



The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity (The Norton History of Science)

By Roy Porter

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"To combine enormous knowledge with a delightful style and a highly idiosyncratic point of view is Roy Porter's special gift, and it makes [this] book . . . alive and fascinating and provocative on every page."?Oliver Sacks, M.D.

Hailed as "a remarkable achievement" (*Boston Sunday Globe*) and as "a triumph: simultaneously entertaining and instructive, witty and thought-provoking . . . a splendid and thoroughly engrossing book" (*Los Angeles Times*), Roy Porter's charting of the history of medicine affords us an opportunity as never before to assess its culture and science and its costs and benefits to mankind. Porter explores medicine's evolution against the backdrop of the wider religious, scientific, philosophical, and political beliefs of the culture in which it develops, covering ground from the diseases of the hunter-gatherers to today's threat of AIDS and ebola, from the clearly defined conviction of the Hippocratic oath to the muddy ethical dilemmas of modern-day medicine. Offering up a treasure trove of historical surprises along the way, this book "has instantly become the standard single-volume work in its field" (*The Lancet*). "The author's perceptiveness is, as usual, scalpel-sharp; his manner genially bedside; his erudition invigorating." - Simon Schama 24 pages of b/w illustrations

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Samuel Johnson once called the medical profession "the greatest benefit to mankind." In the 20th century, the quality of that benefit has improved more and more rapidly than at any other comparable time in history. With all the capabilities of modern medicine's practitioners, however, we as a people are as worried about our health as ever.

Roy Porter, a social historian of medicine at the London's Wellcome Institute, has written an dauntingly thick history of how medical thinking and practice has risen to the challenges of disease through the centuries. But delve into its pages, and you'll find one marvelous bit of history after another. The obvious highlights are touched upon--Hippocrates introduces his oath, Pasteur homogenizes, Jonas Salk produces the polio vaccine, and so on--but there's also Dr. Francis Willis's curing of *The Madness of King George*, W. T. G. Morton's hucksterish use of ether in surgery, and research on digestion conducted using a man with a stomach fistula (if you don't know what that means, you may not *want* to know). Porter is straightforward about his deliberate focus on Western medical traditions, citing their predominant influence on global medicine, and with *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, he has produced a volume worthy of that tradition's legacy.

From Library Journal

Porter examines what healers have done and the impact of their ideas and actions. His focus is on Western medicine "because Western medicine has developed in ways which made it uniquely powerful and...uniquely global." (LJ 2/15/98)

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From The New England Journal of Medicine

There has not been a book of this scope since Garrison's *An Introduction to the History of Medicine* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders), the fourth edition of which appeared in 1929. In reviving the single-authored, encyclopedic, universal history, Roy Porter seeks to make serviceable for the 21st-century reader a model that ultimately derives from the positivistic German medical handbuch of the 19th century. That he has mixed success is probably due more to the way readers and writers have changed than to any deficiencies on his part.

Best known for his prolific contributions to the social history of medicine, especially the history of popular healers and mental illness, Porter here demonstrates a confident familiarity with the "great doctors" and much else. Although discussions of the former constitute the core of the book, discussions of the latter are substantive and brilliantly condensed and conveyed. Porter's recurrent examinations of epidemiology, public health and demography, medical institutions, the social role of medicine and its practitioners, women and medicine, and treatment of mental disorders at various periods reveal admirably how medical historiography has broadened and deepened since Garrison's era.

Nearly half the text of this book follows a chronologic course from prehistoric times to the end of the 18th century (including surveys of Islamic, Indian, and Chinese medicine), whereas the past two centuries are approached thematically and, as Porter acknowledges, selectively. There are chapters on "Medicine, State, and Society" and "Medicine and the People," as well as chapters dealing with medical practice and research.

Throughout the book, Porter presents masterly introductory and concluding summaries of each section in a

fluent, often amusing, and sometimes irreverent style. The text is enlivened by numerous quotes from lay and medical contemporaries. Although respecting his universalist goal, Porter explains that Western medicine receives the most attention because it has largely triumphed around the world, and he draws the majority of his historical case examples of professional and social developments from Great Britain (his own area of research).

What, then, are the problems with *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*? The apparently few factual errors (several with respect to Vesalius, and the erroneous statement that Dr. Guillotin invented the instrument named after him), which are inevitable in such an ambitious survey, do not pose a serious problem, nor does the judicious coverage and balanced interpretation of medical history. Instead, as the extremely informative 45-page list of further readings (usefully rated by Porter with stars for those he has found most helpful) indicates, the problem is that medical historiography, particularly since around 1980, has experienced such a boom in quantity, quality, and diversity that no single-volume total history can hope to do more than briefly summarize while pointing the reader toward more extensive sources. Although readable, this book is dauntingly crammed with information that moves by at a rapid clip. It is likely to overwhelm the novice but hold few surprises for the specialist. It will probably find its greatest use as a modern, comprehensive, and reliable reference work, a point of entry to the literature and a valuable aid to those teaching the subject.

Reviewed by Toby Gelfand, Ph.D.

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Users Review

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