

Book Reviews

GODWIN JESCHAL, *Politik und Wissenschaft deutscher Aerzte im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Würzburger Medizinhistorische Forschungen, Band 13), Pattensen/Han., Horst Wellm Verlag, 1980, 8vo, pp. 169, DM. 26.00 (paperback).

This doctoral thesis from Berlin tells the old and unedifying story of how the leaders of the German medical profession followed their imperialist government in supporting the 1914–18 war inside and outside the Reich. The author illustrates this additionally by examining their attitude towards gas-warfare, nutrition, and abortion. For him this is the necessary consequence of the economic “bourgeois” condition of the German doctors. The author omits two basic facts: (1) this attitude was practised just the same by the leaders of the French and English profession; (2) this imperialistic attitude is practised today, even in peace-time, in those countries, where the bourgeoisie has been exterminated. This makes it obvious that in spite of the author’s industry in collecting material, this is no scientific monograph but a political pamphlet, a fact which is anyhow obvious from the blind reliance on material from the so-called “German Democratic Republic”, and the terminology and the general philosophy of the opus. You can call this science, if you want to, but as Friedrich Engels once wrote, “You can classify a clothesbrush as a mammal, but that doesn’t make it grow mammae”. By the way, S. Grumbach, whom Jeschal quotes repeatedly, as a “Swiss”, was no Swiss, but a French socialist deputy.

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P. H. SYDENHAM, *Measuring instruments: tools of knowledge and control*, London, Peter Peregrinus (in association with the Science Museum), 1979, 8vo, pp. xvii, 512, illus., £19.00 (overseas £22.00).

It is hard to be generous about this book, which begins with two chapters of total gobbledegook. In his endeavour to construct what he calls a philosophy of measurement the author does nothing so much as add verses to *Jabberwocky*. On page 2 we learn “measuring instruments . . . [are] . . . tools for converting information into knowledge”. By page 18 we have also discovered “knowledge . . . [is] . . . information that has been given a certain meaning by the observer”, and on page 20 we are told “the meaning of measurements would seem to remain a property subjectively tied to the mind of the observer”. All of which leads to the conclusion “that measuring instruments are information machines that convey and code with meaning, knowledge sought” (p. 20). Reference back to page 2 should make this clear, “there is a great difference of opinion on what knowledge is”. An aphorism that can only be helpful by the time we get to page 26 “Science is the study of gaining knowledge and ordering it in its most general form so as to reduce the number of individual facts needed to be known”. By page 28 a Zen-like “known body of knowledge” has crept into the text. After this the solidity of page 38 is something of a relief: “The sum total of knowledge is termed the body of knowledge”. This body of knowledge grows through technology: “If the equipment and method is better than those that preceded it, it must reveal new knowledge” and so, the author notes conclusively, “It provides a journey into the unknown where all manner of hitherto unknown phenomena exist” (p. 49).

After this gnomic beginning and the oracular “Man can only create what can be

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created" (p. 65), the author gets down, by page 142, to a subject he obviously knows a great deal about: chronicling the invention of measuring instruments, particularly electrical ones. Historians of this subject will have to be the final judges as to whether Professor Sydenham's dense text and extensive bibliography are accurate, complete, and useful as a work of reference. In his self-confessed pursuit for a "single historical perspective" (preface), however, he makes tentative sorties into other areas. Medicine is represented by Ludwig's kymograph, Marey's sphygmograph, and Verdin's sphygmometrograph. Ludwig's kymograph is, of course, central to any history of measurement in medicine. But what about Poiseuille? Why Marey's sphygmograph and not Dudgeon's? Why the sphygmograph at all? What about the sphygmanometer? In addition Professor Sydenham omits from his bibliography the two most important articles on this whole subject.¹ Medicine makes a brief reappearance later in an account of the electrocardiograph. Einthoven, of course, is credited with having recorded the first E.C.G. with surface electrodes. Waller is not mentioned. It is not better to mislead than not to lead at all.

Amongst his many cryptic pronouncements, however, in a phrase I shall cherish, Professor Sydenham describes exactly the sort of relationship I have to this book. It is an ongoing "situation of adequate noninteraction" (p. 51). And, to give him another final word, "In modern times many a major project has failed for lack of measurement forethought and investigation" (p. 51).

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¹H. E. Hoff and L. A. Geddes, 'Graphic registration before Ludwig; the antecedents of the kymograph', *Isis*, 1959, 50: 5-21; H. E. Hoff and L. A. Geddes, 'The technological background of physiological discovery: ballistics and the graphic method', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1960, 15: 345-363.

ESTHER FISCHER-HOMBERGER, *Krankheit Frau und andere Arbeiten zur Medizingeschichte der Frau*, Berne, Stuttgart, and Vienna, Huber, 1979, 8vo, pp. 160, illus., S.Fr. 34.00/DM. 38.00 (paperback).

This collection of essays deals chiefly with the misconceptions about female complaints and female professions in history. Some of these misconceptions arose unconsciously in people's minds, but the majority were fostered by the jealous upholders of male superiority. Often wrong thought-associations were the cause, as in the case of menstruation which was regarded as a sign of female imperfection, because of the comparison with the wounded and sick. The changes of detail in this enduring attitude through the centuries make compelling reading. Essentially menstruation was regarded as a sign of sin, and the woman as containing poison with all its implications. The fluctuating importance of the hymen in social history is another theme treated; and similarly, the role played by the midwife, which increased and decreased. Hysteria was dismissed by men as a typically feminine complaint.

The first essay is a short history of gynaecology and midwifery. The last essay is a history of the concept of the power of imagination in medicine shown in such writers as Marcellus Donatus, Thomas Fienus, and J. B. Van Helmont. The latter thought that images causing disease could be produced by the spleen and by the uterus. The