

## Book Reviews

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*La Médecine de l'Amérique précolombienne*, by CHARLES COURY, Paris, Editions Dacosta, 1969, pp. 351, illus., Fr. 124.

In a literal sense the term Pre-Columbian refers to the period of the history of the Western Hemisphere from the earliest times to 1492, when Christopher Columbus set foot on the New World. In a wider sense, however, pre-Columbian commonly applies to the pre-acculturation period, before the native populations bore the full brunt of European colonization. Due to the staggered waves of exploration and conquest, extending from the fifteenth century to about the nineteenth, the 'historic' or post-contact period for such areas thus differs widely, Central and Northeastern America bearing the white man's influence very early, while until less than a century ago purely aboriginal—therefore in a sense pre-Columbian—culture could be encountered on the Northwest Coast. Whatever the date of contact, it is now accepted that the multitude of different tribes and peoples that inhabited the Americas, from the Eskimo North to the Southern pampas, had a long-established culture, and in certain cases an advanced civilization of their own. Maya-Aztec Mexico and the Incas of Peru are the best known, but other early foci of advanced art and social structure are now being discovered or re-discovered and are beginning to receive due attention. Thus, the prehistoric products of the arctic Thule culture and the totemic art of the North Pacific coast are now regarded among the rare group of superlative achievement by any standard.

To varying degrees of development all these areas and cultures had their medicine too. With its blend of medico-religious practices, shrewd empiricism, judicious use of available plant and animal products, and an intuitive interpretation of nature, native medicine cannot have been inferior to the contemporary pseudo-medico-chirurgical alchemy imported by the early conquerors, missionaries and so-called men of physick. Indeed it is a fair guess that with his keen sense of observation and respect for nature, the Amerindian healer probably stood a better chance of succeeding. Yet however advanced or retarded these areas might have been in the healing arts, they can rarely have passed the stage of 'primitive medicine'—primitive both in the restrictive sense of non-scientific healing, and the wider sense of medico-religious magic. Until Europeans and white Americans colonized any area, and sometimes well after this, the primitive and traditional forms of native medicine persisted. In his *La Médecine de l'Amérique précolombienne* Charles Coury, Professor of the History of Medicine and Surgery at the University of Paris, presents a comprehensive and beautifully compiled account of the archaic medicine of the 'First Americans'. This is not Professor Coury's first book on medical history, but with his special interest in primitive medicine, the present work is particularly successful.

All the native peoples of North, Central, and South America are now believed to have come from the Ural-Altai plateau of Siberia, crossing eastward via the narrow Bering approach. Whether this route to America was then a land bridge or the waterway now known as Bering Strait is not yet established. Other trans-Pacific routes cannot be altogether eliminated either. In any case, migrations must have come in waves. So far the earliest known sites of human life in the Western Hemisphere

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date back to some 20,000 years. These proto-Americans must certainly have brought some of the cultural traits of their Mongolian homeland. In the medical field totemism and shamanism show undoubted signs of Asiatic roots, with a primitive form of psychotherapy that is explicable within the particular view of the supernatural cosmology. The more natural components of the healing art draw more on the new habitat, America presenting a wide variety of flora and fauna to be used therapeutically. Quite a number of these have indeed now found their respectable place in the pharmacopoeia.

Source material for the study of American medicine prior to the sixteenth century exists, but it is sporadic and of unequal value, remaining greatly dependent on conjecture and deductive reconstruction. However, dated osteological and palaeopathological findings, pottery representing disease and malformations, artistic objects connected with healing, medico-spiritual monuments, and several illustrated *Codices* as well as early (but post-Columbian) accounts give quite an adequate picture of archaic medicine in America's distant past. In Professor Coury's remarkable work the photographic reproductions of such source material are systematically interwoven with a clear and scholarly text. The value of the presentation is further enhanced by the extensive museological references and detailed bibliography.

After discussing the general aspects of medicine, magic and religion, with particular reference to the primitive medicine of the Western Hemisphere, the author begins with a most helpful chapter on the ethnography of the primitive American tribes. Four sketch maps simplify the often tongue-twisting problem of tribal nomenclature and geographic distribution. Much as a contemporary work on medicine, the book discusses the various specialties such as anatomy, physiology, pathology, infectious and parasitic diseases, epidemics, congenital malformations and induced deformities, surgery, public health, pharmacology, etc., always with reference to primitive American medical practice by regions. The healing profession and the position of the healer among the various peoples are discussed at some length. The medicine man has always been held in high esteem in primitive society and one can discern a set of checks and balances operating in order to maintain the profession upright and safeguard the interest of the sick. Pharmacology and materia medica are naturally studied in detail; here one can be more scientific in one's information, and Professor Coury describes a number of medicinal remedies that from their Indian use, have found a place in the current drug list. Some well-known anaesthetics and hallucinogens are but two examples.

A work on the primitive medicine of the Americas cannot be complete without mention being made of the early Maya and Aztec manuscripts. These are the only literary documents in the whole of aboriginal America. In an appendix Professor M. D. Grmek studies the iconography of some of the famous *Codices* and interprets their medical significance.

This is, of course, a book on medical history. But it is also an art book, and should prove useful to historians and ethnographers too. Printed in a de luxe limited edition on heavy paper, with clear type, it will also give much pleasure to anyone who loves to handle books. The 122 well-chosen illustrations, of which 12 are in full colour, add much to the beauty of this authoritative work. That the text is in French should not deter

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those who would like to acquire a copy, but it is hoped that an English edition will be available before long.

S. W. A. GUNN

*The Common Scientist in the Seventeenth Century. A Study of the Dublin Philosophical Society 1683–1708*, by K. THEODORE HOPPEN, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, pp. xiv, 297, £2.75.

The foundation of the Royal Society in London in 1660 reflected the presence of a sizeable group of talented and active scientific men living in London or coming to the city frequently, who wanted a centre and focus for their deep scientific interests. The foundation of the Dublin Philosophical Society in 1683 reflects the wistful hope of a few moderately competent scientifically-oriented men that a formal society would necessarily generate more interest in science than was then known to exist in that very provincial city. The moving spirit was William Molyneux, subsequently author of two books on optics; both he and his brother Thomas, a successful Dublin physician, were to be elected F.R.S. and have several papers published in the *Philosophical Transactions*. The most distinguished member was Sir William Petty, still fitfully occupied with technological and scientific matters. Other members were theologians, there was one Professor of Mathematics (St. George Ashe), and (almost one third of the whole) there were eight physicians and one surgeon in 1684. The Society flourished only intermittently, never quite regaining its first impetus after its collapse in 1687, but struggling on until 1708.

Dr. Hoppen has presented a most scholarly study, solidly based on manuscript sources and wide reading. His work is full of useful information upon two or three dozen men who kept up an interest in scientific activity under difficult conditions. But even William Molyneux regarded Ireland as unsuitable for scientific work, and his son Samuel, after serving as the moving spirit in reviving the Society in 1707 (at the age of eighteen!) left for London a few years later. It is clear that there was not a sufficiently large group to sustain a scientific society, and indeed many members would have preferred a literary and theological debating society. The whole effect is somehow a trifle pathetic, showing how difficult it was at the end of the seventeenth century to stimulate an interest in science. The Molyneux family did best when its members sought stimulation by corresponding with members of the Royal Society, and were unconsciously fortunate when the disturbances of 1688 sent them and others of the Dublin Society to England and above all London.

MARIE BOAS HALL

*Bibliography of Mediaeval Arabic and Jewish Medicine and Allied Sciences*, by R. Y. EBIED, London, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1971, pp. 150, £2.00.

Historians will welcome this bibliography which covers the literature relating to Jewish and Arabian physicians of the Middle Ages and their contributions to medicine and medical sciences. The 2,000 entries are arranged in two main sections. The second (pp. 75–136) records not only the works of the medieval physicians but also critical writings about them; the first (pp. 27–74) lists contributions by modern authors which are relevant to the main theme. Original titles, if in Arabic or Hebrew,