

### Book Reviews

*Correspondance du P. Marin Mersenne*, ed. by PAUL TANNERY and CORNELIS DE WAARD, Volume III (1631–1633), 2nd ed., Paris, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1969, pp. xiv, 660, illus., 120F.

The correspondence of Mersenne (1588–1648) antedates and practically anticipates the monumental collections of scientific work given in the second part of the century in the *Transactions of the Royal Society*, the *Journal des Savants* and the *Acta Eruditorum*. It surpasses the latter in the extent and intimacy of personal information which can be derived from it. It concerns the great luminaries of the time such as notably Galileo, Gassendi and Descartes. With the exception of some light thrown on Descartes' early acquaintance with Harvey's discovery, there is nothing of immediate interest to the medical historian. What does concern him, however, in the volume under notice, are the eleven letters from the pen of Jean-Baptiste Van Helmont. From these we get first-hand insight into all the aspects of his work and thought—the purely scientific and medical as well as the religious, metaphysical and mystical aspects. What is more, we clearly see how they were deeply interlocked and integrated. This is a lesson for the historian of science who is inclined to forget that in the past, scientific discovery was compatible with, and indeed inspired by, non-scientific motives and thoughts. Even more so, it should demonstrate the absurdity of the amusing idea that no scientific advance or for that matter philosophical sense could be expected or worth mentioning with reference to a mind given to religious belief and mystical contemplation, in the seventeenth century. At all events Mersenne, the rationalist 'Christian philosopher' and Aristotelian, the advanced mathematician and keen enquirer into physical phenomena and theories, sought his advice and opinion. He cultivated his friendship in significant contrast to Robert Fludd whose cosmosophical speculations and largely inept mechanical devices were equally distasteful to Mersenne as they were to Kepler, Gassendi and Van Helmont. In Van Helmont Mersenne seems to have recognized and esteemed a congenial truly scientific observer and religious naturalist philosopher. On the scientific side, perhaps the most revealing item in the Helmont letters is the repeated discussion of the properties of air and its significance in life—ideas that sound strangely akin to a presentiment of oxygen. In view of all this, the apologies offered for the existence of these letters in a volume largely concerned with scientific news sound odd. But full credit must be given to the editors and the reviser for the wealth of learned comments and notes to each of the 111 letters contained in this second edition of the third volume of letters. Indeed, each of them presents a dissertation in its own right which is indispensable for the student of the scientific world of perhaps the most important period in its development.

WALTER PAGEL

*Lives of the Fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, 1952–1964*, by R. H. O. B. ROBINSON and W. R. LEFANU, Edinburgh and London, E. & S. Livingstone, 1970, pp. 470, £6.00.

This new volume of brief lives, written on a more than usual personal level, will bring both pleasure and sadness to its readers; for, by recalling names which not so very long ago were as contemporary and as vital as anything could be (e.g. Aird, Bonney, Gordon-Taylor, etc.), it demonstrates the essential nearness of much medical

### Book Reviews

history. The biographies vary in length from short paragraphs to several pages, and wherever possible they tell us about a person's hobbies as well as his professional interests. Perhaps one should say that too little attention is occasionally paid to the latter and that the compilers are somewhat idiosyncratic in their treatment of personal bibliographies. But in general the job is very neatly done and should act as a sound base for future biographers and historians. An appendix is included of biographies omitted from previous volumes.

E. GASKELL

*An Introduction to the History of General Surgery*, by R. H. MEADE, Philadelphia, London and Toronto, W. B. Saunders, 1970, pp. xi, 403, illus., £7.20.

This book of four hundred and three pages with seventy-four portraits sketches the evolution of the surgery of various organs and systems of the human body. In his preface, the author states that no attempt has been made to cover the specialities—after they became recognized as such. Despite this, there are chapters devoted to plastic and thoracic surgery and organ transplantation, but the development of neurosurgery is omitted. Other important subjects excluded are those concerned with the suprarenal glands, the sympathetic nervous system—and one of the commonest of surgical conditions—varicose veins.

The book opens with a chapter on the evolution of our knowledge of anatomy—up to the time of William Cheselden—and the work of Marie Velpeau and Paul Broca. It is sad that no mention is made of William and John Hunter. In the chapter on the management of infection, Sir Alexander Fleming is referred to as Arthur. There is no portrait of him. In dealing with fractures the author repeats the common error that Percival Pott sustained the fracture associated with his name. There is no reference to the important contributions of Lorenz Böhler—nor to the evolution of skeletal traction and the development of limb prostheses for amputees. Dislocation of the hip receives a few lines, but the common shoulder dislocation and the work of Kocher are not mentioned.

In other chapters there are many omissions—e.g. the contribution of Dos Santos to vascular surgery, that of Sir Thomas Dunhill to the surgery of toxic goitre, and that of Hamilton Bailey to the surgery of the parotid salivary gland. In a work of this kind the development of various endoscopic procedures surely deserves inclusion, while the omission of the practice of litholapaxy is extraordinary.

The chapter on rectal surgery is confused. Diverticulitis and ulcerative colitis are regarded as synonymous. There is no reference to the introduction of the barium enema by Abbé, or to the work of Paul of Liverpool. Lockhart-Mummery is referred to as 'Mummer'.

In an attempt to cover so wide a field, the thirty chapters are necessarily brief and fragmented. This, however, is compensated by a very extensive bibliography at the end of each—a total of over two thousand—an indication of exhaustive research by the author.

The book is eminently readable and apart from the omissions it provides the reader with an excellent basis for further study.

T. G. ILLTYD JAMES