

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Pestilence, Insanity and Trees: How Stephen Smith changed New York by John M Harris**

Hardback, 338 pages  
Taylor and Francis  
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This biography of New York surgeon and social activist, Stephen Smith (1823-1922), is presented in an attractive hardback format by the author who is an internal medicine physician in Tucson, Arizona. The short chapters, together with numbered references, is especially pleasing.

Smith studied at Geneva College Medical Institute in New York, qualifying in 1850. There he became friends with Austin Flint (1812-1886) who introduced the stethoscope and who became Dean. He also met the pioneering doctor Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910).

Smith was primarily a surgeon who in 1862 published his handbook of surgical operations, propounding the theory that surgery should be minimal and avoided when possible, and this volume went into many copies and five editions and was a useful military manual too. It sold 15,000 copies. He devised an amputation that positioned the scar behind the knee and facilitated the fitting of a prosthesis.

Infectious diseases were rife and Smith became heavily involved with the isolation facilities on Staten Island. Typhus was managed effectively with milk and brandy, an enduring popular remedy today. He promoted antisepsis and asepsis. He pointed out that patients enter hospital and leave with newly-acquired infections, including typhoid and typhus. He also treated cases of smallpox.

Smith was highly active in public health. His considerable contributions to public health and hospital design, including Johns Hopkins Hospital, are described extensively here. He initiated the public health profession in the US and became President of the American Public Health Association. He emphasised the need for a periodical publication. Smith also launched the State Lunacy Commission, informed by his own extensive experience with mentally ill patients.

In 1872, Smith postulated a solution to the excess summer mortality in New York, recommending more trees on city streets to help control temperatures, reduce the spread of malaria and purify the atmosphere. Trees were useful disinfectants that added beauty to the streets and cooling shade through their leaf canopies; they also removed carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Smith was a pioneering surgeon and social reformer and not an iconoclast. He died less than six months from his hundredth birthday, thus just frustrating that lifelong aim.

**Christopher Gardner-Thorpe**  
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