

Book Reviews

History accessible to a wider audience will be found.

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Louise Foxcroft, *The making of addiction: the 'use and abuse' of opium in nineteenth-century Britain*, *The History of Medicine in Context*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, pp. xvii, 199, £55.00, \$99.95 (hardback 978-0-7546-5633-3).

When this book first appeared on the publisher's list, some colleagues mentioned its subject to me. They wondered how it would differ from a book I had published some years ago. I wondered too: but I approached the book with an open mind and a realization that historical research and interpretation has a shelf life. Perhaps it was time for a new approach.

I cannot say that I was convinced that this book provided it. The author starts with a misapprehension. "There are few recent historical works that include accounts of addiction . . ." (p. 3), she claims. The aim of the new book is to provide a nuanced account of addiction in the nineteenth century. My own *Opium and the people* is acknowledged as having done this. But, so Foxcroft states, "the 'nature and significance' of addiction is relegated to an appendix in the 1987 edition" (p. 5). She has this wrong. The main text of the book, which I wrote, contains a whole section and two chapters (12 and 13) which deal with the nature of opium use as a disease, the emergence of disease views and the role of hypodermic morphine in the process. The appendix which she criticizes was written by Griffith Edwards and this is clearly stated in the book; thus the words quoted represent the view of a psychiatrist in the 1980s, not the historical discussion in the rest of the text. Other authors—Geoffrey Harding and Terry Parssinen, for example—have also touched on the emergence of these concepts in their work and Mariana Valverde's *Diseases of the will*, which is not cited, has given a recent reinterpretation.

Establishing new interpretation is fine and to be welcomed—but it should not be done by misrepresenting the existing state of play.

The book's contents did not reduce my sense of irritation. Much parallels that in my own production. There is a discussion of early history; the period before the nineteenth century (the usual authors are cited); the impact of poisoning by opium; literary use; the Earl of Mar case, which opened up discussion of whether the moderate and lengthy use of opium was harmful; the Chinese and anti-opium agitation; the emergence of addiction through discussion of the use of the hypodermic syringe and literary sources. There is new material but often some familiar quotations peep through.

What is different? The availability of a larger amount of secondary comment on literary usage has enabled the author to write well about this topic. The chapters provide interesting quotation and further detail about addicts such as Helen Gladstone, sister of William. I am surprised that the recent focus on Wilberforce with the current interest in the abolition of the slave trade has made nothing of his tolerated opium addiction, a parallel example of attitude change over the last two centuries. The greater volume of historical interpretation on the wider history of medicine field which now exists is also drawn upon. Some areas of significance are not here. There is little on popular use and nothing on the Fens, nothing on the legislative issues of the nineteenth century—the role of pharmaceutical regulation or the role of patent medicines.

There are some surprising omissions. One is the connection between disease theories of opium and those concerned with alcohol, addiction to drugs and to alcohol. There is an appendix on opium and alcohol but it does not touch on the connection. The few references to inebriates and inebriety in the index also do not lead to a sustained discussion. If the book's aim is to deepen our understanding of the role and emergence of addiction as a concept it must surely discuss this connection, which was an important one. Overall the book has its interesting passages, but I found it difficult to

understand what was really new and original about its approach.

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Ian Burney, *Poison, detection and the Victorian imagination*, Encounters, Cultural Histories Series, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2006, pp. viii, 193, £35.00, \$59.95 (hardback 978-0-7190-7376-2).

As any weekly television schedule will confirm, the battle of wits between a cunning murderer and a skilled “medical detective” is an endlessly fertile source of entertainment. Occasionally the roles are reversed, and we are presented with the struggles of an innocent accused against a fanatical and charismatic expert. Ian Burney shows how similar dramas were played out in the courtrooms, newspapers and novels of Victorian England.

Central to Burney’s skilful interweaving of medical, legal and cultural history is the versatile concept of “imagination”. If imagination involves “calling into being something not immediately perceptible” (p. 4) then toxicologists were engaged in an imaginative exercise, however much they strove to present their evidence as hard scientific fact. The toxicologists’ insistence (contrary to earlier beliefs) on the invisibility of poison, its ability to kill without external signs of violence, gave it its imaginative resonance at the same time as making its detection the preserve of experts. But expert detection frequently depended on subtle discriminations of taste and smell that could only be communicated by verbal similes, again appealing to the audience’s imagination. Even when the toxicologist literally succeeded in making the invisible visible, as in the white deposit produced by Marsh’s test for arsenic, appearances could be deceptive. The deposit might be antimony, itself a poison but commonly used in medicines and as an emetic in cases of suspected poisoning.

In a fascinating discussion of poisoning trials (which has parallels, in ways Burney might usefully explore, with a number of recent studies in the sociology of science), Burney argues that while toxicologists sought to contrast their disinterested scientific virtue with the adversarial game-playing of counsel, the construction of scientific knowledge and its forensic deconstruction were in many respects homologous. The courtroom was a laboratory in which scientific evidence was tested by the experiment of cross-examination. Scientists adduced a range of experimental results as pieces of testimony which, while individually inconclusive, corroborated one another as proofs of the suspect substance’s toxicity.

Burney’s discussion of criminal trials might have been enriched by a closer attention to developments in trial procedure. The trial of William Palmer (1856), to which Burney devotes a full chapter, has also been analysed by the legal historian David Cairns in *Advocacy and the making of the adversarial criminal trial 1800–1865* (1998), and it is worth reading both accounts to understand how the scientific evidence fitted into the larger drama of the trial. What Burney perhaps does not sufficiently emphasize is how far the successful prosecution of Palmer and other alleged poisoners depended on counsel’s ability to weave scientific and circumstantial evidence together into a compelling narrative. While this strategy enabled the prosecution’s poison-hunters to carry the day, it also disrupted the image of their activity as a hermetic, scientific inquiry whose results the jury must accept as authoritative. The choice between experts was subsumed into a choice between competing narratives of murder or tragic coincidence. Burney is perhaps too quick to accord explanatory primacy to cultural factors rather than to the dynamics of the adversarial trial in accounting for the equivocal outcomes of those trials from the poison-hunters’ point of view. His discussion of the cultural significance of poison, as reflected for example in the novels of Bulwer Lytton and Wilkie Collins, nevertheless adds an important dimension to his account of the legal and scientific controversies