

BOOK REVIEW

Health, Hedonism & Hypochondria. The Hidden History of Spas

by Ian Bradley

Hardback, 304 pages (also available as e-book)

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The British medical profession has long turned its back on traditional spas with their reputation for cures brought about by “taking the waters”. For most younger people in the UK, spas are associated with the beauty and “wellness” industry or luxury hotels and exotic holiday resorts offering a mix of pampering and pummelling. Throughout Europe there has been a more recent decline in many old established spas.

Ian Bradley’s “Health Hedonism and Hypochondria” comprehensively traces the origins and evolution of European spas from classical times to the present day. Although this is primarily a social history, the medical aspects are not neglected. After a fairly long introduction, he deals briefly with mediaeval and early renaissance balneological practice.

As well as geothermal spas, we are introduced to Turkish baths and hydropathic establishments offering cold baths and dripping sheets. The focus is primarily on the personalities frequenting these institutions, some seeking “*sana per aquam*” while others looking for a few days of debauchery.

The sexually charged atmosphere of a spa often led visitors to form brief romantic relationships. German speakers have a word - *Kurschatten* - to describe these amorous dalliances, a theme to which Bradley frequently returns and provides many examples of this phenomenon during La Belle Époque of European spas.

The final chapters examine how the great spas of the 19th century with their illustrious visitors transformed to accommodate a more proletarian and medically needy clientele. The book culminates with Bradley’s personal experience of treatments exemplifying the contrasting extremes of punishment and pampering.

The author’s extensive research is reflected in his bibliography but nearly all his reference material is taken from secondary sources. His writing style is engaging and the book contains many entertaining vignettes without losing its more serious treatment of the subject. The limited illustrations were a slight disappointment. Bradley provides a useful account of the historic importance of the traditional spas aimed at the general reader.

Roger Rolls

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