Clarion Review

Historical

Leeches and Liberty: A Medical Historical Fiction 1771-1783

Richard H. Kennedy
Two Harbors Press
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★★★★☆
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“Almost anything can happen in the colonies,” an elderly vicar says encouragingly to a woefully inadequate student who contemplates leaving 1773 England for America. Such begins the journey and journals of Luke Carr, the narrator of *Leeches and Liberty*, Richard H. Kennedy’s historical novel of life and medicine during the American Revolution.

Kennedy’s bona fides are both impressive and unique. He is not only a hospital administrator and lecturer of long standing but also a colonel in the Army Reserve and a “surgeon” with Revolutionary War reenactment units in Connecticut and Rhode Island.

Drawing upon his own experiences as well as solid research, Kennedy writes with authority in the supposed daily journal of a young English immigrant who becomes apprentice to, and soon takes over the practice of, a local doctor in Pawtuxet, Rhode Island. Through his protagonist, Kennedy paints an engaging and educational portrait of both daily life and the practice of medicine in Colonial America.

Carr is not the most brilliant of surgeons or the least fallible of doctors. He makes mistakes, some of them fatal, as he stumbles about trying to learn from trial, error, and experience how to best minister to the needs of his family and community. He gets involved in the mysteries of the Freemasons, debates the morality of slavery, and ponders the science, or lack thereof, in his profession.

After war comes, he joins the army in time to see service in the battles of Long Island and Harlem Heights. It is in such martial episodes that Kennedy gives his readers a grim, bloody, and thoroughly authentic look into the horrors and failings of eighteenth-century battlefield medicine. What Carr sees and learns will shake the reader as it does the good doctor,

who admits afterward, “I thought I was made of sterner stuff.”

Since the story takes place within the pages of a journal, Carr’s is the only voice heard in *Leeches and Liberty*. Many entries are mundane and pedantic, as would be expected in a diary, while others recount dramatic episodes and arguments, from the birth of children and the battle against epidemics to the debates concerning the course of the war and the wisdom of seeking independence from the Crown. Kennedy repeatedly draws upon newspapers, books, plays, and medical journals of the period, reprinting or paraphrasing passages that illustrate what was going on and what people thought of those events.

While Kennedy puts most of his effort into creating Carr’s character, he does manage to shift some of that energy into bringing to life the other people in the protagonist’s life. There is the lovely Hope, of whom Carr notes, “She smiled at me and that is all it took.” There’s the kindly Dr. Randall, who, despite his lack of university education, is “a perfectly good doctor.”

Leeches and Liberty is very cleanly written and contains but one minor typo. Sometimes a thrilling read and almost always an engaging one, it will especially appeal to readers with an interest in the life of a doctor in Revolutionary America.

Mark McLaughlin