

BOOK REVIEW

A History of Women in Medicine: Cunning Women, Physicians, Witches by Sinéad Spearing

Hardback, 147 pages
Pen & Sword Books
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Sinéad Spearing's work is an examination of forgotten female "cunning women", physicians and witches: their lives, practices and subsequent demonisation. She draws upon new archaeological evidence, religious practices, rites and theories and the Old English medical texts "Bald's Leechbook" and "Lacnunga" to illuminate her work as she seeks to redeem the reputation of these cunning women. Her range of sources and translations of old English medicinal remedies are impressive.

The book has three main strands: women as archaeological artefacts within a wider social and pagan belief system, the Church's attitude towards that belief system, and the collision of those worlds. The analysis of recent Anglo-Saxon burials is fascinating, and Spearing uses one find in the Cotswolds of a woman she names "Mildbryb" – Mildred – to question the significance of the contents of the "doctor's bag" and artefacts found with her and others like her. She also questions why the graves of such women were found at the edges of graveyards; could they have been seen as frightening personae?

The author examines the contribution of St Augustine to denigrating British paganism and the women who indulged in its evil practices. She also provides an interesting analysis of the word witch, both in its present-day connotation and the origins of the Hwiccians as an Anglo-Saxon tribe, who possibly continued pagan practices resisting Christianity, leading to a "wicce" being viewed as a practitioner of witchcraft with black magic.

The title of the book is somewhat misleading. It is not really a history of women in medicine, broadly interpreted, but rather a case study largely focussing on one woman, and much of the book is speculative. This aspect could appeal to all who like to speculate on the past and the book is an excellent introduction to the topic, the wide range of sources providing much opportunity for the interested reader to investigate further. The professional historian, however, might regret the lack of a wider historical context, varying points of view, and Spearing's tendency to look at the past with a 21st-century eye, particularly in her field of psychology.

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