

Book Reviews

interested in the first chapter, which gives a brief overview of Soviet psychiatry up to recent times.

After fighting through the endless verbiage, one might draw the conclusion that the only scientific work of any consequence done in psychiatry was before 1917. The single major exception would be A. R. Luria, who is completely ignored in the book, except for one appearance of his name in a list of Soviet scientists; this extraordinary treatment, which is presumably because he was Jewish, is in contrast to the repeated mentions and extended space given to such mediocre apparatchiks as Snezhnevsky. Medical hegemonism seems to be triumphant, since even nursing and occupational therapy only appear in a medical context, and other professions are not even mentioned.

It is not surprising to find that the political misuse of psychiatry in the USSR is not referred to, but the text is regularly interrupted with allegations such as that ECT "has become all but a repressive measure applied to even healthy people" in America. There are some short accounts of important pre-revolutionary figures like Bechterev, but the lack of any references or supporting details make these of very limited use. One is told yet again that psychiatric day-hospitals began in Moscow in 1931–2, but this tantalizing morsel is not filled out with the kind of information that historians need. Altogether, a worthless piece of propaganda and a sadly missed opportunity.

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HENRY HOBHOUSE, *Seeds of change. Five plants that transformed mankind*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985, 8vo, pp. x, 245, illus., £15.00.

Too many people with too little knowledge have clambered aboard the "green medicine" bandwagon in recent years, so that any further book with a title even vaguely suggestive of that is liable to be approached with some suspicion. Certainly, it was with some scepticism, even a sinking heart, that this reviewer turned to the opening pages of a volume handicapped by the revelation on the dust-jacket that the author is a one-time *Daily Express* journalist (a former "William Hickey" no less, according to the publicity handout).

That initially unfavourable reaction was very quickly dispelled. This is a thoughtful, thought-provoking, extremely readable work based on a wide and careful sifting of the secondary literature (the notes, placed at the end of each chapter, are alone more fascinating than many other authors' texts). All that is lacking is a little spicing of wit.

The five crop plants discussed are quinine, sugar, tea, cotton, and the potato. Though only one of these is a medicine, three of the others have profoundly influenced human nutrition and all five abundantly support the author's thesis that certain of the major twists and turns in world history have come about as a result of a critical dependence on particular botanical species. Much of what he has to relate is not, of course, all that new; and in the case of the potato, especially, has been covered already, with great comprehensiveness, in Salaman's famous work. But it is nevertheless useful to have such a diversity of information brought together and assessed from a macro-historical viewpoint. It is heartening to be reminded, too, that it is not only specialist scholars who are capable of producing *haute vulgarisation* of a standard that can command respect. Too many of the deeply knowledgeable will always lack the time or the inclination or the writing skills to go to the trouble of passing on what they have learned to the general reading public in a suitably palatable form: they need lay allies like Mr Hobhouse if that crucial but too-neglected task is not to go by default.

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