Hospital Sunday Fund and the Hospital Almoner Service. This chapter provides a fascinating account of the gradual humanization of healthcare, from the chaining of lunatics to the establishment of more compassionate and organized systems. The author skillfully weaves together historical context, biographical sketches, and social commentary to create a compelling narrative. The writing is engaging, and anecdotes add depth and emotion to the story. The chapter's focus on the development of healthcare as a social and moral imperative makes for a thought-provoking read.

The last tenth chapter, *A Health Service in Being*, discusses the development of national health services in various countries, including the USSR, Sweden, and Germany. It highlights the importance of healthcare systems in addressing social and economic challenges, particularly in relation to ageing populations. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the complexity of modern medicine and its role in maintaining overall health and well-being. This chapter provides a thought-provoking conclusion to the book, highlighting the evolution of healthcare systems and their critical role in addressing societal challenges. The author effectively weaves together historical context, international comparisons, and social commentary to create a compelling narrative. The writing is engaging, and specific examples add depth to the discussion. The chapter's focus on the complexities of modern medicine and its interconnectedness with social and economic factors makes for a nuanced and insightful read.

In conclusion, this book's examination of the history of medicine is marred by several methodological and structural flaws. The inaugural chapter's truncated and opaque exploration of pre-19th-century medical philosophy raises questions about the author's approach to historical contextualization. Furthermore, the book's failure to adequately elucidate connections between disparate topics and themes undermines its overall coherence. The selective bibliography, which some historians may see as skewed or incomplete, also warrants critical scrutiny. Despite these shortcomings, the book retains some value as an introductory text. However, readers must be aware of its limitations and engage with the

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material critically, recognizing the insights and oversights that permeate the narrative. Ultimately, a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to the subject matter would have strengthened the book's contributions to the field of medical history.