

### *Book Reviews*

North American Indians. They deal with the psychiatric aspects of various types of primitive medicine. Unfortunately, as in all composite works, the contributions are variable in quality and some have only scanty documentation. Nevertheless, on the whole, the material is valuable and well worth studying. As the editor points out, the handling of the mentally disturbed in Haiti as seen in the healer-patient relationship seems to have a lot in common with the relations of the Western psychiatrist with his patient. Primitive attitudes to disease and death provide insights valuable even for the sophisticated and "developed" physician. The comparative nature of these studies is also of great interest, how different cultures will interpret and handle identical situations and events associated with sickness, especially with that of the mind. The outstanding importance of illness as a social phenomenon is also revealed clearly in the various cultures dealt with. And this is especially true in the case of psychiatric disorders, again providing salutary insights into our own practices.

There is, therefore, a great deal of material in this book which will be of interest to the modern psychiatrist and general physician, as well as to the medical historian concerned with primitive medicine, and to the social anthropologist.

**BARBARA G. MEYERHOFF**, *Peyote hunt. The sacred journey of the Huichol Indians*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1974, 8vo, pp. 285, illus., £8.20.

The Huichols are few in number and they inhabit an inaccessible part of Mexico. However, in recent years they have become better known because of their religious use of peyote, the main alkaloid of which is mescaline, and for their paintings made of coloured wool yarn. Peyote and the resultant hallucinogenic state, however, comprise only one constituent of their ritual complex. To the Huichols the plant is a divine gift, and the visions it produces are personal and of the inmost self only; peyote can thus be likened to the wine of communion.

In this fascinating book Professor Meyerhoff relates her friendship with a Huichol shaman-priest who told her the detailed secrets of his community's symbolism, myth, and ritual, so that they could be recorded and preserved. Each year the Indians undertake a hunt for peyote and the author gives a vivid account, supported by illustrations, of her experiences on one of these expeditions, travelling several hundred miles to a site thought to be their original homeland, where they gather sufficient peyote for the ensuing year's ceremonies.

There is also a general ethnographical and historical discussion of the culture of these Indians. For the anthropologist, Professor Meyerhoff's book will be an important addition to the study of the role of symbols in social and cultural processes. For the historian of medicine the interest lies in the controlled ingestion of a hallucinogenic drug and the vital part it plays in the culture of a simple people. The book is especially relevant to the present-day problem of drug abuse. As suggested recently by Brian Inglis, alteration of drug habits demands changes in society, and we have a lot to learn from primitive natives like the Huichols who practise and enjoy the episodic exhibition of a habit-forming substance.