

### Book Reviews

*Dr. Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689): his Life and Original Writings*, by KENNETH DEWHURST, London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1966, pp. viii, 180, illus., 35s.

Thomas Sydenham was 'the greatest physician this country has ever produced', Dr. Dewhurst claims boldly (p. vii). Parliamentarian soldier, member of a family which had helped to run England for Oliver Cromwell, himself a radical Whig, friend of Locke and admirer of Shaftesbury, pioneer of rational theology, Sydenham is typical of the radical Puritanism of many of the serious original Fellows of the Royal Society. Like Robert Boyle, Sydenham enjoyed the tremendous advantage of not having his education ruined at a seventeenth-century university. After fighting for Parliament in the civil war, he had only a brief spell at Oxford in 1647–8, before it had been purged by Parliamentary Commissioners and scientists (briefly) introduced (pp. 15–16). 'Physic', says Sydenham, 'is not to be learned by going to universities', but he is for taking apprentices; and says, 'one had as good send a man to Oxford to learn shoemaking as practising physic'. That comment by an undergraduate contemporary sums up Sydenham's wholly correct view (p. 17; cf. p. 72). He probably profited more by his experience as visiting physician at one of London's hospitals for the poor, where he could experiment in treating fevers 'before risking the lives of people of quality' (p. 30). Sydenham noted later that mortality from smallpox was far lower among the poor than among the rich. 'which cannot be thought referable to any other cause than that they are deprived through the narrowness of their fortunes and their rude way of living of the opportunities of hurting themselves with a more precise and tender keeping' (p. 116).

Sydenham was a classical Baconian. Hypotheses derived from the Ancients have 'but confined and narrowed men's thoughts, amused their understanding with fine but useless speculations, and diverted their enquiries from the true and advantageous knowledge of things . . . He that in physic shall lay down fundamental maxims and from thence drawing consequence and raising dispute shall reduce it into the regular form of a science has indeed done something to enlarge the art of talking and perhaps laid a foundation for endless disputes . . . The most acute and ingenious part of men being by custom and education engaged in empty speculations, the improvement of useful arts was left to the meaner sort of people who had weaker parts and less opportunities to do it, and were therefore branded with the disgraceful name of mechanics . . . I rank the cook and the farmer with the scholar and philosopher' (pp. 81–3). Sydenham had no sympathy with 'the madness of those men who raving upon remote philosophical notions contemp the easier and plainer ways of doing good to his neighbour' (p. 139).

Sydenham's clinical methods were correspondingly unorthodox and experimental. By the traditional method of treating smallpox with a heating regime 'greater slaughters are committed and more havoc made of mankind every year than hath been made in any age by the sword of the fiercest and most bloody tyrant that the world ever produced; and which makes it more sad, this destruction lights not upon any so much as the youth' (pp. 120–1). (2,664 persons, Dr. Dewhurst glosses, died of smallpox in London in 1667–8, out of a total population of half a million—p.40). Sydenham recommended fresh air and exercise for most complaints. He told one

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patient who refused to take exercise that he could only be cured by a doctor in Aberdeen. The gullible patient rode there, failed to find the non-existent doctor—but cured himself by the exercise (pp. 53–4; cf. p. 169). Sydenham had ‘an abhorring’ of bleeding, and of most of the medicines prescribed in his day (pp. 41, 49). Patients were best left to ‘the prince and pattern of physicians—Time’ (p. 47). ‘His own palate will be the best judge what is fit for him’, Sydenham wrote to Locke of a patient with whom the latter was having difficulties (p. 172). When one day I asked him to advise me what books I should read to qualify me for practise, one of his juniors records, ‘he replied “Read *Don Quixote*, it is a very good book, I read it still” ’ (p. 49). With such legends accreting round him, with his radical politics and his caustic tongue, no wonder one of Sydenham’s more traditional colleagues referred to him as ‘a trooper turned physician’, and that attempts were made ‘to banish him, as guilty of medicinal heresy,’ from the College of Physicians (p. 43).

Dr. Dewhurst sums up: ‘His pioneering of quinine was of immense benefit in fever-ridden England, and countless lives were saved by his cooling regimen in the treatment of smallpox. He exhibited iron, either in the form of steel filings or as a syrup, in the treatment of hysteria and chlorosis; and in a pain-racked age he wisely realized the value of opium, which he gave in the form of liquid laudanum’. But his reputation mainly depends on the general clinical principles which guided his own practice of medicine and illustrated his writings; his ‘revival of the Hippocratic method of studying the natural history of diseases by making a series of accurate and detailed observations set the clinical pattern of future progress’ (p. 59). Dr. Dewhurst’s volume consists of a valuable seventy-page introduction and over one hundred pages of Sydenham’s original writings, nearly all hitherto unpublished, some of them previously attributed to Locke (p. 73). It is an excellent piece of work, of interest to the general historian as well as to the medical specialist.

CHRISTOPHER HILL

*The Medical Formulary or Aqrabadhin of Al-Kindi*. Translated with a study of its materia medica, by MARTIN LEVEY, (Publications in Medieval Science), Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1966, pp. xiii, 410, \$8.50.

There are several areas in the history and philosophy of man’s progress to which little attention has been given. Among the least studied and understood is the Arabic culture, during the Middle Ages, especially in its contribution to the development of the health professions.

Levey’s fine, scholarly work fills this hiatus in the study of Arabic pharmacy and the evolution of materia medica. In the introduction, Professor Levey adequately covers the major types of Arabic literature on pharmacology (although the term is poorly defined in the footnote on page 3). He does even better with the etymology and sources of Arabic names in materia medica but gives little attention to the life and times of al-Kindi (see my article, ‘Al-Kindi, a ninth-century physician, philosopher, and scholar’, *Medical History*, 1965, 9, 328-342).

It is, however, refreshing and very creditable to note that Levey has included a reproduction of the original Arabic manuscript. He has rendered the translation