

BOOK REVIEW

NOTE: This is the author's version; the published version differs somewhat.

Bartlett, C. Review of book "Different Truths; ethnomedicine in early postcards" by Peter A.G.M. De Smet (2011). *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 28(1): 215-216.

"Different Truths; ethnomedicine in early postcards" by Peter A.G.M. De Smet was published in 2010 by KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 216 pp, €34.50. This is a book that one will want to look at, read, then look at again, re-read, and look at more. It will appeal to those interested in medical practices within different worldviews and the controversies that are constant travelling companions today within cross-cultural, multi-cultural, and trans-cultural endeavours. The title *Different Truths* is exceedingly apt and the book's audience very broad. De Smet has put together an astonishing assemblage of about 270 postcards showing "health-related scenes and representations from societies all over the world". His selection is from among a collection of some 700 he amassed by searching two major postcard auction websites. De Smet adopts the term "colonial postcards" for his collection, as the photographs used to create them were mainly taken in the period 1900-1930 in countries under European colonial rule. In a declared strategy to address today's issues about ethnocentricity and gaze, De Smet does not confine the book to non-Western ways of healing. Postcards are included for medicine practiced in Western Europe parallel to those practiced in colonial settings.

For each postcard, De Smet provides details as possible, such as caption, publisher, additional text, lay-out of the card's back, postal usage, and documentary use. Yet the five part book is much more than postcards and descriptors because De Smet discusses the controversies, past and current, that the postcards represent while also explaining the value they and his book hold. Part 1 (Prelude) and Part 5 (Postscript) are short and all text; they serve well the purposes their titles suggest, with ethnomedicine a topic considered in both. Parts 2-5 contain the vast visual richness of the postcards, plus De Smet's insightful commentary. The background the author brings to this challenging task is as a pharmacist, certified clinical pharmacologist, senior researcher, and university professor working in The Netherlands.

Part 2 (Postcards) is a fascinating discussion about the postcard industry and its history, postcard collections and collectors, and the "us / them" encounters the postcards portray. De Smet tells us that the first picture postcards appeared in the 1870's and the craze for collecting them spanned about 30 years, ending in the second decade of the 20th Century. It seems that many honesties and dishonesties were employed as photographs became postcards and as existing postcards and photographs were re-worked into new images; the reader can well understand that *Different Truths* will be the result.

Part 3 (Practitioners and Practices) opens by emphasizing that different perspectives come into play in the medical practices of different societies. De Smet says “therapeutic differences between (and within) medical systems can be explained, to a substantial extent, by *Different Truths* about underlying causes”. This introduction is followed by 13 additional sections, entitled: native concepts of illness; self care; healers around the world; diagnostic methods; native therapies; supernatural methods of treatment; material holders of power; natural methods of treatment; physical methods; herbal medicine; surgery; midwifery; and animal care.

Part 4 (Professionalized Systems) has been provided, De Smet indicates, because he was influenced by Arthur Kleinman’s proposition that health care in different societies can generally be divided into the lay sector, folk sector, and professionalized sector. De Smet explores the latter by way of postcards believed to depict various learned traditions, again *Different Truths*. Thus, In Part 4 we find sections on: south Asian traditions, east Asian traditions, Western traditions; colonial medicine; colonial public health care; missionary health care; famine and pestilences; and conspicuous symptoms. As in Parts 2 and 3, the postcards featured are an overwhelming draw for the eye – the look – the looker. Consistently throughout the book, De Smet attends to the controversies entailed.

The book is large (29.5 cm X 24 cm X 1.5 cm), made from high quality paper, and a pleasure to hold. It is thoroughly documented, with 393 notes and hundreds of citations. The preface is written by Sjaak van der Geest, Professor Emeritus of Medical Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. Like the author, he speaks to the controversies that can entangle such a work but he concludes that De Smet “grants both the others and ourselves too much respect, attributing them and us too much ‘rationality’”. He encourages readers to understand that much of what all people do for their health is based on “not-knowing and not knowing that we do not know”. The postcards in De Smet’s book will enable countless readers to begin a journey of asking themselves about knowing and not-knowing; De Smet’s textual guidance and informed commentary are rich bonus.

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