

Book Reviews

MARGARET PELLING, *Cholera, fever and English medicine*, Oxford University Press, 1978, 8vo, pp. x, 342, £7.50.

Reviewed by R. J. Morris, B.A., D.Phil., Department of Economic History, Edinburgh University.

This book deals with the implications of an “official doctrine” towards epidemic fever, and uses the response to cholera to provide a wide range of insights into the development of the leading strands of British medical thought before 1865. A detailed examination of contemporary literature shows that the traditional historian’s division between contagionist and non-contagionist attitudes to epidemic fever oversimplifies the thought of most medical men. Unlike Southwood Smith and Chadwick, they thought of diseases as specific entities and ranged them along “a spectrum of contagiousness” from malaria to smallpox. Of the diseases in the centre of the spectrum, like cholera, the medical theorists asked not, is it contagious, but under what circumstances does it spread by contagion and under what conditions by other means? Gaultier’s book on Manchester would be a good example of this. The rigid dichotomy was a myth created by the sanitarians who needed to sharpen the debate for political purposes. In 1848–49, they feared cholera as a diversion from the real sanitary campaign against typhus/typhoid, summer diarrhoea, and the rest, and thus identified cholera with those diseases as non-contagious, hence implying cleansing not quarantine.

In the development of medical theory after 1840, the chemistry of Liebig is shown to have had a crucial place. His concept of “contagious molecular action” influenced Farr, Snow, Simon, and a wide range of the medical profession, enabling them to relate pathological observations and beliefs to the environmental circumstances of epidemics. With a variety of modifications, the disease process was recognized as a chemical one analogous to Liebig’s concepts of fermentation and putrefaction.

Margaret Pelling attacks Ackerknecht’s claims that the 1840s saw a trend from contagionist to non-contagionist thinking. If any trend is discernible in the complexity of medical thinking, it was towards the varied forms of “contingent contagionism,”; a trend helped by Liebigian thinking. There is no doubt that the crude equation of anti-contagionism with something called “bourgeois society” is justly criticized here. Nor would it be useful to suggest that medical men chose opinions solely on the basis of social status and interest (although laymen and politicians might). However, social pressure could sway those in doubt especially when the scientific debate was less coherent, as it was in 1831. By 1848, scientific theorists had a much greater assurance. The material in this book suggests that Liebig’s theories were one source of that assurance.

The careful analysis of the work of Farr, the Bristol “fungus theory” men, Snow, and Budd shows the coherence and logic of the different strands of medical thought, thus fulfilling the author’s aim of “doing justice to the theoretical developments of the first half of the 19th century”. In assimilating this careful analysis to the literature of social and medical history it will be important not to take the conclusions too far. It was possible for the medical journals of 1831 and 1832 to discuss cholera in terms of the dichotomy. This was difficult in 1848. Medical men did separate theory

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and practice, as Margaret Pelling asserts, but on several issues theory was vital, namely quarantine and the separation of the sick from the healthy, especially in hospitals. The relationship of the work of the leading medical theoreticians analysed here, to other practitioners, to politicians, and to public opinion needs further examination. This book not only makes that task easier but makes an important contribution to the history of medical thought.

HANS-REINER SIMON, *Die Bibliographie der Biologie. Eine analytische Darstellung unter wissenschaftshistorischen und informationstheoretischen Gesichtspunkten*, Stuttgart, Anton Hiersemann, 1977, 8vo, pp. x, 315, DM.150.

Reviewed by Eric J. Freeman, B.A., Librarian, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP.

Potential users of Dr. Simon's book should pay attention to his sub-title if they are to escape the shock of the unexpected. This is no gentle, humane narrative of the rise and progress of the enumerative bibliography of science, such as may be found in the writings of Estelle Brodman and John Fulton. Much of the book is strictly for men, rather than boys; men, moreover, with more than the usual dash of numeracy.

There is a useful historical survey of the bibliography of biology containing familiar enough material, but analysed and arranged in ways not to be found elsewhere. One example, plucked at random from the section on periodical bibliography, is the thirty-six-page alphabetical subject index to *Archiv für Naturgeschichte* (1835–1927), complete with details of authors, date of contribution, volume, series, part, and page numbers. Inaccessibility of the original forbids a check, but if Dr. Simon has it all correct it will be a minor miracle.

A good half of the book is concerned with the stern and somewhat arid stuff of information theory and bibliometry. Study of the ways in which the movement of scientific information may be inferred from science's literature received its best-known, and fairly non-technical, treatment in Derek De Solla Price's *Big science, little science* (1963). Matters have darkened since then and this section of Dr. Simon's book is best avoided except by readers with basic statistical skills.

Der Bibliographie der Biologie will receive its peer reviews in the technical journals. For the rest of us the book will be occasionally useful, wholly admirable, but unlovable.

ARTHUR E. IMHOF (editor), *Biologie des Menschen in der Geschichte: Beiträge zur Socialgeschichte der Neuzeit aus Frankreich und Skandinavien*, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1978, 8vo, pp. 421, [no price stated].

This collection of essays edited by A. E. Imhof bears the same title in German as a recent American volume edited by R. Forster and O. Ranum (*Biology of man in history*, Johns Hopkins Press, 1975). Both are selections from an exciting area of historical investigation associated most intimately with the French journal *Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*. All of the essays in the Forster-Ranum collection come from *Annales*, and many in Imhof's volume do. Most of the authors will be familiar to anyone interested in this topic; they include M.D. Grmek, E. Le Roy