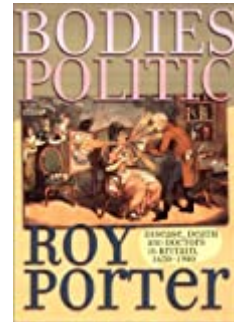


Roy Porter. *Bodies Politic: Disease, Death and Doctors in Britain, 1650-1900.* Picturing History series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. 328 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3953-7.



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A Picture of Health: Representations of British Practitioners and Patients in Popular Media

A Picture of Health: Representations of British Practitioners and Patients in Popular Media

The purpose of Roy Porter's *Bodies Politic: Disease, Death and Doctors in Britain, 1650-1900* is to examine the body beliefs, medical practices, and health care providers of the period through "the public representations of them in a variety of media, verbal and visual" (p. 272). In his preface, Porter observes that, like most historians, he has spent his career working with the documentary evidence that is conventionally thought to be superior to the "merely visual" (p. 9). Yet, the proliferation in the long eighteenth century of images of all types led him to ask how exploration of these images and the texts invariably accompanying them could enhance the information and interpretations suggested by printed materials. *Bodies Politic* answers this question.

The book is organized topically. Opening with an introduction which describes the territory to be covered, it begins with chapters on "The Body Grotesque and Monstrous," "The Body Healthy and Beautiful," and representations of disease, both physical and mental. Central chapters discuss characterizations of practitioners and

patients. Chapter 7 explores depictions of unlicensed and often unorthodox practitioners, while Chapter 8 illuminates a variety of internal and external problems bedeviling the "regular" medical profession. Concluding chapters consider the use of body and medical metaphors to characterize political issues and changes in representations of doctors and medicine occurring in the Victorian era.

Bodies Politic is beautifully produced, with its 137 color and black-and-white illustrations appearing on the substantial glossy paper usually associated with coffee table books. While readers may find the illustrations too small to enable easy reading of the text with which they are liberally embellished, Porter forestalls frustration by describing the visual contents, reproducing text, and discussing the meaning of the whole. The pictures themselves are wonderful, bringing back the vitality of the daily lives and preoccupations of 18th- and 19th-century people in ways that mere narrative never can.

This is, however, much more than a picture book. Porter's elegant writing and command of a huge variety of sources reveal a scholar at the top of his game—a mas-

ter having a wonderful time in familiar territory. This is not, of course, surprising. As the dust jacket reminds us, this is only the penultimate of the more than 75 books Porter wrote or edited during his career. *Bodies Politic* is informed by the wide-ranging research that went into those books and created a remarkable career.

It is fitting that this work, published shortly before the author's untimely death on March 3, 2002, is so full of Porter's huge enjoyment of the human condition. The book fairly quivers with his sense of the ridiculous, exploring the peccadilloes of both practitioners and patients in wicked and sometimes scatological detail. It is full of jokes that reveal both the deadly importance of, and the universal indignities associated with suffering and healing. As is true of Porter's other works, it also places health, illness, and medicine at the vital center of British social and political life.

Roy Porter, more than any other scholar, put the history of medicine on the scholarly map. His productivity

was legendary. However, his enthusiasm, imagination, and energy also stimulated others to cultivate new directions in the field. He was incredibly generous—a quality I experienced at first hand. He commissioned for one of his edited collections the first paper I published. He invited me to participate in several wonderful seminars and conferences. He served as an external examiner of my Ph.D. dissertation and reviewed my first book. He was unfailing in his support of my career, always responding promptly to requests for yet another letter and offering encouragement during bleak times. I can hardly believe that he is gone; the world is much the poorer for his passing.

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