

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 68 | Number 4 (Fall 2009)

pps. 468-470

Frontier Medicine: From the Atlantic to the Pacific, 1492–1941

Martha K. Robinson

Clarion University of Pennsylvania

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2009 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Robinson, Martha K. "Frontier Medicine: From the Atlantic to the Pacific, 1492–1941." *The Annals of Iowa* 68 (2009), 468-470.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1396>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](http://iowa-research-online.org)

Like all work popular in ages past but now out of fashion, Jay Sigmund's writing leaves us wondering what readers ever saw in it. His stories are short vignettes or heavy-handed morality tales about the ambivalences of modernity in small-town Iowa. His poems in free verse and rhyme are far too expository for most current tastes. The one-act play included here is most charitably described as Thornton Wilder lite.

It's no surprise, then, that Sigmund's editor doesn't really try to recuperate the Cedar Rapids native via the rubric of lasting literary accomplishment so much as the historical role Sigmund played in putting Iowa on the national literary map. An insurance man by occupation, Sigmund also entertained Sherwood Anderson and Carl Sandburg. He hobnobbed with modernist writers in Chicago and published regularly in the *Chicago Tribune*. He was so well received by East Coast tastemakers, in fact, that six years *before* the founding of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, *Des Moines Register* headlines could cite him in trumpeting "Iowa City Now U.S. Literary Center."

The publication of *The Plowman Sings* during the same year that UNESCO designated Iowa City a "World City of Literature" should provide those interested in the making of literary history with ample food for thought. One might legitimately wonder whether the Writers' Workshop could have gained the traction it did without Sigmund's trail blazing. (Sigmund was also an early mentor to fellow Cedar Rapids native and future Writers' Workshop director Paul Engle.) What does it mean that Iowa City's literariness was purchased via writing that no one would choose to represent it today? Does Iowa City have a responsibility to acknowledge these roots, and how should that be done? And, if there's one Sigmund in Iowa's literary past, are there more? Where did they go, and what can they help us learn today?

Frontier Medicine: From the Atlantic to the Pacific, 1492–1941, by David Dary. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. viii, 381 pp. Illustrations, glossary, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth.

Reviewer Martha K. Robinson is assistant professor of history at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. Her research and writing have focused on health and medicine in early America.

In *Frontier Medicine: From the Atlantic to the Pacific, 1492–1941*, David Dary surveys a broad range of North American medical history, with particular attention paid to medicine in the nineteenth-century West. The book begins with a brief treatment of Native American medicine and medicine in colonial America and ends with a short discussion of

medicine in the early decades of the twentieth century. Dary's main interests, however, lie in the Old West. The bulk of the book focuses on health and sickness among such western groups as fur traders, trappers, emigrants on the overland trails, soldiers, homesteaders, and ranchers.

Dary is a fine storyteller with a keen eye for anecdote, and the book will appeal to general readers interested in the Old West. The narrative is sprinkled with stories that are, by turns, horrifying and humorous. Readers will wince at the story of a Kentucky woman who underwent surgery for an ovarian tumor in 1809. With no anesthesia available, she "endured the pain by reciting psalms and singing hymns even as her intestines rolled onto the wooden table beside her" (58). They may laugh at the story of Dr. John Brinkley, a twentieth-century Kansas doctor who promised to restore male potency with transplants of goat glands (292–93). The parade of doctors and patients who march across Dary's pages also includes such memorable figures as a midwife who discovered the origin of "milk sickness," a black soldier in the Old West who proved to be a woman in disguise, and a mountain man who survived a rough-and-ready amputation even after binding his wounds with a "dirty shirt" (107).

Western historians will note that Dary's frontier is the frontier of Frederick Jackson Turner — a line of advancing civilization, where American characteristics such as "individualism, self-reliance, equality of opportunity . . . and competition" developed (52). In medicine, Dary tends to identify the march of progress with the arrival of formally trained doctors in the West. Again and again, he describes the first physicians to practice in various towns, whether Leavenworth and Abilene or San Francisco and Fresno. But nineteenth-century medical history does not easily fit into this narrative of progress. Dary himself notes that physicians in Jacksonian America needed no credentials to practice, that medical training varied in quality, and that the widely used potent drugs and excessive bloodletting "often did more harm than good" (55). Although Dary's stories also include heroic midwives, sophisticated practitioners of Chinese medicine, and self-taught herbalists, he too often contrasts the "the 'regular' physicians" with "quacks [and] cultists" out only to take advantage of those "ignorant enough to seek their services" (192).

Dary's extensive research in primary sources (including the journals and letters of nineteenth-century doctors, cowboys, soldiers, and explorers) provides a wealth of evidence about health, sickness, and medical practice in the Old West. These accounts are the source of many fascinating stories. Historians of medicine, however, will note the absence of significant recent works in their field, including Eliza-

both Fenn's *Pox Americana* and Conevery Bolton Valencius's *The Health of the Country*. This reliance on older secondary sources sometimes leads to errors. Thus, for example, Dary's discussion of epidemics among the Indians suggests that Europeans had, over the course of centuries, evolved a "genetic resistance" (25) to the diseases of Europe, a contention that most historians of the field would dispute. Dary also suggests that the mountain men may have "inherited antibodies" (103) against smallpox, which modern scholars agree is medically impossible.

These criticisms aside, Dary's book will please general readers with an interest in the history of the Old West. Even readers long familiar with the explorers, mountain men, and western settlers who fill its pages will find new perspectives and new stories in *Frontier Medicine*.

Health Culture in the Heartland, 1880–1980: An Oral History, by Lucinda McCray Beier. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xviii, 242 pp. Illustrations, graphs, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Reviewer Gwen Kay is associate professor of history at the State University of New York at Oswego. She is a coauthor of *200 Years of Health: The Onondaga County Medical Society, 1806–2006* (2007) and author of *Dying to be Beautiful: The Fight for Safe Cosmetics* (2005).

It is not often that a museum exhibit spawns not one but two books, but fortunately, such a thing happened: *Health Culture in the Heartland, 1880–1980* is the second book from an exhibit for the McLean County, Illinois, museum of history. Trained as a British historian of medicine, Lucinda McCray Beier guest curated an exhibit on health for the museum and subsequently wrote a book based on the exhibit. As Beier notes in the introduction, this book has more perspective than the earlier volume, placing the county's evolving concepts of health and health care in national context.

The volume under consideration is "a work of local medicine and public health history" (xii), focusing as it does on the evolution of medical care in a single county in central Illinois. But the book is more than that; it offers a model for community history placed within the larger historical narrative. The histories evoked in this well-written and smoothly flowing book are those of public health, history of medicine, the history of the county, and social history, or what Beier terms "community health history": how a community understands its health care, from site of sickness to appropriate caregivers, from range of "normal" illness to location of death. The book relies, in part, on interviews conducted by community volunteers for the original exhibit, supple-