

BOOK REVIEW

The Uncanny Rise of Medical Hypnotism, 1888 to 1914: Between Imagination and Suggestion

by Gordon Bates

Hardback, paperback or ebook, 265 Pages
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This book describes the development of hypnotism as a medical treatment at the turn of the 1900s, ending when it became an established therapy used during WW1. The book developed out of a PhD and retains a lot of references and quotes but is highly readable and wide ranging.

Starting from Greek ideas about the role of imagination, and the 'faith' healers of the medieval period, Bates uses the ideas of maternal imprinting (that what a mother did or thought during pregnancy affected her child) frequently cited in medieval times but still evident in medical writings as late as 1892, as evidence of how long standing the idea of the medical power of the imagination has been. The Georgian mad-doctors claimed the use of personality and imagination was all important in their work, perhaps because physical cures were less available.

Bates's main theme is how English medicine adapted and adopted a science that developed on the boundaries of conventional medicine with roots in popular imagination, in quackery, showmanship and occultism, as well as in medical therapeutics. One conclusion is that it could not adopt hypnotism until medicine more generally had established itself as a science rather than quackery. Many of the early proponents were mavericks which complicated the message.

Bates expands on the theories of mesmerism placing the mechanism of suggestion in bestial internal forces, contrasting these with the ideas of imagination changing the body. The downfall of the respectable and esteemed Dr Elliotson, for his promulgation of mesmerism and gullibility for psychic phenomena, served as a dampener for budding explorers of the area of suggestibility. Braid's publications on hypnosis and the imagination were not appreciated at the time but made him an icon for future practitioners by separating hypnosis from mesmerism. Hypnosis had to develop abroad in France before it could return to Britain. Charcot's showmanship and focus on mesmerism and hysteria retarded the acceptance of the school of medical hypnotism developed in Nancy from Braid's work, but Nancy showed how hypnotism could be used successfully on a wide range of patients.

Individuals with access to medical society and to the literate public dominate the described battle in the 1890s with Hart's campaign in the BMJ for hypnotism to be considered quackery, culminating in him recruiting a fake patient and secretly swapping magnets for fakes at a seance. However, the battle abated and acceptance loomed in the 1900s.

This is an entertaining read, which covers a wider timespan than suggested by the title and describes the characters involved, many of whom merit the digression. I enjoyed reading this book and would suggest it as a good introduction into the acceptance of hypnosis and more generally the challenges for new therapies on the edge of medicine in the Victorian period.

Peter Carpenter

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