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Review of *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley* By R. Alton Lee

Bob McCoy

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The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley. By R. Alton Lee. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002. xvii + 283 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

R. Alton Lee has produced an engaging book that details the full life of John R. Brinkley. As someone interested in quackery in the US, I already knew Brinkley as an exemplar of this genre, but there is much more to him. He was a complex man who carried many labels, some contradictory: quack, caring healer; devoted family man, liar and con-man; would be Governor, community booster, and radio station entrepreneur, the latter as a way to promote mail-order sales of his medical remedies and also to draw in patients to his hospital.

Lee's biography is an informative and entertaining account of this larger-than-life character. The author tells of Brinkley's medical education at the eclectic Bennett Medical College in Chicago while working nights at Western Union to support his wife and family, of his itinerant medical practices as an "undergraduate physician" in North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, and Arkansas, ending up in Kansas with a new wife and family. It was in

Kansas that he obtained his MD degree from the Kansas City College of Medicine and Surgery, formerly the Eclectic Medical University of Kansas, which shortly thereafter was revealed by the Kansas City Star to be a diploma mill selling medical degrees (with a high school diploma if needed) for \$1,000. Lee then follows Brinkley's life as a doctor providing, to put it mildly, unorthodox treatments for impotence (goat testicle transplants) and prostate problems (injections of colored water after a partial vasectomy). His wife, also an "MD" from the KC College of Medicine and Surgery, was an associate in his practice.

Lee recounts Brinkley's flamboyant style of life after he became rich, and also his political aspirations. He was a write-in candidate for governor of Kansas and supported many Democratic politicians, most likely because Democrats were in power, while also supporting, quietly, the American Fascist movement.

Brinkley had devoted supporters and ardent detractors, one of his foremost opponents being the redoubtable Morris Fishbein of the American Medical Association, and it was Brinkley's ruinous decision to sue Fishbein for libel that brought about his ultimate fall.

Lee gives not only a comprehensive account of John Brinkley's life and fortunes, from poverty to riches to bankruptcy, but is also even-handed, portraying Brinkley rather affectionately. Important questions are raised. Why do people resort to quacks? Was John Brinkley merely a con-man and charlatan or could he have been an advanced medical thinker practicing cutting-edge medicine? Was Morris Fishbein, an indefatigable foe of quackery, conducting a vindictive witch-hunt or a public spirited exposé of harmful fraud?

This fascinating book with its extensive annotations and source references is both a good read and a thoroughgoing assessment of one of America's foremost twentieth-century quacks.

BOB MCCOY
Golden Valley, Minnesota