

Book Reviews

economy he has already written so much ground-breaking work.

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Ken Arnold and Danielle Olsen (eds),
Medicine man: the forgotten museum of Henry Wellcome, London, The British Museum Press, 2003, pp. 397, 500 colour and 50 black and white illus., £19.99 (paperback 0-7141-2794-9)

This book, which accompanied the Wellcome Trust exhibition at the British Museum in 2003, seeks to convey something of the spirit and atmosphere of Henry Wellcome's lifelong accumulation of objects relating to medical history, which he conceived very broadly. It does not really aim to be a history of that collection, or of Wellcome himself, so much as to give a flavour of both, in a more impressionistic way. The book fascinates, not least because of the illustrations, which one can only describe as lavish and copious, however clichéd the phrase. It is very fully illustrated throughout, but the most important images are organized into six visual essays, on themes such as 'The beginning of life', where a number of photographs of anthropological and historical objects, drawings and paintings on a broad theme are gathered together. There is no particular chronological or geographical order to these essays, which seems to suit the, to put it mildly, eclectic and unsystematic collecting of Wellcome himself. They were chosen to "delight the eye or challenge the mind" (p. 45); they do not actually convey a story, rather they highlight the variety and range of societies' responses to the human body and its life cycle, diseases and injuries, which they do very well (despite representing only 0.1 per cent of Wellcome's entire collection!). It is refreshing to have the contents of a book dictated, as the editors freely acknowledge, by a sense of wonder and fascination, rather than a particular argument to be developed.

The visual essays alternate with written essays by a variety of contributors, mostly from

museums, with a few medical historians. These contributors have a difficult task—to bring some framework or coherence to this great gathering of things—which they approach in different ways. Among the most straightforward, and useful, is Ghislaine Lawrence's article on the development of Wellcome's Historical Medical Museum, setting it in the context of the anthropological and museological thinking of the day, though it is abundantly clear that Wellcome went his own way. Other articles look at the Wellcome Library and at Wellcome's forays into archaeology. John Mack's article seeks to uncover how Wellcome understood the relationship between medicine and anthropology, asserting that there was some system in Wellcome's bewilderingly omnivorous collecting practices, which stretched the category of "medicine" to the breaking point; Wellcome followed the paradigm of late nineteenth-century anthropology, especially of A H Pitt-Rivers, in developing an evolutionary sequence which followed technical development in various object types, rather than looking at an entire cultural context, as twentieth-century anthropologists were increasingly doing. John Pickstone writes more generally of the ways in which the history of medicine can be approached, while Ruth Richardson gives a more personal response to encountering the collection.

The various contributors, then, attempt to set Wellcome in the context of the intellectual framework of his own day—though the conclusion seems to be that he was somewhat isolated from that framework—and to ask what his collection might mean for us today; they also attempt to invoke the atmosphere of the collection. However, this is more successfully done by the images than the words; there is a certain unevenness of tone among the articles, from a quite conventional academic style to a much more personal, emotional one. While the book as a whole is fascinating, and lends itself to browsing or more focused reading, it is the illustrations that make it so remarkable.

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