

BOOK REVIEW

Migraine: A History **by Katherine Foxhall**

Paperback, 292 pages
Johns Hopkins University Press
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This is a beguiling and intriguing but somewhat diffuse book of historical reference and analysis extending from mediaeval times to the present day. Its focus is principally on the experiences of sufferers from the disorder known at various times as *megrin* and *hemicrania* and latterly as *migraine*, as described in diaries, letters, fiction and even religious literature from the 10th century onwards, frequently related to the particular complaints and artworks of notable patients.

Each of the ten chapters begins with a quotation from a single source, usually to a contemporaneous recipe book, that is expanded to cover how the condition was regarded at the time, what were its personal, domestic and social effects, and how it was treated. These accounts, together with black and white half-tone illustrations of variable quality, illustrate the difficulties of definition and separation from other types of repetitive headaches just as the recommended early therapies – bloodletting, many types of herbs in early “receipts” and different diets – reflect changing beliefs in humoral and pathophysiological causes of disease. Prominence throughout is given to the visual disturbances and auras experienced by many afflicted with migraine.

The last four chapters describe the genesis of the modern classification of headache and the successful drug treatments for several types of migraine guided by changing ideas of its cause as a psychological, allergic, vascular and finally a primarily neural disorder. There are extensive explanatory notes, references and a bibliography of 24 pages, comprising mostly British and American sources, but including other classical and European works. The approach is descriptive and narrative more than analytical or critical, especially when describing the sciences involved and in the accounts of contemporaneous cultural and literary schools.

Reading the book was a pleasure both for its fluency and for the information about a wide range of sources and cultural influences that are less well known than they deserve among historians of medicine.

Tony Dayan
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