

Book Reviews

RICHARD KIECKHEFER, *European witch trials. Their foundations in popular and learned culture, 1300–1500*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976, 8vo, pp. x, 181, £5.25.

The author has examined carefully and critically witchcraft trials occurring in Britain and on the Continent, 1300 to 1499. He provides an extremely valuable calendar of them (pp. 108–147), from which it appears that at least forty-nine were held in England, mostly London, and one in Scotland during this period. From this mass of data he is able to show that the trial was usually based on accusations of witchcraft arising from presumed malevolent influence on neighbours, their children or animals, so that the accused was considered to be in league with the devil in his attempts to overthrow the Christian world. Here it is possible to differentiate between popular and learned ideas of witchcraft. At this time the essential and popular notion of witchcraft and the original accusation was one of sorcery, the diabolism being added by the inquisitors.

In his scholarly book, Mr. Kieckhefer adds precision to the study of witchcraft by his listing and by a graph of the frequency of trials. More importantly, he has opened new avenues for research, especially on why witchcraft trials increased in incidence in the fifteenth century and why in certain cities in particular. It also shows that the craze owed more to early modern than to medieval influences. Without doubt this is an important contribution to witchcraft studies and can be strongly recommended.

C. U. M. SMITH, *The problem of life. An essay in the origins of biological thought*, London, Macmillan, 1976, 8vo, pp. xxiv, 343, illus., £10.00.

Man's attempts to explain the phenomenon of life is the central theme of this book, and it is pursued from Miletus of the sixth century B.C. to the present day, with a terminal chapter on the concept of the mind. The author is concerned with the history of the investigation of the perpetual enigma so that it is set in perspective. At the same time, this fundamental question lies at the centre of biology so that the book, although the story of a quest, is also an account of the evolution of biology. An explanation for life is the most difficult of all problems to depict, for it concerns not only the biologist, but also the philosopher, the theologian, the physicist and the poet, amongst others. To relate this momentous theme successfully the author must, therefore, be widely read and informed. Dr. Smith proves to be just this, and his book is intended for the non-biologist as well as for the scientist.

The result is an excellent work, well written and documented, and with a valuable bibliography intended to lead the enquiring reader specifically to the primary sources, which Dr. Smith rightly maintains must be read in order to communicate directly with the authors. As intended, the book's contents unfold like a plot, within the frame of a continuous narrative and although, predictably, an answer is not forthcoming, the reader is at least acquainted with the major attempts to provide one and is made more aware of the dimensions of the problem. Dr. Smith ends his 'Introduction' by neatly summarizing the present situation: life is a physicochemical mechanism, and at the same time it is "... the experience of intention and purposeful activity, of sadness and joy" (p. xxiv). His book can be warmly recommended and deserves wide attention.