

Book Reviews

The Birth of Penicillin and the Disarming of Microbes, by RONALD HARE, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1970, pp. 236, illus., £3·15.

There have been many bizarre birthplaces of antibiotics including the sewage of Sardinia (the Cephalosporins), an open fracture (Bacitracin), the soil of Borneo (Vancomycin), Caracas and Venezuela (Chloramphenicol) and the Philippine Archipelago (Erythromycin).

Penicillin was born in St. Mary's Hospital, Praed Street, Paddington, and this splendid monograph describes the labour, delivery and puerperium conducted by that most admirable of midwives, Alexander Fleming. At the time he discovered penicillin Fleming was only forty-seven years old; he was small, with blue eyes, a large head, a bent nose and a broad Ayrshire accent. The son of a Scottish lowlands farmer, he had worked for a time as a clerk in a city office before inheriting sufficient money to become a doctor. He became a member of Sir Almroth Wright's team at St. Mary's, went to France with him during the First World War, and remained with Wright until he died. On returning from a summer holiday in September 1928, he noted with interest an agar plate on which a growth of staphylococcus aureus was absent in the vicinity of a mould. This unusual phenomenon was demonstrated in turn to D. M. Pryce, E. W. Todd, Hurst Brown, C. J. La Touche and others who dropped in on Fleming at his laboratory. Penicillin, produced by the mould, killed the growing staphylococci. Such was the birth of penicillin and the heralding of a new era.

Professor Hare unfolds the story with the authoritative insight of a distinguished bacteriologist who had himself worked in this laboratory and was present at the discovery of penicillin. The paper describing the discovery was sent to the *British Journal of Experimental Pathology* on 10 May 1929, and published in the June issue of that journal.

The introduction of the sulphonamides was in many respects even more exciting; certainly Ronald Hare heightens the entertainment with charming personal digressions in a lucid style.

This historically important account of the advent of chemotherapy by an Emeritus Professor of Bacteriology in the University of London is compulsively readable and most enjoyable.

D. GERAINT JAMES

The Cole Library of Early Medicine and Zoology. Catalogue of Books and Pamphlets. Part I: 1472 to 1800, by NELLIE B. EALES, Reading, The Alden Press for the Library, University of Reading, 1969, pp. xiv, 425, *front.*, no price stated.

This is an unusual catalogue in several ways. To begin with, it records a collection which is more than a little out of the ordinary, as anyone will know who has seen it in Reading University Library. Professor Cole was no random collector. And so one is impressed by the contents. But equally impressive is the way in which they are arranged. It is as if Dr. Eales had entered the mind of a librarian and noted down all those virtues which he expects a good reference book to have; and then provided them.

The contents of the Cole Library catalogue amount to more than 2,000 items, representing something like 500 writers from the pre-1800 period. The authors follow in chronological sequence starting with Hippocrates and ending with Abraham