

Book Reviews

Medical History of Malta, by PAUL CASSAR, London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1965, pp. xi, 586, 18 plates, 75s.

It seems surprising that the medical history of an island which is of about the same area as the Isle of Wight can justifiably be extended to 586 large pages. This splendidly produced volume however contains little that is irrelevant, covering as it does in considerable detail the early history—which is similar to that which would be applicable to most parts of the Mediterranean basin—the pattern of disease in Malta, its hospitals, the evolution of Public Health and the social services, medical education, and a final section on the impact of the two World Wars. It is the fruit of many years of devoted work by Dr. Paul Cassar in the library of the Royal University of Malta, and much of the material which he quotes remains unpublished in its archives.

Perhaps the most fascinating sections to the average medical historian will be those in which he deals with the heroic epoch of the Sovereign Knights of Malta who ruled from 1530–1798.

The Order of Knights Hospitaller, as it was originally called, was founded by Pope Paschall II during the time of the Crusades to administer and guard the primitive hospital which had been founded in Jerusalem by certain generous merchants of Amalfi to care for the Christian sick and destitute. Thus the Order received a dual role as a militant body whose resources became increasingly employed against the power of Islam, and the objective which it continues to pursue today, the relief of suffering. When in 1310 it moved to the island of Rhodes a new hospital was built which was far superior to any to be found elsewhere in Europe. It was beautifully designed, the beds were of iron, adequately spaced, and, what was rare at that time, each contained only one patient. Both the physician and surgeon in charge made a round of the Wards every morning and evening accompanied by the apothecary. The patients could now be of any religion, race or colour.

In 1530 the Order moved to Malta, and after surviving the great siege of 1565 they built the city of Valletta in joyful thanksgiving for the valour and wisdom of their great grandmaster Le Valette.

Their new Holy Infirmary of Santo Spirito was even more splendid than the previous one, the chief Ward being five hundred feet long, with an high altar at one end. Each patient's bed was provided with a locker for clothes and possessions and some classification of their diseases was attempted. They were nursed by the Knights and their helpers, and fed off silver platters. There were also some subsidiary wards, and quarters for the resident administrative and medical Staff. The head of the hospital was an important Knight known as the Hospitaller who was enjoined by the Statutes to exercise reasonable economy, but to 'treat the sick with charity and liberality, neglecting nothing that can be servicable either to the soul or the body.'

All this remained far in advance of anything that the rest of Europe could probably show until the age of Florence Nightingale.

The Order had also installed a very comprehensive code of laws designed to safeguard the health of the community. These dealt with quarantine procedures, notification of infectious diseases, control of leprosy, burial and the regulation of practice

Book Reviews

by physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries. This was administered by a Health Commission which consisted of four Knights Grand Cross and two Knights, who worked through the chief physician—'princeps medicorum'—who was appointed by the Grandmaster for life.

When the era of the Knights ended with their surrender to General Bonaparte there was a short interregnum until the British took over government and re-established the Infirmary as a Military hospital. It was largely destroyed by the air-raids of the last war.

Medical education started in Malta with the establishment in the seventeenth century of a School of Anatomy by Grandmaster Nicholas Cottoner at his own expense. This developed into a Faculty of Medicine when the Royal University was founded in 1771, its Statutes being based upon those of Bologna. The French abolished it, but it was rapidly re-founded by the first English Governor in 1800, and has flourished since.

Scientific medicine in Malta finds its highlights in the identification of the course of Brucellosis ('Malta Fever'), by Sir David Bruce in 1886, and in the discovery by Professor Sir Themostocles Zammit, in 1905, that the goat is the reservoir of the micrococcus causative of this disease. The latter also introduced the modern agglutination tests for this group of diseases, basing his technique upon that previously described by Widal for the diagnosis of typhoid fever.

There are full descriptions of the present-day medical, social and administrative institutions and services which bear upon the public health of this colourful little island. All this and much more is told very readably, in detail. This must be the definitive work on the Medical History of Malta.

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Vor und nach Paracelsus. Untersuchungen über Hohenheims Traditionsverbundenheit und Nachrichten über seine Anhänger, by GERHARD EIS, (*Medizin in Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. R. Herrlinger and K. E. Rothsuh, vol. VIII), Stuttgart, G. Fischer, 1965, pp. 183, 6 plates, DM. 26.

Before and after Paracelsus; his debt to tradition and new material on the Paracelsists is the title of the present volume in which seventeen papers published between 1941 and 1964 have been reprinted. Some of these are difficult of access and all contain new and important manuscript material, mostly from the period immediately preceding Paracelsus and from the personal collections of the author. Dr. Eis is Professor of Germanic Philology in the University of Heidelberg and has to his credit substantial contributions to the history of medicine, especially on late medieval tradition. Paracelsus is in many respects not as original as generally believed; he was anticipated by less well known, but quite important, medieval naturalists whose achievements can only be evaluated from manuscripts here published for the first time. This is the key-note of the present book. It is well proven where the author can show that certain words and phrases supposedly coined by Paracelsus were in fact older and transmitted to post-Paracelsian generations from earlier sources, and where he can demonstrate or make probable Paracelsus' acquaintance with the parlance or substance of late medieval tracts (e.g. on venesection) or prescriptions (e.g. of wound ointments