

Book Reviews

Möbius coined the term “pathography”, and since then, many practising doctors have used their clinical knowledge in attempting more fully to understand historical figures. The results are sometimes one-sided and smug, but if used sensitively, as by Sir George Pickering or Lord Brain, the medical biography can be an exceptionally interesting historical exercise.

William Ober belongs with the first-class practitioners of this genre. The present volume collects essays which he has published in medical journals over the past decade. In addition to the opening essay which gives the book its title, Ober has written on Swinburne’s masochism; on the relation of Lady Chatterley to D. H. Lawrence’s mental and physical state while composing his novel; on Keats and opium; on three “mad” eighteenth-century poets (Collins, Cowper, Smart); and on Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, the Earl of Rochester, Thomas Shadwell, and Socrates. The essays vary in quality – Dr. Ober does not have much new to say about Chekhov or Socrates, but he is exceptionally interesting on Boswell, Lawrence, and the mad poets – but the volume itself is distinguished by three sterling qualities.

First, Ober has researched his subjects exceptionally well. He has immersed himself in the literary productions as well as the biographical details (published and unpublished) of his group of literary men. His essay on Boswell, for instance, contains a wealth of detail about Boswell’s many attacks of venereal disease, culled from the massive private record which Boswell left behind. In other studies, Ober successfully uses art to illuminate life, and vice versa.

Second, Ober writes with a witty and elegant style. His essays are pleasant to read; the volume is ideal bedside reading and frequently entices the reader to move from the essays to the actual works of Dr. Ober’s subjects.

Finally, Dr. Ober approaches his theme with a sound combination of psycho-history and retrospective physical diagnosis. Generally, Ober is Freudian in his interpretations, but he is never dogmatic and has a splendid sense of the difference between speculation and fact. He approaches his figures as complicated human beings, not simply as collections of symptoms. His collection of essays deserves to be widely read.

L. J. RATHER, *The genesis of cancer. A study in the history of ideas*, Baltimore, Md., and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 8vo, pp. xi, 262, £12.25.

Reviewed by W. F. Bynum, M. D., Ph. D., Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP.

The genesis of cancer is, quite simply, intellectual history of medicine at its best. In four long chapters, Dr. Rather examines theories about the origin of tumours from the Greeks to the end of the nineteenth century. Although focused on what A.O. Lovejoy called a “unit idea” – the tumour – Rather’s exposition involves him in a number of issues: humoral versus solidist theories of disease; notions of the roles of lymph and blood in the body economy; the relationship between inflammation and disease; and the impact of the concepts of tissue and the cell on clinical medicine. Rather’s concern is primarily with the nineteenth century, when microscopy, embryology, cellular pathology, and clinical diagnosis permitted fairly sharp and consistent distinctions between benign and malignant tumours, and between the various forms of carcinomas

Book Reviews

and sarcomas. Within a decade of the publication of Virchow's *Cellularpathologie* (1858), Wilhelm Waldeyer had developed a descriptive account of the genesis and mode of spread of carcinoma which is essentially that in use today. As an added bonus, though, Rather provides useful insights on earlier medical theorists such as Galen, Thomas Willis, and John Hunter, and an exceptionally helpful discussion of the work of Bichat, Andral, and other members of the French school.

The strength of Rather's book lies in his mastery of a vast medical literature written in several ancient and modern languages; and in his capacity to use his own experience as a pathologist, not in the service of a Whiggish historiography, but as an aid to a sympathetic reconstruction of earlier patterns of medical thought and perception.

BRIAN P. COPENHAVER, *Symphorien Champier and the reception of the occultist tradition in Renaissance France*, The Hague, Paris, New York, Mouton, (Berlin, W. de Gruyter), 1978, 8vo, pp. 368, illus., DM. 92.00

Reviewed by Vivian Nutton, M.A., Ph.D., Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP.

Symphorien Champier (c. 1473-1540) is remembered today, if at all, for his early acceptance of Renaissance Galenism and his opposition to magic and Arabic medicine. Professor Copenhaver, in this careful, if at times ponderous, study, revises this traditional estimate and shows how, despite vehement opposition on religious grounds to the occult, Champier's uncritical methods of writing often leave open the possibility of his occasional adherence to some of the doctrines he attacked. This is a valuable contribution to the understanding of pre-Vesalian medicine, especially as an annotated text and translation of the *Dialogue . . . on the destruction of magic* is provided, in part the work of Dr. Amundsen, and it is good to be reminded of the intellectual difficulties involved in the formation of Renaissance medical theories. But two cautions are necessary. As the author well knows, Champier's view of what constitutes magic differs from ours, and it is often hard to distinguish between acceptable medical and illicit occult remedies. There was considerable contemporary debate among doctors on this, of which only stray indications are given here: there is no mention of Giovanni Garzoni, for forty years lecturer at Bologna in medicine and proponent of astrology, or of Hartmann Schedel, for whom a doctor without *astrologia* was an enemy of nature. A more serious objection is that Champier's writing was often hurried, careless, and verging on plagiarism. How much weight, then, should be placed on his inconsistencies? His personal attitude may be less complex than Copenhaver allows, and some of his statements may be the result of uncritical compilation rather than of individual preference.

The student of early Renaissance medicine will find here much of value, especially on Champier's career and late-medieval medical theories. The interpretation of incubus, p. 228, as a respiratory malfunction, however, goes back to Galen, if not beyond, and, p. 139, the *Continens* of Rhazes was no "standard offering in the curriculum" but a book for private study. The translations are accurate – p. 222 "andromache, theriac" is a rare slip for "theriac of Andromachus" – and the identification of Champier's, often unacknowledged, sources, adds considerably to our knowledge of the spread of new medical learning as a result of printing. Syllanus' commentary on Rhazes, p. 228, is cited as authoritative very soon after its appearance in print. Yet, for all its merits, this