

### Book Reviews

PETER RAZZELL, *The conquest of smallpox. The impact of inoculation on smallpox mortality in eighteenth-century Britain*, Firle, Sussex, Caliban Books, 1977, 8vo, pp. x, 190, £8.00.

A demographic study which in spite of the author's persuasive writing and extensive quotes (at least a third of the text consists of frequently inordinately long verbatim quotations) by no means justifies the staggering claim on the dust jacket that the book "shows how [the practice of variolation] virtually eliminated smallpox before the end of the eighteenth century".

The statistics presented certainly show an impressive impact of variolation in the localities examined, most of which have been culled from the relatively small area covered by the Sutton family and their disciples (comparisons with the very different situation on the continent of Europe would also have been interesting). The net is thrown somewhat wider in an astonishing table on p. 133, which purports to trace the "increase in natural virulence of smallpox" by comparing case fatality rates over a period of 150 years in 13 different towns and cities, making no attempt to compare rates for the same locality in different outbreaks at different times.

As in his previous exercise, concerned with the debunking of Jenner, the author does not hesitate to present near-clichés as though he had just invented them. Thus he remarks somewhat sententiously in his preface: "One of the lessons to emerge from this book, is that effective medical measures do not always come from highly organized and expensive research programmes, but sometimes arise out of the traditional skills of folk medicine"—William Withering, among others, must be turning in his grave. As a matter of fact, that particular lesson had already been well learnt by 1766, when Sir George Baker wrote, also apropos of smallpox inoculation: ". . . it cannot but be acknowledged that the Art of Medicine has, in several instances, been greatly indebted to Accident; and that some of its most valuable improvements have been received from the hands of Ignorance and Barbarism".

ROBERT S. GOTTFRIED, *Epidemic disease in fifteenth-century England. The medical response and the demographic consequences*, Leicester University Press, 1978, 8vo, pp. xiv, 262, £10.00.

Dr. Gottfried has examined minutely a large number of primary sources dealing with East Anglia in the fifteenth century. He has employed new methods and techniques to analyse his data, which are mainly wills and testaments. The end-result is an outstandingly important book, both as concerns the detailed contents and conclusions, and also on account of the research methods used. Although it deals with a restricted part of England, some generalizations are, however, permissible.

The prime factor of mortality, which controlled population growth, was epidemic disease, especially plague, characterized by repeated outbreaks of lethal consequence. Famine had little part to play, although colder weather may have had a role. Towns and the country were usually equally affected. Low levels of fertility were a second demographic peculiarity, and helped to bring about a population decline or halt. An explanation for this is more difficult to come by, and several possible factors are discussed.

The author, a historian, has made a significant contribution to medieval medicine

### Book Reviews

in England, and his book will become a classic of its kind. Moreover, he indicates that material for similar studies is available, and it is to be hoped that others will continue this area of research. Meantime, both general and medical historians, as well as social and economic historians, and historical demographers, will wish to examine Dr. Gottfried's work closely.

CHARLES DE MERTENS, *An account of the plague which raged at Moscow 1771*, [facsimile of 1799 ed., with introduction by John Alexander], Newtonville, Mass., Oriental Research Partners, 1977, 8vo, pp. 39, v, 127, [no price stated].

Plague disappeared from the British Isles in the seventeenth century, but its appearance as close as Marseilles in 1720, and its constant presence in Asia throughout the eighteenth century, guaranteed British interest in the disease. The present volume is a facsimile reprint of a vivid, first-hand description of a devastating epidemic which occurred in Moscow in 1771. The author, a Belgian physician named Charles de Mertens (1737–1788), originally published his account in Latin in 1778, but translations into several European languages during the succeeding twenty years attest to the continued topicality of plague in Western Europe. The English version was first published in 1799. Mertens' English translator abridged the work somewhat, though retaining Mertens' account of the civic and medical measures taken to combat the Russian epidemic, and many of Mertens' shrewd observations on the treatment and prevention of plague. Mertens placed great stock in cleanliness, particularly in frequent sponging with vinegar and water. He was convinced that plague hospitals were the most effective way to contain the spread of the disease, and he decried the practice of quarantining both sick and well members of a family together.

In addition to Mertens' text, this edition contains an excellent, fully-documented introduction by Professor John Alexander of the University of Kansas. Alexander describes the original British response to the Russian plague epidemic of 1770–72 and places Mertens' little book in its historical setting.

COLIN McEVEDY and RICHARD JONES, *Atlas of world population history*, Harmondsworth, Middx., Penguin Books, 1978, 8vo, pp. 368, illus., £1.75 (paperback).

The authors aim to provide figures for the population of each country at regular intervals through historical time. There are six parts: Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and a global overview. Each of the first five sections has a general review, and then its countries are taken in turn, with a general account of demographic progress illustrated with graphs and maps, a discussion of primary sources for population data, and a bibliography.

As can be imagined, this is a remarkably useful and accurate work of reference, and it will continue to be so for some time. It is also cheap, and will deservedly find a wide audience of students and scholars.

G. MELVYN HOWE (editor), *A world geography of human diseases*, London and New York, Academic Press, 1977, 8vo, pp. xxviii, 621, illus., £24.00.

Although this book is dealing primarily with the modern position concerning the