

Book Reviews

The Greatest Benefit to Mankind—A Medical History of Humanity, Roy Porter, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1997, xvi & 831 pp., (including 66 p. index) \$35, ISBN: 0-39304634-6.

Hippocrates, often called the father of medicine, stated that the art of medicine comprises three factors: the disease, the patient, and the physician. The present tome is a ten-year exploration of diseases, patients, and physicians, and their interrelations—a medical history of humanity.

The author lists medical advances of the last half of the twentieth century. Infant mortality has fallen 80 percent; deaths from infectious disease nearly halved; stroke deaths dropped by 40 percent, coronary fatalities by 19 percent—and these are diseases widely perceived to be worsening.

Medicine continues to advance; new treatments appear, surgery works marvels, and people live longer. Yet few people today feel confident, either about their personal health or about doctors. Healthcare delivery and the medical profession in general remain suspect.

The media, specializing in scare tactics, bombard us with medical news and breakthroughs that raise alarms more than spirits.

There is a pervasive sense that our well-being is imperilled by . . . the air we breathe to the food in the shops. We are healthier than ever before, yet more distrustful of doctors and the powers of what may broadly be called the “medical system.” Medical science seems to be fulfilling the wildest dreams of science fiction. . . . We turn doctors into heroes, yet feel equivocal about them.

Porter feels such ambiguities are not new. He recalls that in 1858 a statue dedicated to Edward Jenner, the pioneer of the smallpox vaccination, was erected in London’s Trafalgar Square. Protests followed. It was unseemly for a country doctor to be amidst the generals and admirals. Porter asks whether only those responsible for causing deaths rather than saving lives are worthy of public honor?

In Greek times, opinions about medicine were mixed. The word *phannakos* meant both remedy and poison—“kill” and “cure” were apparently indistinguishable. That idea—death and doctors riding together—has loomed large in history. Porter follows this thread as he assesses the impact of medicine and the response to it.

Porter’s goal is not to praise medicine—nor to blame it. He feels medicine has played a major and growing role in human societies and needs to be explored so that its place and powers can be understood. Porter discusses disease from a global viewpoint. A number of chapters cover medical beliefs from the very earliest societies to American medicine and disorders in the Third World. He devotes most attention to “Western” medicine. Its ceaseless spread throughout the world owes

much to western political and economic domination.

Western medicine has developed distinctive approaches to exploring the workings of the human body in sickness and in health. Peoples and cultures the world over, throughout history, have construed life (birth and death, sickness and health) primarily in the context of the wider cosmos. Modern Western thinking, however, has become indifferent to all such elements. The West has evolved a culture preoccupied with the self, reduced to the individual body that must last as long as possible.

Porter's ambitious ten-year effort takes us through a series of stages, belief systems, transcendental explanations, natural law, structures of medical organizations, temperaments of individuals, quacks, medical police, the hospital sphere, national insurance, national health schemes, and state bureaucracies throughout medical world history. Through his research, Porter became more aware of his own and the collective ignorance of historians about the medical history of mankind. The most celebrated physician is Hippocrates, yet we know nothing about him. The historical record is like the night sky: we see a few stars and group them into mythic constellations. But what is chiefly visible is the darkness. We need to read this masterpiece so that we see more and brighter stars.

—Del Meyer, M.D.

Minnesota's Twentieth Century: Stories of Extraordinary Everyday People, by D. J. Tice. University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 204 pp., \$29.95.

Born of the feature series "A Century of Stories" in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and with a theme of human dignity and the significance of individual actions, these stories all involve people of Minnesota. The author is an editorial writer of great skill in writing human interest stories. The book is well illustrated with photos and graphs.

Beginning with two notorious murder cases in 1905, leading to the abolition in 1911 of the death penalty in Minnesota, the series ends with the recent and continuing farm crisis.

In between are stories of World War I and the Commission of Public Safety which limited the liberties of American citizens, ousted the mayor of New Ulm and the president of Martin Luther College, the influenza pandemic of 1918, prohibition, lynchings in Duluth in 1920, the Milford mine disaster in 1924, the life story of Quentin Fairbanks of the Red Lake Indian reservation, the dust bowl and the great depression, three governors (John Johnson, Floyd Olson and Harold Stassen), a Minnesota volunteer on the losing side in the Spanish Civil War, fishing and art by Howard Sivertson of Isle Royale, a prisoner of war in 1943-1945, a pioneering woman editor from the iron range who appeared in the *Field of Dreams*, a black sailor who became deputy police chief in St. Paul, a soldier-politician-environmentalist, a Dutch immigrant, a marine in Vietnam, a businessman and Republican fund raiser involved in Watergate, Henry Boucha of the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame, an immigrant from Vietnam, and the author's mother's girlhood witnessing German prisoners of war marching past Whitewater State Park.

Tice's book deserves a place alongside more scholarly tomes of Minnesota history and may well be cited in future such works.

—William J. Hempel

Beyond Belief—Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples, by V. S. Naipaul. Random House, 1998, hard cover, 408 pp., \$27.95.

This is a book of stories of people in Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia where Islamic missionaries preached that if people were faithful to their religion, society would be blessed. They rejected the past of the local countries and Western values, praising only the deserts of Arabia, and they had little to no understanding of the creation of wealth. Dominant clerics destroyed their countries, and continue to do so.

Indonesia may have a resurgence of common sense now that Mr. Wahid is president. He goes back a long way and was a thorn in the side of Suharto, Habibie, and Imaduddin for many years. His family had been connected with the boarding schools in Java for more than a century, and has had more than thirty million followers. He did not approve of the identification of Islam with politics because it led to violence. I would assume he will do what he can to separate economics from ignorant clerical dominance.

Iran is ruled by fanatics who preach submission. One must submit to Allah, which becomes submission to clerical rule. Hotels have been nationalized, as have newspapers. Spies are everywhere, among young men and women, trying to prevent them from making signs to each other; flying helicopters over houses to see if anyone has television dishes and who might be watching Western programs; working night patrols not looking for terrorists but for those with alcohol, or compact discs or cassettes, or women whose hair is not completely covered.

Revolutionary slogans are everywhere.

Do not think that those who are slain in the cause of Allah are dead. They are alive and provided for by Allah.

Chanting in the war against Iraq filled men with thoughts of death and martyrdom and going to paradise and having freedom. People were sickened, but the assault against citizens went on. Government was out of control and life was anarchy and terror. The clerics had the same goals as the Communists: seize the property of the wealthy and give it to the poor. Khomeini had an instinctive, animal intelligence that enabled him to dominate the people.

There is unrest in Iran, student protests, and a president in Mohammed Khatami who wants to be moderate. Perhaps he will be successful, but it will be difficult because Islamic dogmatism remains the great force in the country.

Pakistan is the worst of the countries described in this book. Pakistan separated from India because of religion (!), wanting only an Islamic state, dreaming of a past that never was and a future that can never be. The Hindus of India were hated, but these Hindus welcomed the new learning of Europe and the institutions that the British had brought to their country. A new

intelligentsia grew by leaps and bounds, expanding in all directions, bringing the country into the modern world and a wealth that could lift the country out of poverty. Islamic Pakistanis proclaimed only the faith and then proclaimed the faith again and again while the country sank.

The Hindus and Sikhs who had to leave the country at the time of separation were wealthy, leaving wealth and property, and the Islamic faithful took what they could, adding theft to piety. Then there was the war in Afghanistan when drugs and guns were plentiful. Plunder was readily available.

Government offices in Pakistan stop for all prescribed prayers while whipping vans are sent out to correct the wicked. Holy wars within holy wars are a commonplace, with incredible brutality, while living in Karachi is living in a war zone where one may not get home alive.

Perhaps Malaysia has the best chance of a decent future. The country is so fertile that the natives luxuriated in their idyllic villages, wanted nothing to fulfill their lives. But because of unrest in China, Chinese came to the country, bringing strange habits and a different language, strangers in a blessed land. They had immense energy and did what they could to survive. They had no choice but to settle in cities. When the new world came, with technology and business, they were in the forefront. They transformed the country from a idyllic paradise into a wealthy, modern country. Malaysians joined them, and the country seems to be in peace.

—Angus MacDonald

Katyn: The Untold Story of Stalin's Polish Massacre, by Allen Paul. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997.

This book is of especial relevance to the academic community's recent studies of genocide. Although the mass graves in the Katyn Forest contained only 4,142 bodies, references to Katyn have come to include the execution by the Soviet Union's NKVD of a total of 15,000 Polish officers and "bourgeoisie" in April and May of 1940. (The other bodies are buried in still-unlocated mass graves.) Between October 1939 and June 1941, the Soviet Union additionally deported some 1.5 million Poles to various locations within the Soviet Union. More than a million of these were never heard from again. This was out of a total Polish population of 36 million.

In this scholarly account, Allen Paul ascribes the murders in particular to Stalin's desire "to eliminate Poland's educated class." The army was the single institution most vital to the unity of Poland's highly diverse population.

By eliminating all traces of its leadership, the Soviets expected to decapitate the country, rendering it helpless and compliant.

Stalin's efforts along these lines ran parallel to Hitler's, since both countries wished to subjugate Poland completely—and between September 1939 and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe both had control successively over Polish territory.

A follow-up study of the effects upon the Polish people is, accordingly, very much in order. What are the consequences, in a number of dimensions, of the “decapitation” of perhaps two generations of a people’s leadership? A study of the Polish example would have much to tell us about the effects of World Wars I and II on Europe as a whole, since they involved the death of great numbers of the nation’s best people and a resultant degradation of the national gene pools.

This book is valuable for a number of other reasons, as well, which include the following, though they are by no means exhaustive:

- The events of the Katyn massacres themselves. For many years, the Soviet Union placed the blame on Germany. Germany, indeed, was indicted for the crime at Nuremberg. Strong evidence pointed toward Soviet guilt, and all questions about it were removed in 1990 when Mikhail Gorbachev, in a ceremony at the Kremlin, released voluminous documents to the president of Poland showing the commission of the executions by the NKVD.
- The complicity of successive administrations within the United States and Great Britain in blaming the Nazis and hiding the fact of Soviet guilt. This points to a serious side-effect of the democratic nations’ having allied themselves with one totalitarian power against another. (It has long been an established premise within Western opinion that the alliance with Stalin against Hitler was morally necessary, but it was a premise questioned by former United States president Herbert Hoover and a good many Americans before World War II.)
- The perspective it provides about the Nuremberg tribunal. The indictment of the Nazis for the crime, and the subsequent dishonesty of quietly omitting all mention of it in the final judgment despite strong evidence of Soviet guilt, demonstrates the travesty, in terms of the Rule of Law, of having the victors prosecute and judge war crimes cases. The lesson applies even when none of the victors is a totalitarian power, as was the case at Nuremberg; the show trial of John Demjanjuk in Israel for being Ivan the Terrible at Treblinka—a trial that resulted in a death sentence that was set aside only after Soviet archives opened to show that another man had been Ivan—tells us that even a democracy is capable of sham justice.
- The perspective it provides, also, about Communism as a totalitarian system as compared with Nazism. Even today, a double standard allows Marxism-Leninism a comparatively favorable image despite its murderous record.

—Dwight Murphey