

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South by Thomas J. Ward,

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it is here in which she introduces her concept of “metonymic nationalism”: “representations . . . that treat a social group within a nation as empowered to signify the larger totality that is the nation” (p. 160). For historians, Foley’s text is the most insightful when she discusses the use of rhetoric by eugenicists, nativists, liberals, and radicals. She questions whether the Left contributed to the “substitution of culturalism for class struggle” by its own formulation of the relationship among class, race, and nation. She asks, can the emergence of culturalism only be attributed to government repression, the Red Scare, antiunionism, and anti-immigrant sentiment, or did the Left contribute to this as well?

Thomas J. Ward, Jr. *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003. 170pp. Cloth \$34.95.

Thomas J. Ward, Jr., has completed extensive archival research to produce this thoroughly documented and synthesized text. African-American physicians, Ward states, are often neglected in the scholarship because the history of physicians ignores blacks and because black history focuses on the plight of the impoverished masses. Black physicians are unique because they were the only black group with the education, the income, and the occupational status to be considered “elite.” (Teachers may have had the education but not the occupational status, especially as many labored under white administrators in a segregated system; black lawyers were often barred from practicing in courtrooms and therefore the majority of them did not attain the economic status of black physicians.) Medicine was therefore a “professional haven” for blacks (p. xxi). In exploring black physicians as an elite group of African Americans, Ward focuses on both race and class, producing a text that captures the many nuances of their lives—their separation and distinction from white physicians and from the masses of black folks to whom they attended. Ward also recognizes the differences among black physicians, dependent upon the time and place of their practice.

Ward divides the text into three parts: education, professional life, and community life. He uses manuscript collections from hospitals, state boards of health, medical colleges, and individuals, as well as oral histories, to provide a seemingly comprehensive treatment of black physicians.

The section on education is especially noteworthy, as Ward combines information on African Americans’ educational and economic status and investigation into the medical education of blacks, with the movement to reform medical education and the assistance provided by states and philanthropies to aspiring black physicians. What emerges is a picture of black medical education caught between competing and contrasting ideals: training enough black physicians to serve the unmet health needs of the southern black masses or training a smaller and more specialized group of blacks whose medical credentials could have equaled that of white physicians.

As it was, the majority of black students did not have the financial means or the educational background, because of the inadequate system of segregated public secondary schooling most attended, to permit black medical schools to maintain high admission standards or to develop lengthy four-year programs of medical study that were costly to students and deferred their ability to begin practice and make money. Black graduates of medical schools turned down opportunities for specialization, as they often needed to open their own practice for economic reasons. This, however, contributed to a general perspective that black physicians were not as qualified as white ones, whose families often supported them throughout their medical education and internship.

As Ward states, the “financial crises that every black medical school faced in trying to develop physicians from an economic underclass” (p. 17) was only one difficulty faced by institutions like Howard University or Meharry Medical College (Nashville). The rising standards for medical education strained schools preparing black physicians, causing many to fold. Medical colleges for blacks were not well funded and did not have the clinical experiences or laboratory resources needed to meet the rising standards for medical preparation set after the Flexner report. If an institution received an insufficient assessment in Flexner’s report, philanthropic monies to the school often stopped, and thus there were fewer institutions at which African Americans could receive medical training.

The sections on professional life and community life highlight the unique position of black physicians in their communities. Ward details how these men (and some women, as Ward takes care to note) established practices, and the difficulty of doing so, especially if it would challenge a monopoly on the black patient that many white physicians and clinical hospitals had. (Ward notes the use of black patients in some teaching hospitals and the implication that African Americans were seen by some in the white medical establishment as guinea pigs for medical students before they would be able to treat white patients.) Additionally, he documents the many black physicians who did successfully establish private practice, often in conjunction with drug store pharmacies or even real estate, as physicians would purchase land or buildings in which to house their practice and then extend that secondary business into a viable economic asset. Ward also captures the relationship that black physicians had with their uneducated patients.

There is much in this text to laud. Each chapter is richly nuanced and exceptionally documented. Ward untangles the complexities of the education and the professional and community life for black physicians that are consistent with what scholars already understand about the education of African Americans, yet he adds dimension to that by continuously relying on both race and class to explore black physicians in the Jim Crow South.