

Book Reviews

GIUSEPPE PITRÈ, *Sicilian folk medicine*, translated by Phyllis H. Williams, Lawrence, Kansas, Coronado Press, 1971, 4to, pp. xv [317], illus., \$48.50.

The late Giuseppe Pitrè (1841–1916) dedicated his whole life to the preparation and publication of his twenty-five volume study, *Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari Siciliane* (1871–1913), of which *Medicina popolare Siciliana* (Turin, 1896) is the nineteenth. Pitrè was a physician, and he was justifiably convinced that only a medically qualified person can deal effectively with folk medicine. He collected his data over a period of about twenty-five years and presents it here in five sections: popular practitioners of the medical art; anatomy, physiology, physiognomy, hygiene; general pathology; special external pathology, medical and surgical; special internal pathology. There is also a list of Sicilian herbs mentioned and of works to be consulted, and a series of illustrations of the healing saints of Sicily. The translator has retained the dialect in the terms cited and quotations given in the text because of its basic importance to the Sicilians. They are grouped in topographical areas, and they preserve their identity, satisfy their cautiousness and provide themselves with protection by keeping their own terms, beliefs and ways. Superstition has an important role to play in their everyday life, but some of their beliefs are now known to be part of modern medicine.

Collected in this book is a remarkable amount of information, which will be of the greatest interest to those concerned with folk-lore and the medical knowledge of relatively primitive communities. It provides fascinating reading and as a book of reference it will be most valuable. The cultural background is, however, given less attention than it deserves. This is perhaps the most important aspect of folk medicine because after the compilation of that belonging to one country, a comparative study with another community possessing different racial characteristics, traditions, personality traits, history, and so forth, would be valuable. It would, for example, be very revealing to compare Sicilian with English folk medicine. Unfortunately there is no work on the latter in any way comparable to the outstanding treatise of Dr. Pitrè. As folk medicine in this country is rapidly dying out and may have vanished in another generation or so, it is perhaps already too late to tackle this task, using Pitrè's technique of direct interview. Nevertheless, someone should be making good this embarrassing defect in our history by recording what remains and culling the widely spread and voluminous literature on the subject. Pitrè's classic work could well be used as a model.

GORDON THOMAS, *Issels. The biography of a doctor*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1975, 8vo, pp. 352, illus., £3.50.

Mr. Thomas's controversial book, the publication of which has been held up for two years, presents the equally controversial cancer treatment practised by Dr. Josef Issels in his Bavarian clinic until it closed in 1973. The debate continues, with the medical profession solidly opposing his claims and denouncing the uncritical acceptance of it by others. The episode above all is an excellent example of the vicious intolerance of the medical profession to unorthodox and unproven views, and a survey of this attitude over the centuries would make a fascinating study. After all, the history of therapy is a sequence of wonder cures, and a study of them should not