

BOOK REVIEW

The Medicine Cabinet: The Story of Health and Disease Told Through Extraordinary Objects *by Natasha McEnroe and Selina Hurley (eds.)*

Hardcover, 256 pages
André Deutsch
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The Science Museum's medical collection comprises more than 150,000 objects, a legacy of Sir Henry Wellcome's collecting obsession built upon over the years by the museum's curators. The result is a storehouse of medical items – unique in scale and scope – that document the long and diverse history of healthcare in all its dimensions. A small fraction of this extensive collection populates a new exhibition space: "Medicine: The Wellcome Galleries".

The Medicine Cabinet is inspired by the "cabinets of curiosities" from earlier centuries that collected extraordinary objects to categorise and relate stories about the wonders of the natural world. The book tells the stories of 100 objects in the medical collection written by 21 contributors associated with the Museum. Each object is displayed as a high-quality, full-page image, accompanied by a page of explanatory text with additional relevant illustrations. In each case, the object's origins, medical importance and wider relevance, and the personal or human angle involved, are explained in a readily digestible manner.

The varied items are broadly grouped under 10 headings – understanding our bodies, birth and death, diagnosis, surgery, public health, assistive technology, belief, drugs and pharmacy, war, and hospitals – and range across art, culture, ethnography, the natural world and religion, blending the ancient and modern, local and global, mundane and exotic to create a stimulatingly eclectic mix..

Among the objects included are some of the usual suspects such as Jenner's lancet, Laënnec's stethoscope and Lister's carbolic spray. The range is wide: there are anatomical models, microscopes and obstetric forceps; books, posters and drawings; test-kits, scanners and robots; machines, vehicles and equipment; and models of organs, molecules and hospitals.

Some objects may seem rather ordinary, such as a pair of plastic NHS spectacles, yet they help us examine why the newly established service catered to a basic need with an emphasis on cost-effectiveness and utility that led to wearers becoming stigmatized. Others are less familiar: the biscuit-packer's test, Japanese bitterlings and Smokey Sue to name but a few.

Authoritatively written, richly illustrated and handsomely produced, this book is in equal parts interesting, informative and entertaining and should appeal to anyone with a general interest in the history of medicine. It gives a good taste of what makes medical objects worth collecting and may well encourage the reader to explore more of the artefacts – and the stories associated with them – that will be on show at the Science Museum for many years to come.

Edward Wawrzynczak
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