BOOK REVIEWS


Not until after the Revolution did Americans begin to develop a patent medicine industry of their own, having relied almost exclusively on imports from the mother country until the break occurred. Once initiated, however, many factors combined to facilitate its rapid evolution into a large-scale, nationwide enterprise. Professor Young shows how the weaknesses of regular medical practice in the pre-scientific period played into the hands of the nostrum vendors. Other factors favorable to medical quackery included the individualistic, anti-intellectual, ultra-democratic, and laisser-faire attitudes of the Jacksonian era — with every man his own physician and medical licensing laws generally viewed as monopolistic.

Furthermore, the expansion of the newspaper business along with mass education opened the way for advertising on a national basis. And the patent medicine men were pioneers in the merchandising techniques which ultimately would become an integral part of the American way of life: flamboyant (and often misleading) advertising, direct to the consumer, throughout the entire country. The "hidden persuaders" of the twentieth century represent a new phenomenon only in the sense of being slightly more subtle, although this may be debatable. The nineteenth-century remedy-pushers had a real mastery of psychology long before that science was elaborated.

In addition to extensive newspaper advertising, the makers and sellers of panaceas extolled the virtues of their wares by means of pamphlets, handbills, posters, almanacs, medicine shows, and signs painted on walls, fences, trees, rocks and mountainsides.

Although it was simple enough to concoct a medicine, the difficult and increasingly expensive problem was that of promotion itself. One highly successful compound was 99% water; the promotional framework, however, captured the popular imagination. Many tried and failed. Those who succeeded were almost without exception colorful and eccentric personalities. Professor Young does a masterful job of portraying these characters, their ingenuity, their methods and motives — sometimes sincere although misguided.
One interesting sidelight of the nostrum business in the latter nineteenth century was its relationship with the temperance movement. Many concoctions, ranging from forty to eighty proof, were widely used as liquor substitutes in areas where the prohibitionists had their way.

Intermittently throughout the nineteenth century criticism was directed at the patent medicine business by physicians, pharmacists, and other reformers. It was not until the late nineteenth century, however, that the question of food and drug legislation became a real issue. The utilization of chemistry for analyzing the compounds and exposing their contents was basic to the movement toward reform. Young gives an excellent account of the forces involved in the drive toward federal legislation on the subject in the Progressive era. The journalistic crusade of the muckrakers; the organized activity of pressure groups (including the A.M.A. and druggists' trade associations); the influence of Harvey Wiley, chemist in the Department of Agriculture; and the impact of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* on public opinion — all these were aspects of the movement which culminated in federal legislation on the related problems of meat inspection and food and drug regulation in 1906.

Although federal regulatory measures in the twentieth century certainly have mitigated some of the worst features which had prevailed in the proprietary drug business, the legislation has serious deficiencies, and abuses still abound. Quackery is still very much with us in this age of legitimate miracle medicines and wonder drugs. Vitamins, health food fads, and weight losing methods are examples of fertile fields for unjustified advertising claims. Since modern medicine and public health measures have largely eliminated the infectious diseases, the major problems today involve heart disease, cancer, and the ailments of old age. Hence, the nostrum promoters have shifted emphasis to those problems which remain yet unsolved by medical science. They promise quick results and certain cure, while the physician can only be tentative. And to the attractive offer of the simple and the certain in place of the complex and the uncertain, twentieth-century man is scarcely less receptive than his predecessors.

With his fascinating account of the patent medicine business in America from colonial times through the early twentieth century, Professor Young has clearly demonstrated that a scholarly study need not be dull at all — as many persons, including scholars
themselves, so often assume. On the contrary it can be lively and entertaining literature. Although his subject has an inherent appeal all its own, the author's flair with words is noteworthy. While employing the analytical approach of the "social scientist," he has also managed to set forth the narrative, the broad patterns of development, conclusions, and insights in a vivid, imaginative style — a combination all too rare in historical writing.

A comprehensive treatment of patent medicines in this country, an important chapter in American social, intellectual, and medical history, *The Toadstool Millionaires* also provides a good indirect commentary on the human predicament, the enduring thread of irrationality.

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*A Petition, Regarding the Conditions in the C. S. M. Prison at Columbia, S. C., Addressed to the Confederate Authorities.* By COL. JOHN FRASER. Ed. by GEORGE L. ANDERSON. (The University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence, Kansas, 1962.)

This 57-page pamphlet, which is Number 14 of the Library Series of the University of Kansas Publications, contains much interesting information about prison conditions in the Southern Confederacy, and also about the life of Colonel John Fraser, who had had a distinguished career as a scholar and teacher before the war, and was to become an educational administrator at several institutions afterwards.

It is astonishing how many institutions of learning Colonel Fraser was connected with: two in Scotland, one in Bermuda, one in New York, and two in Pennsylvania before his military duty, and later two more in Pennsylvania, and two in Kansas. For six years he was Chancellor of the University of Kansas and for two years he was State Superintendent of Public Instruction of Kansas. His Civil War career, however, revolved around his professorship of mathematics at Jefferson College at Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, from 1855 to 1862. It was from this community that he raised a company of volunteers in the summer of 1862, and it was to this