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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, how everyday people interact with both science and medicine has become a source of deep fascination for public servants, health experts, and politicians. Historians are no exception. Indeed, the history of science and medicine has often considered how average people responded to new scientific theories or medical treatments. That story is rarely one of consensus. If anything, the public reception of science and medicine has always been somewhat rocky, with relatively few exceptions. Alexandra Roginski’s *Science and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Tasman World: Popular Phrenology in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand* adds to this field of work with her consideration of how average Australians and New Zealanders viewed the practice of phrenology. Specifically, Roginski describes her work as a history of science from below. She states that the book is meant to make two interventions: she argues, first, that phrenology was inherently a discipline that spoke to “colonial anxieties about false and shifting identities” of its practitioners and, second, that it better explores the lives and interpersonal relationships of those same practitioners (p. 4).

With these goals in mind, most of the chapters describe the lived experiences of specific popular phrenologists. What becomes immediately apparent is that most of these men (and a fair few female phrenologists) were involved in a striking amount of legal trouble. While the contemporary reader might assume that this was because the field of phrenology was considered just barely above outright charlatanism, the reality was grittier. According to Roginski, a striking number of male popular phrenologists (whether they plied their trade in the bush or on the lecture circuit) were accused of varying forms of sexual assault against both women and children. Roginski uses these moments of legal intervention to discuss asymmetrical power relationships between men and women in the Tasman world (chapter 4) and
between White and Black men (chapter 6). In most cases, regardless of the skin color of the phrenologist, these allegations were dismissed. This state of affairs is not especially surprising considering the time and place. However, what is surprising is Roginski’s approach to these allegations. She includes virtually no discussion of the possibility that at least some of them may have been all too true. Though it is not the job of the historian to adjudicate long-over legal cases, the book itself indicates that these charges were at least somewhat the result of male phrenologists’ ability to come in close proximity to vulnerable people, so that vulnerability should have been more clearly articulated.

This points to another issue affecting the overall execution of the book. Roginski never meaningfully considers if the people she is studying were closer to criminals than they were to performance artists or scientists on the lecture circuit. She states out of hand that phrenology was barely considered scientifically legitimate even at its height of popularity. This does seem to be why so many different types of people came to it as a money-making venture. Perhaps this is also why it was able to pair with other forms of popular entertainments of the nineteenth century, such as minstrelsy and public lecturing (chapters 1 and 6). Focusing on the tawdry may get us closer to science from below, but it would be much more illuminating and rewarding if Roginski were a bit more willing to entertain that at least some of these men and women were likely exactly what they were accused of being: pedophiles, sex offenders, and cheats. Nonetheless, Roginski does an admirable job tracing the interpersonal connections and antipathies between some of the popular phrenologists operating in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, with chapter 9’s focus on bush phrenologists being an especially good example.

While the picture that Roginski paints of the popular phrenologist’s world is rich indeed, that richness is distinctly less when it comes to discussing non-White historical actors. For example, chapters 3 and 5 specifically attempt to consider how Aboriginal and Maori individuals engaged with the discipline and its more notable White practitioners. Chapter 3 does so by discussing various Indigenous performers and seeking agency in their public interactions with popular phrenologists. Chapter 5 looks at how popular phrenologists were received when they traveled to Aboriginal communities living on missions in Australia. Though it is important to do what one can to seek marginalized voices and experiences from our texts, there is so little on which Roginski can build that the outcome is a bit flat.

That said, the pages of Roginski’s book teem with many different kinds of people: scientists, performers, criminals, busybodies, and average people looking for an hour’s worth of entertainment. Besides their differing walks of life, the book suggests a diverse colonial society that included people with heritage from all over the world. And, perhaps, this is in fact the monograph’s primary difficulty. We only spend a very brief time with each individual and the connective tissue between them often becomes quite thin. Making the chapters longer and cutting some of the content would have allowed for more emphasis on thematic continuity that would help the reader. Even so, Roginski’s work is suggestive that there is more work to be done regarding science from below in the Tasman world, in the nineteenth century and beyond.

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