

James B. Waldram, D. Ann Herring, T. Kue Young, *Aboriginal Health in Canada: Historical, Cultural, and Epidemiological Perspectives*. University of Toronto Press, 1995.

reviewed by Patricia Jasen

*Aboriginal Health in Canada* is a book of enormous scope. It is an interdisciplinary work, as Waldram and Herring are medical anthropologists and Young is a community health physician who has already published a useful historical study of health issues in Northern Ontario (*Health Care and Cultural Change: The Indian Experience in the Central Sub-Arctic*, University of Toronto Press, 1988). Building on that work, the authors have produced a study of the past, present and future of Aboriginal health in Canada which, in addition to bringing together historical and contemporary scholarship from diverse sources, seeks explanations and solutions for current health problems experienced by Aboriginal people. This is an ambitious task, but one of the book's great merits is that it avoids generalization and rejects simplistic answers; as the authors explain, their work "takes as axiomatic that the health of any human population is the product of a complex web of physiological, psychological, spiritual, historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and environmental factors" (3).

Following a brief introduction to Aboriginal cultures in Canada, the book addresses questions concerning pre-contact health and illness, the impact of early contact, and the "new epidemics" of the twentieth century, a term defined to include all mounting health risks including non-communicable diseases such as cancer and diabetes. Throughout, historical developments are related to current issues including, in Chapter 2, the fraught question of pre-contact levels of infectious disease and, in Chapter 3, the question of how new pathogens introduced by Europeans were able to take advantage of changes in the "social and physical environment" of Aboriginal peoples. As primary author of these portions of the book, Ann Herring based her analysis on recent findings in biological anthropology. She details what is now known regarding the fungal, bacterial, and parasitic "disease load" already present when the Europeans arrived and provides an antidote to the notion that Aboriginal people were at one time disease-free, though that view may no longer be so widely held as the author seems to suggest.

The chapter on "Medical Traditions in Aboriginal Cultures" is less clear in its purpose but serves as an introduction to the subject. It covers a

good deal of territory in twenty-five pages and does not purport to be a comprehensive study, though this is an area in which there could have been more reliance on Aboriginal sources. It offers brief surveys of European and Euro-Canadian attitudes and efforts to supplant traditional practices, and of anthropological studies of belief systems concerning illness and health. Various aspects of healing are considered, including the use of herbs, the shaking tent, and the Midewiwin.

Although "Gender and the Healing Traditions" is a topic mentioned briefly in this chapter, readers may feel that the issue has been skirted. This is very much a contemporary as well as an historical question. The authors point out that it is widely believed "among both analysts and some Aboriginal peoples" that most healers were male, but they also recognize that explorers, traders and missionaries, by reason of their sex and the assumptions of their own culture, were relatively uninterested in female roles, and in any case would be "excluded from observing many female activities and talking to females" (115). Another possible factor which might be taken into account, however, is that if women's healing practices were found to be less exciting to watch and record than those of prominent male healers, outside observers would also overlook them for that reason. Many of their narratives were written with an eye to a European readership hungry for tales of the wild and exotic. In any case, the authors conclude that there is "no solid evidence" to support current beliefs that men were more likely to be shamans and women herbalists and midwives, and that "Hence, we would speculate that most healing roles were not gender identified" (116). The problem, of course, is that a lack of written historical evidence does not mean that healing roles were not gendered, but rather that historians will have to look elsewhere for answers to this important question.

Especially in its treatment of history, the book reflects, understandably, the limitations of the work produced thus far in this field. As a consequence, the analyses of nineteenth-century developments are rather scant and women are seldom mentioned. They do not appear in the index, nor do "childbirth" nor "midwifery," despite the excellent work already produced on these subjects by John O'Neil, Patricia Kaufert, and others. Nonetheless, *Aboriginal Health in Canada* is the first work of its kind in this country and is an extremely useful and informative book. It will be relied upon as both a textbook and a reference work for years to come.

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