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Steven Palmer From Popular Medicine to Medical Populism: Doctors, Healers, and Public Power in Costa Rica, 1800-1940. (Book Review)

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enterprises of William Vernon Harcourt (the Yorkshire Philosophical Society and the British Association for the Advancement of Science), Henry De la Beche (the Geological Survey of Great Britain), and Smith himself (as mineral surveyor), gifted itinerant lecturer, supporter of educational enterprises, astronomer, meteorologist, instrument maker, Oxford don, and prolific author, Phillips was deeply woven into the intellectual fabric of Victorian Britain. His life's journey was the professionalizing journey of geology itself, from lowly private enterprise, through private museums and societies, to the national survey and the university system. It was also, supposedly, a Smilesian journey of self-improvement, from poverty-stricken orphan to the heights of academia. That ascent, however, can be overstated: Phillips was no product of the laboring classes and benefited from a (relatively) fine education, and in Smith he had a mentor who did much to shape the intellectual, visual, and fieldwork practices of geology. Phillips's elevation was the product of natural eloquence and pleasant blandness, an intellectual inheritance, and the sheer hard work of multiple occupations. He was not gifted with inspirational genius or intellectual arrogance, and in Jack Morrell's long-awaited biography his excellence emerges as in many respects quite ordinary.

Morrell is perfectly placed to undertake this autopsy of Phillips's life, for he has excelled as a historian of the British Association, Oxford science, and the intellectual culture of Yorkshire—all important contexts in the present work. This biography is, as one would expect from Morrell's past work, rigorous, learned, eloquent, analytical; it is not a "dirt under the fingernails" story exposing the reader to the grime of Whitby or the rainy squalls of the Welsh mountains. Rather, Morrell seems to revel in the multifaceted complexities of society, preferring the encyclopedic to the simple narrative. He has no taste for Romantic heroism or for elevating controversy, preferring instead to document a Victorian life by engaging the reader in its richness. He is helped in this labor by Phillips's Romantic ambition to keep his name alive, an ambition furthered through diary writing and notebook and letter keeping. It is for this reason that Phillips has become increasingly studied, but Morrell avoids repeating the work of others—which is concentrated on Phillips's first thirty years and a short period in his forties. So in some respects the appearance of comprehensiveness here is an illusion; there is a good deal more that is important but that Morrell has left for others to say. Phillips's important first book,

for example, gets rather little attention. Where Morrell does repeat earlier work, he does so because he has important additional information—for example, regarding Phillips's role in Smith's deification or Anne Phillips's important conglomerate. The last thirty years of Phillips's life are treated in detail, and here Morrell reveals an aspect—Phillips's Oxford years—that has hardly been explored. It is during this period that he published his critique of evolution—"washed, stilted," according to Charles Lyell, and "namby-pamby, old-woman" according to Charles Darwin (p. 356). It reveals Phillips's innate desire to avoid a fight; having risen from a lower station and always in need of a salary, he knew the benefits of caution and diplomacy. While such things are assets in a young man, they are not in an Oxford don.

Morrell's starting point for this biography was to try to understand Phillips's veneration on his death. It is not a question to which Morrell returns, but he answers it nonetheless, for his placement of Phillips in a rich, complex, yet quite everyday world makes the respect he achieved more understandable. Phillips *worked* his way into society, into numerous networks spanning generations, and, through his lectures and popular writing, into the heart of the public. Morrell has mirrored Phillips's industry in the production of this substantial and rich study, where mere sentences have clearly been won by considerable labor. *John Phillips and the Business of Victorian Science* is a remarkably thorough study of a life, and I am delighted to have it.

SIMON J. KNELL

Steven Palmer. *From Popular Medicine to Medical Populism: Doctors, Healers, and Public Power in Costa Rica, 1800–1940.* xiv + 329 pp., bibl., index. Durham, N.C./London: Duke University Press, 2003. \$69.95 (cloth).

This is an excellent book that covers the evolution of medical practice in Costa Rica from colonial times to the point at which conventional (licensed) medicine became available to most Costa Ricans. It illustrates how changes in health practices worldwide influenced medicine in this small and (in terms of medicine) largely peripheral country. Although focused on Costa Rica, *From Popular Medicine to Medical Populism* contains numerous references to medical practices elsewhere in Latin America, so readers interested in the general topic of medicine in this part of the world will find it very valuable. The volume is well organized, and Steven Palmer

writes with enormous clarity while exploring the subject thoroughly. He has produced a highly readable book that achieves an excellent combination of depth and breath.

One of the major strengths of this book, and what makes it quite different from other medical historiographies of the region, is that the author fully understands the role of unconventional medicine in Latin American countries. Thus he explores the influences of Native American, Afro-Antillean, and Chinese traditions and the extent to which the role of the *curanderos* (healers) was embedded in the psyche of the local population.

Between the time the country achieved independence in 1821 and 1870, almost all licensed medical doctors in Costa Rica were European immigrants. Many of these “doctors” had “lost” their diplomas, and their “credentials” were accepted at face value in a country that was desperate for physicians. Slowly but steadily these physicians were replaced by Costa Rican doctors, who were mostly educated in the United States and in Europe; at the same time, the practice of medicine was increasingly institutionalized within hospitals.

Unlike other Latin American countries, where conventional medicine developed mainly in the large urban centers, Costa Rica remained largely rural. This socioeconomic condition set the stage for what the book describes so admirably: the *mestizaje* (race mixing) of medical practice—that is, the way the whole range of medical practitioners, from academically educated doctors to *curanderos* and healers, pharmacists of all kinds, and nurses and midwives, commanded the attention of all citizens in need of medical care.

The hybridization of these practices was not easy, however, because of the constant rivalries among different factions within each of those professions as well as among them. This resulted in what the author calls medical populism, where less academically oriented practitioners absorbed some of the techniques of the more academically trained ones and vice versa. Although this intellectual hybridization parallels the ethnic *mestizaje* of Costa Rica and other Latin American countries, the application of the word “populism” is quite adequate to describe the phenomenon, since populism is itself such a pervasive cultural practice in Latin America, in domains ranging from politics to religion.

For example, it has not escaped Palmer’s attention that many academically trained doctors in Costa Rica occupied positions of great political influence (including the presidency) in the country. Since populism is the easiest ticket into

Latin American politics, it is not surprising that influential doctors accepted a form of populism in the practice of their own profession.

The author’s excellent introduction provides the basic material for understanding the content of the book. There is mention of a subject that still awaits further studies: the reception and development of eugenic ideas in Latin America. The reader may be surprised to see how immigration laws and practices in Costa Rica (developed to keep “undesirables” out) mirrored those of the United States at the same time.

I was disappointed that there is no treatment of a medical practice generally illegal but common in Latin America—abortion—particularly because its frequency and the way it is practiced are closely linked to social class. Despite this shortcoming, however, Palmer achieves what he set out to do: a study of the evolution of medical practice and politics for an entire Latin American country.

ALDEMARO ROMERO

Kavita Philip. *Civilizing Natures: Race, Resources, and Modernity in Colonial South India.* viii + 256 pp., index. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Within the last two decades, several studies on the introduction of Western science in India have contributed to a lively discussion, analyzing the underlying assumptions and objectives of the colonial overlords and the responses of the indigenous people. Kavita Philip’s study, covering the period between 1858 and 1930, deserves special attention for two reasons: first, it deals with a remote region in India that has generally eluded scholars; second, it adopts a multidisciplinary approach to synthesize the findings of experts from the humanities and social sciences as well as literary, cultural, and environmental studies. Chapters 2 and 7 have previously appeared elsewhere, but their inclusion here is intended to furnish local and global contexts against which the disparate discourses on nature, natives, and scientific modernity can be more critically examined. By adopting “a cultural materialistic approach” in Chapter 1, Philip argues that “colonial scientific modernity was made up of a mixture of contradictory elements of indigenous labor, resistance and cooperation, religiously inflected moral agendas, and an Enlightenment science that was often seen as a protector, and not merely an exploiter, of nature” (p. 12).

Chapters 2–6 recount the British discovery of the Nilgiris on the Western Ghats—a collection of majestic hills and pristine forests inhabited by