

BOOK REVIEW

The Mesmerist: The Society Doctor Who Held Victorian London Spellbound by Wendy Moore

Hardback, 320 pages
Weidenfeld & Nicolson
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Against a background of nineteenth-century medicine, where scientific research conflicted with practices of bleeding, blistering and cupping, Wendy Moore introduces the charismatic but flawed character John Elliotson.

A brilliant lecturer and a humanitarian who treated the poor for free, Elliotson had appreciated the benefits of the stethoscope, popularised quinine and identified pollen as a reactive agent, but his desire for the dramatic led him down a path that caused him to fall out with his erstwhile friend and supporter, Thomas Wakley, editor of *The Lancet*. The medical historian will appreciate Moore's summary of nineteenth-century medicine, whilst the lay reader might be horrified to learn about what took place in the operating "theatre", for the work of surgeons was akin to theatre, with its star performers, bitter rivalries and prize seats. Without anaesthetics, speed was of the essence to mitigate blood loss and pain. Mesmerism provided the theatrical – a possible antidote to pain – and the book begins with a demonstration of its powers.

Elliotson had become intrigued by the potential of mesmerism, a concept named after the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer and promoted in England by the self-styled Baron Jules Denis Dupotet. An epileptic girl, Elizabeth Okey, who had become something of a celebrity, fell into a trance supervised by Elliotson and demonstrated a changed personality, indulging in scandalous behaviour. Susceptibility to hypnotism is studied today but Elliotson's experiments became more extreme and possibly exploitative. Wakley, concerned to enhance the professionalism of medicine, conducted experiments on the Okey sisters, became convinced they were frauds, and denounced both them and mesmerism in *The Lancet*. Mesmerism was banned from University College Hospital, although Elliotson continued to practise at home. He later had something of a rehabilitation but never reconciled with Wakley.

As in all her works, Moore provides evidence of meticulous research with copious notes to be appreciated by the medical historian and her acknowledgements demonstrate the breadth of her consultation. The social historian can delight in the background she provides of living conditions, public health and nineteenth-century London geography, and her illustrations bring to life the characters she describes. For example, the works of Charles Dickens, a friend of Elliotson, show a fascination with mesmerism and the intermingling of literature and medicine.

If, at times, Moore tends to over-dramatise and mixes speculation with fact, *The Mesmerist* examines an area of medical history that is often seen as merely a footnote and is an invaluable addition to the literature on the struggle between science and superstition.

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