

Book Review

Mary Cappello, *Swallow: Foreign Bodies, their Ingestion, Inspiration, and the Curious Doctor who Extracted Them*, New York: The New Press, 2011. Pp. x + 292. \$27.95. ISBN 978 1 59558 395 6.

Contained within the Foreign Body Collection at the Mütter Museum, Philadelphia, is a unique and extensive collection of foreign objects which were swallowed and then extracted non-surgically by famed American laryngologist Chevalier Jackson. Surprisingly, these range from wrist-watches, shoe-buckles, umbrella tips and Christmas tree ornaments to toothpaste caps, bullets and even a toy aeroplane. Mary Cappello's *Swallow* asks why someone would digest such non-nutritive objects, and how do people's lungs and stomachs become filled with inedible articles? Furthermore, why did certain members of the medical profession become so obsessed with salvaging and collecting indigestible matter during the early twentieth century?

On the surface, the accidental swallowing of foreign objects might appear to be a curious, if not remarkably peripheral, choice of topic. Yet, as Mary Cappello expertly demonstrates, the theme provides a suitable source of analysis which can inform the historian on a varied range of issues including the rise of medical specialism; the historical impact of the development of technologies designed to probe and explore the interior of the human body; how the medical professional becomes transformed into a celebrity figure; and how certain cultural meanings become embodied in the construction of elaborate medical collections.

Cappello's work is essentially a biography of Chevalier Jackson, a relatively unexplored figure in the medical historiography, but who virtually invented modern endoscopy of the upper airway and oesophagus. His later development of methods for removing foreign objects greatly reduced the high mortality rates which had previously resulted from digestive obstruction. Yet her book is simultaneously a biography of the physiological function of swallowing, presented as both a medical and cultural phenomena, and complementing more familiar work on disease biographies. Furthermore, Cappello attempts to trace the story of the inedible objects themselves, asking exactly how indigestible entities ended up stuck in the digestive tract. Hence, we are provided with stories of children hiding their toys in their mouths; melancholic patients acquiring habits of consuming strange items; and babies learning about the world through placing objects in their mouth.

Overall, *Swallow* provides an excellent contribution to a growing number of enquiries into historical understandings of the physiological process of digesting and consuming, a theme which is being increasingly recognised as one which can inform the reader on a wide range of medico-historiographical concerns. The act of swallowing is dissected as both a corporeal and psychological act, whilst the cultural complexities inscribed into unusual ingestion are highlighted within discussions of forced feeding, deviant sexual behaviour, the cultural role of the sword swallower, and so on. The physiology of the human swallow is assessed, whilst close attention is given to the psychological states which might compel people to ingest peculiar objects. Hence, *Swallow* is intrinsically wide-ranging in terms of scope, whilst being highly inter-disciplinary in nature. To complement the nature of the text, *Swallow* is beautifully illustrated throughout with a set of

illustrations of X-ray images, portraits, personal letters, photographs of retrieved articles, and images of case notes.

Mary Cappello's background is in English and creative writing, and she is currently a Professor at the University of Rhode Island. Hence, the literary style of *Swallow* might risk alienating some medical historians, lacking as it does the structure and forms of analysis most familiar to those working within the field. Yet this should not discourage the historian from engaging with the diverse themes identified throughout this work. In fact, *Swallow* provides an interesting model for how medical historians might best utilise the approaches of other fields. Having said that, there is a notable lack of engagement with some of the central themes familiar to historians of medicine. I would have liked, for instance, to learn more about surgical, rather than non-surgical, removal of foreign objects, which might have added insight into the socio-cultural impact of early twentieth-century abdominal surgery. Furthermore, discussion of Chevailier's collection of indigestible objects could have been more closely situated into a wider historiography of medical museology and display. Yet these are minor criticisms of what is overall an expertly penned, meticulously researched, and intellectually engaging insight into the intricate world of digesting the indigestible.

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