

Book Reviews

ALAN PRITCHARD, *Alchemy. A bibliography of English-language writings*. London, Boston and Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul jointly with the Library Association, 1980, 8vo, pp. vii, 439, £30.

Alchemy has become respectable and attracts the interest of wide circles, largely under the impact of its interpretation in terms of the Psychology of the Unconscious through C. G. Jung. But what is alchemy really? There is certainly much more to it than its traditional appraisal as the art of transmuting base metals into gold by means of the Philosophers' Stone, for mere belief in this possibility and practicality does not make an "alchemist". Hence such early scientists as Libavius, Van Helmont, Sennert, Glauber, Boyle, and Newton are no alchemists. Nor are mystical and theosophical authors who use alchemical terminology widely, such as Boehme. What gives alchemy its distinguishing mark is the inseparable interaction between chemical manipulation and a symbolism of its own kind. More concretely, it is on the chemical side not necessarily gold that provides the ultimate target. There is also the elixir through which life can be prolonged, or else a sequence of colour-changes from black to white, and finally the variegation of the peacock's tail – a sequence obtainable from any given substance. Some of such processes are intelligible today and so are some of their products such as amalgams, but the majority are not. On the other hand, for a millennium since Hellenistic times only alchemists had knowledge of legitimate chemistry. We cannot therefore deny them their dignity as "proto-chemists". On the mystical side there is one over-riding symbol: redemption through purification. It finds expression in the upgrading of the soul as well as of base metal. Both components, then, the mystical and the chemical, must be found united where alchemy is concerned. Technology, mythology, religion, and philosophy of a given epoch have moulded it – of these Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism are conspicuous. Still, whatever we do alchemy will remain to a large extent uncharted, because of its congenital obscurities. Nevertheless, its study offers precious reward for cultural historians of all colours – there is no better approach to the problems connected with the spread of tradition and observation of nature from the Far East to the West via the Near East than through alchemy; the art historian has much to gain from alchemical iconography; and so on. In short we cannot do without alchemy. Nor can we benefit from it without a first aid in the form of a reliable bibliography. There are already famous classics in this field at our disposal. These, however, are concerned chiefly with the texts and only marginally with the very extensive secondary literature, especially of more recent times since 1906. It is just this that the work under notice has to offer, in excellent completeness and design albeit restricted to publications in English (1597–1978). The net is widely cast into all possible border territories. First there are the texts (555 items); the rest of the total of the 3188 entries is occupied by secondary works on alchemy, followed by an index of names. What is new in the arrangement is the subdivision of parts I and II, I into countries. Consequently, for example Paracelsists appear in different categories – Sendivogius and Suchten under Poland; Duchesne and Penotus under France; Croll,

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Boehme and Weigel under Germany, Comenius under Czecho-Slovakia. Part II, 1 is works about alchemy arranged by authors, part II, 2 by subjects. Certain advantages of the new grouping are undeniable and in any case the index of names provides essential help. No opportunity seems to have been taken in facilitating the finding of anonymous items as against previous bibliographies. For example there is the original reconstruction (1714) of the book *Aesch mezareph* (purifying fire) from the pieces scattered through the *Kabbala denudata* – the attempt was repeated by Scholem in 1927 independently. It is entered under the catchword “Short” (item 248, 1–3, on p. 63–64, ‘A Short enquiry concerning the Hermetic Art . . .’). Judiciously the author of the *Kabbala denudata*, Knorr of Rosenroth, is referred to in the index, although his name does not appear in the title of the English work of 1714. To trace the book in the catalogue is therefore left to the good luck or detective arts of the user. It is also in vain that he would look for it under preferable catchwords (such as *Kabbala*, *Aesch mezareph* or even the obviously spurious Philalethes named on the title) in the catalogue of the Wisconsin–Duveen collection by J. Neu (Nr. 3827 on p. 241, also under ‘Short . . .’), whilst it seems to be missing in Ferguson’s *Bibliotheca* altogether. Other examples are the catchwords “Concerning” (instead of “salt” or “aqua vitae”, Nr. 342 and 343) and “Corollary” (instead of “hyle”, Nr. 344). None of this, however, can diminish the standing of the work as a useful auxiliary to the classics of historical-chemical and alchemical bibliography.

Walter Pagel

A. E. DINGLE, *The campaign for prohibition in Victorian England*, London, Croom Helm, 1980, 8vo, pp. 233, £12.50.

One aspect of the “condition of England” question which so troubled Victorian social reformers was the problem of intemperance. In Victorian England, as in contemporary Russia, this was brought about by the combination of an impoverished social environment, the absence of leisure outlets, and cheap liquor. For Victorians the difficulty lay less in recognizing a problem than in diagnosing it, distinguishing between chronic alcoholism and excess “social drinking”. However, increasingly after 1850 opinion in élitist circles — among clergymen, doctors, magistrates, and employers — came to regard drink as a major source of social evil, and therefore inclined to favour legislation restricting its sale. A powerful and well-organized temperance movement pressed politicians for reform of liquor licensing. Yet virtually nothing was achieved by 1914. Dr. A. E. Dingle, in this compact and scholarly work, traces an aspect of this failure, by analysing the history of the United Kingdom Alliance’s agitation for prohibition in Britain, between the 1860s and 1895. The Alliance sought a “local veto” whereby ratepayers in localities might opt to go “dry”. Given the tide running in favour of democratic local government reform, this was a not unreasonable demand. The Alliance failed for two reasons. As prohibitionists they could brook no compromise with mere restrictionist reformers. For them Demon Drink was evil itself. Second, their political tactics were inept. Drawing upon a wide range of sources, Dr. Dingle traces very well the interaction of two uncomprehending worlds; that of a provincial nonconformist-orientated agitational pressure group, and