

BOOK REVIEW

Merchants of Medicines. The Commerce and Coercion of Health in Britain's Long Eighteenth Century *by Zachary Dorner*

Hardback (also available in other formats) 280 pages
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The long-distance supply of manufactured medicines, particularly across the Atlantic and to Southeast Asia, is the focus of Zachary Dorner's *Merchants of Medicines*. The story starts at its distributive heart in London, in the laboratory, the ledger and the medicine chest. Utilising particularly the archives of Thomas Corbyn of Holborn and the Bevans from the Plough Court Pharmacy, Dorner demonstrates how imperial requirements drove bulk production and purchase and shifted distribution from the local to the global. Such activity was not without its challenges of delays and debts. Crucially, the networks of trade and credit which supported it brought merchants of medicine closer to the slave trade and plantation economy, with their products maintaining the health of unfree labour.

The case study of Silvester Gardner (1707-1786) originally a surgeon in New England, moves the focus to a different colonial space. For Gardner, the distribution and sale of medicines was one tenet of his strategy for gaining wealth and status. Through Gardner's activities, Dorner shows how medicines were one of many threads linking extractive enterprises of land speculation, military engagement and slavery, with the approach to health undoubtedly shaped by colonial exigencies. However, the onset of the American Revolutionary War fractured transatlantic networks of supply. Merchants in London struggled to recoup debts, whilst those across the Atlantic questioned reliance on imports and made moves towards greater self-sufficiency.

Covering a period of far-reaching changes in commerce, governance and healthcare, Dorner highlights the tensions between care and coercion and quality and profit that shaped manufactured medicines' global journey and left complicated legacies. Drawing on important and underused archival sources, this book is essential reading for historians of medicine, pharmacy, empire and trade. The publication is beautifully produced, with well-designed maps and carefully chosen images. It is superb example of how ledgers, letters, accounts and government records can be utilised to build an intricate picture of how merchants made (and lost) money from a trade inextricably linked to the growth of empire and exploitation.

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