

### *Book Reviews*

T. R. FORBES, *Chronicle from Aldgate; life and death in Shakespeare's London*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1971, pp xx, 251, £4.50.

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Parish registers are usually rather dull catalogues of vital events, with the briefest of circumstantial detail; we are content to leave them to the genealogist and local historian, and occasionally to the demographer. But the registers of St. Botolph without Aldgate from 1558 to 1625 are quite different. A succession of parish clerks maintained the registers as "a kind of daybook for the parish". Not only are the basic death entries usually augmented with further facts—ages, addresses, occupations, places and causes of death and entertaining side-comments—but there are records of alms collections, marriage banns, payments of rent, sermons and proclamations in the church, and of much else besides. Many parish registers have since been printed, but not these, and Dr. Forbes has now made a wealth of abstracts from them, and has woven these into an account of various aspects of life in the London of Shakespeare's day. On each topic, whether it is the registers themselves, the causes of death, the plague or the care of the poor and sick, a general picture is presented from contemporary sources and later historical accounts, embellished and highlighted by relevant items abstracted from the registers.

Of particular interest to the medical historian and demographer are two almost unique features of these registers, the information recorded on the causes and ages at death during the period 1583 to 1599, while Thomas Harrydance was the parish clerk. Causes are not listed in the London Bills of Mortality until 1629, and ages at death were not recorded there until nearly a century later. Although the stated causes of death (like those in the Bills) are too vague to yield much information, a great deal can be learnt from the ages. Recorded stillbirths numbered about 120 for every 1,000 christenings; infant deaths amounted to 300 per 1,000 christenings, about half of these being "chrisoms", that is, infants dying within a month. Apparently only about half the births survived to age five and only 30 per cent to age ten. The ages at death in years of plague are also of interest. In 1593 most of the plague deaths occurred in those aged under forty, and the numbers were fairly evenly distributed by age over this range. However there was a decided preponderance of male over female deaths between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine, but outside these ages the numbers were almost identical. The non-plague deaths, many fewer in number, showed a similar pattern. However, in the next plague year, 1603, the total numbers of male and female deaths in the parish (ages not being recorded) were almost equal. In the 1625 plague, however, there was again a male preponderance, both in children and in adults.

Dr. Forbes presents his data skilfully and entertainingly, but even his skill cannot overcome entirely the basic difficulty of producing a connected and readable narrative from a staccato record of disconnected events. Dr. Forbes is nevertheless to be congratulated on having brought this unusual and valuable set of parish records before us, and on the picture which he *and* they jointly provide of the people and their conditions in London towards the end of the sixteenth century.