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**The Urge to Eat**

In recent years, historical scholarship focused on medicine, the body, and the environment has often concentrated thematically upon the porous temporal boundaries that delineate the *internal* and the *external*. Environmental historians, for example, have long engaged with the duality of “nature” and “culture,” while historians of disease and medicine oft expound upon the ways illness exists as both a biological and a social phenomenon. In *Appetite and Its Discontents: Science, Medicine, and the Urge to Eat, 1750–1950*, Elizabeth A. Williams examines this dichotomy as it relates to the intangible object of appetite: how it exists in contrast to (and in conjunction with) the “biological” notion of hunger and how our experiences and perceptions of such have shifted over time along-side trends in medical research and society at large.

Williams, a professor emerita at Oklahoma State University, does not explicitly define “appetite” in the text but instead establishes that her goal is to probe the myriad ways scientists and physicians sought to define and manage it over time. The desire to eat, and more specifically, to eat particular foods, was “once a simple reality of daily life” but over time became an object of scientific inquiry, to be pathologized, optimized, and otherwise regulated by medical authorities (p. 5). Spanning from the Enlightenment to the post-World War II era, *Appetite and Its Discontents* traces two centuries of medical and scientific inquiry into “appetite,” drawing primarily from formal scientific writings to construct an overview of the historical processes and important figures that shaped medical and cultural understandings of the relationships between desire, nutrition, and food.

The text is arranged chronologically, with four sections aligned with broader shifts in both thought about appetite as well as within the medical field as a whole. The first section, focusing on the latter half of the eighteenth century, describes
a burgeoning shift from a medical practice still highly influenced by Hippocrates and other ancient knowledge to an Enlightenment-inspired push toward scientific rigor. The outcome of this “scientization” process is the focus of the next section, “The Elusiveness of Appetite: Laboratory and Clinic, 1800 to 1850.” Here, Williams illuminates the newly established dominance of laboratory experimentation but makes clear that many scientific investigators still believed the phenomena of “appetite” to be individual, guided not by biological processes but by the “mind.”

Part 3 focuses on the latter half of the nineteenth century, when experimental physiology emerged as a discipline separate from medicine, within which newly devised instruments and means of measurement were utilized in attempt to identify biological mechanisms associated with appetite. The impact of Charles Darwin is also noted here, as the field of psychology grew as another separate discipline and contrasting notions of instinct and intelligence materialized as another example of the internal versus external dichotomy that so often confounds researchers.

The final section, “Appetite as a Scientific Object, 1900-1950,” examines the impacts of the continued professionalization of the medical field, as scientific medicine fully supplanted outdated methodologies and the notion of an elusive scientific truth permeated research across all disciplines. Williams concludes that by 1950, the medico-scientific community had not yet successfully defined appetite, nor had they identified its origins, whether innate or external, somatic or psychic. The epilogue provides a brief overview of developments since 1950, noting that the splintering of the medical field into increasingly specific subspecialties has only complicated understandings further. If anything, the culmination of information Williams presents suggests that appetite is both internal and external, influenced by biological and psychological processes, cultural norms and expectations, political realities on both the local and global scale, food availability, and an endless list of factors that, evidently, two centuries of scientific rigor cannot fully explain.

Underscoring the deeply personal nature of appetite and our relationship with food, Williams notes that appetite is “one of the modalities by which we establish who and what we are in the world around us” (p. 16). Her focus on scientific discourse constructs a clear timeline of scientific consensus (and discontent), but the text remains somewhat removed from the individual experience and reality of eating and its associated choices. This is not necessarily a flaw, partially because the text is already lengthy and the scope is quite broad, but further because it illuminates a persistent disconnect between scientific research and personal experience, evident in this work about appetite but applicable to any number of intangible objects in medicine and beyond.

A novel and compelling addition to a growing body of work focused on the complex historical relationship between humans and food, Appetite and Its Discontents is sprawling and well researched, presenting broad overviews as well as specific case studies that trace a well-supported historical lineage. The text is a welcome contribution to historiographies of science, medicine, and nutrition, and may be of particular interest to scholars and students in these fields as well as those interested in histories of psychology, science and technology studies, and epistemology at large.

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Appetite and its Discontents is sprawling and well-researched, presenting broad overviews as well as specific case studies that trace a compelling and well-supported historical lineage. The text makes a strong addition to historiographies of science, medicine, and nutrition, and may be of particular interest to scholars and students in these fields as well as those interested in histories of psychology and epistemology at large.

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