

EAHMH 2013 Book Prize Jury report: by Professor Laurinda Abreu

The jury of the EAHMH 2013 Book Award – Hilary Marland, Robert Jütte and myself – have received many excellent books and our decision was not easy. But in the end, we were unanimous in our decision to award the prize to Alun Withey for his book, *Physick and the Family: Health, Medicine and Care in Wales, 1600–1750* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011).

Alun Withey's book is organized in three parts: Part I - Disease and mortality in early modern Wales; Part II - Medical knowledge in early modern Wales; Part III - Domestic sickness and care in the Welsh home. In his own words, it seeks "to restore a balance to the medical history of Wales, by highlighting the many ways in which Welsh people both engaged with, and participated in, wider networks of medical knowledge and practice". To achieve this, Alun Withey drew on a wide range of primary sources, even if he often laments that they were not rich enough or as informative as he had wished.

The book generated a lot of interest and discussion among our jurors. It has been called "an original contribution to the social history of British medicine, and to the social history of early modern period in general". One review noted that it "makes a significant contribution to debates in medical history; including economies of knowledge, domestic medicine and care". Another said that it "offers new directions for recovering the often obscure medical worldview of the 'ordinary' person".

Among many other questions, the book deals with health and care, medical knowledge and its consumption, reproduction and circulation among a population where an oral, rather than a written, culture of knowledge dominated. However, for those who research formal poor relief practices, I mean those studies framed by institutions and by any kind of institutionalization, what stands out most is his approach to the people's experience of sickness and healing, their perception of illness, how they reacted to it and how they experimented with the "sick role".

Although Dr Withey researched a place and era which lacked institutions to produce trained health professionals or provide health and poor relief resources, he was able to enter into people's houses, follow their caring routines, accompany them as they accessed their social networks, while simultaneously uncovering their rules and dynamics and the way they mixed tradition with modernity.

This final point is particularly important because, as everybody knows, even in the most generous cases, the formal poor relief in the early modern period only covered a very small minority of the population: often few than 10%, sometimes even less. It is also widely accepted that the majority of the population, whether in Wales, or the rest of Europe, was poor or even destitute. In fact, the more we know about institutional poor relief and health care, the more certain we are that it is necessary to look in other directions, to look beyond the convenient concept of the “deserving poor”. This means investigating other – non-institutional – sources and asking of them the appropriate questions. Usually these sources are not so abundant, or as rich as the institutional ones. Access is often more complicated and their analysis more complex. It is in this task that Alun Withey has done so well, and we are very grateful to him for his labours.