

who came before as backward, dull, or simply in error, rather than as people who “just viewed the world differently.”

It is important to reiterate that Burnham appears to want from those who read his book not a re-understanding of medical history and facts, but a re-invigorated ability to read. That is, he attempts to provide both the impetus and the skills to look beyond and behind the printed page. Although he outlines a genealogy of medical history, and although his perspective is that of an historian, he deliberately cites only minimally the works on which he bases his ideas, preferring rather to provide a wonderful collection of “suggestions for further reading.” In this way we are given not only a way to look, but places to look, should we be so inclined.

It ought not to go unsaid that this book is first and foremost an historian’s examination of history; which is to say that it is in many ways a work of theory. As such, and notwithstanding its numerous valid and important arguments, it may not be for everyone. Those many of us whose reading in medical history is as diversionary as didactic, and whose disposable reading time continues to dwindle, probably can ill afford to read this book; all the more so since reading it almost certainly will force us back into books with which we thought ourselves long finished.

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Illness and metaphor

Book learning

Turned out to pattern by his medical school, Manson had faced the future with a well-bound textbook confidence. He had acquired a smattering of physics, chemistry, and biology — at least he had slit up and studied the earthworm. Thereafter he had been dogmatically fed upon the accepted doctrines. He knew all the diseases, with their tabulated symptoms, and the remedies thereof. Take gout, for instance. You could cure it with colchicum. He could still see Professor Lamplough blandly purring to his class, “*Vinum colchici*,* gentlemen, twenty to thirty minimum doses, an absolute specific in gout.” But was it? That was the question he now asked himself. A month ago he had tried colchicum, pushing it to the limit in a genuine case of “poor man’s” gout — a severe and painful case. The result had been dismal failure.

And what about half, three quarters of the other “remedies” in the pharmacopœia? This time he heard the voice of Doctor Eliot, lecturer on *Materia Medica*: “And now, gentlemen, we pass to *elemi*† — a concrete resinous exudation, the botanical source of which is undetermined, but is probably *Canarium commune*, chiefly imported from Manila: employed in ointment form, one in five, an admirable stimulant and disinfectant to sores and issues.”

Rubbish! Yes, absolute rubbish. He knew that now. Had Eliot ever tried *Unguentum elemi*? He was convinced that Eliot had not. All of that erudite information came out of a book; and that, in its turn, came out of another book; and so on, right back, probably to the Middle Ages. The word “issues,” now dead as mutton, confirmed this view.

From Cronin AJ. *The citadel*. Toronto: Ryerson Press; 1937. p. 35-6.

*Tincture of *Colchicum autumnale*, autumn crocus or meadow saffron; contains colchicine.

†A yellowish aromatic resin derived from certain tropical plants such as *Canarium commune*; used in making plasters, ointments and varnishes.

One thousand words



Vincent Hanlon

Canadian Healing Oil. I found this bottle in a little *tienda* (general store) on the main street of San Ignacio, Belize. The shop owner told me it was a good liniment for strains and sprains. He also made the claim that half a teaspoon taken orally was very effective for coughs and colds. On the basis of the labelled ingredients, I would not advise this. “Each 100 mL contains: Sulphonated Seal Oil 46.69 mL; Turpentine 51.69 mL; Oil of Tar 1.54 mL; Camphor 0.72 g; Oil of Camphor 0.18 mL; Oil of Thyme 0.02 mL; Thymol 3.12 mg; Creosote 0.05 mL. For external use for the temporary relief of pain arising from strains, sprains, bruises, rheumatism, muscular stiffness. For best results: warm Canadian Healing Oil by placing bottle in a pot of hot water as warm Canadian Healing Oil is more readily absorbed. Cover with a warm flannel if possible and leave overnight. Keep out of the reach of children. Made by Guyana Pharmaceutical Corporation Ltd. 1 Public Road, La Penitence, Georgetown, Guyana” I wonder why Canadian? Perhaps a little Canadian Healing Oil poured on the roiling waters of the public-private debate would have a soothing effect. — **Vincent Hanlon**, Emergency Physician, Lethbridge, Alta.