

BOOK REVIEW

Medicine: The Definitive Illustrated History

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Hardback, 288 pages
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This well-produced and comprehensive book – as the introduction states – “...throws a spotlight onto what has been, the giant strides that medicine has achieved, and how the balance between health and illness looks set to improve for future generations”.

The book has five sections: Ancient Wisdom to 700; Revival and Renaissance, 700-1800; Science Takes Charge, 1800-1900; Era of Specialization, 1900-1960; and Promises Old and New, 1960-Present. Each section has an introductory two-page timeline, followed by a series of two-page articles, each on a specific subject. Four major topics are given an extended treatment over four pages: The Golden Age of Islamic Medicine, Medieval Medicine, The Anatomy Revolution, and Cancers. Each of the individual articles stands alone, mixing easy-to-follow text and abundant, captioned illustrations.

The book certainly achieves its aim by casting its spotlight on over a hundred “scenes” where, in general, the text plays the main role and the illustrations are chosen as the supporting cast. In five excellent scenes, however, the illustrations are the stars and need only minimal accompaniment. These are: The Evolution of Microscopes, Early Anaesthetics, Diagnostic Instruments, The Evolution of Syringes, and Artificial Body Parts. Also excellent are the illustrations of Scurvy, Diagnostic Dolls, and Post-mortem Instruments.

One of the challenges of illustrated histories is the problem of finding space to provide descriptions of the illustrations themselves. Typically, the captions in this book are short and limited to what the illustration shows; details of where it first appeared, when and why it was created, and how it can be interpreted are almost always missing. One exception is the caption accompanying *Going Away*, a staged photograph by Henry Peach Robinson, in the article on Tuberculosis, which explains that the disease was often romanticised by writers, poets, playwrights and artists as a disease of the able, intelligent and creative. In general, though, an opportunity has been missed to interpret the illustrations more fully.

Overall, *Medicine: The Definitive Illustrated History* represents good value for money, has hundreds of excellent illustrations, and should appeal to all with an interest in the history of medicine.

David Wright
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