

Book Reviews

Soemmerring corresponded with many eminent contemporaries—other naturalists, as well as philosophers and poets. In the process, he came to occupy a central place in the cultural life of the German *Länder* during the period which the Germans tend to refer to as “the Goethe era”.

This central position has made it possible for Gunter Mann, Jost Benedum, and Werner F. Kümmel to give the title of ‘Soemmerring-Forschungen’ to a new publications-series in which not only Soemmerring material will appear but also contributions to the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science and medicine in general. The aim of the editors is to encourage the study of these subjects within a broad context of cultural history so as to bring out the many-faceted nature of the growth of science and medicine.

The first volume in this new series admirably matches the editors’ high historiographical ideals. *Samuel Thomas Soemmerring und die Gelehrten der Goethezeit* is a rich collection of essays, in which Soemmerring’s life and accomplishments are explored through the network of contacts which he kept. There are separate chapters on his relationship to Goethe, Blumenbach, Peter Camper, Alexander von Humboldt, Cuvier, Merck, Gall, Kant, the poet Wilhelm Heinse, Soemmerring’s close friend Georg Foster, his teacher Ernst Gottfried Baldinger, the illustrator Christian Koeck, the writer Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, and the historian Johannes von Müller. Added to these biographical essays are a chapter on German academic institutions of the period, and also a comprehensive Soemmerring bibliography. An interesting array of topics is thus presented, including several of Soemmerring’s scientific “errors”. Among these were his refusal to accept Goethe’s discovery of an *os intermaxillare* in man, his objections to Cuvier’s interpretation of pterodactylus as a reptile, his partial concurrence with Gall’s phrenology, and, most prominently, his interpretation of the intraventricular, cerebrospinal fluid as “the organ of the soul”.

A definite shortcoming of this collection of essays is the lack of a synthesizing introductory or concluding chapter. Some of the general questions raised by the individual contributions are therefore left unanswered. Among these questions is: why should mere anatomical expertise have made Soemmerring such a sought-after and central figure on the German cultural stage? Or, to turn the question around: why were not just the contemporary naturalists, but so many of the leading poets, philosophers, and historians, deeply interested in Soemmerring’s anatomical work? The answer may be found in the fact that one of the great intellectual pre-occupations of “the Goethe era” concerned the meaning of organic form and diversity. Anatomy was one of the most pertinent areas of research in this connexion, and, through comparative anatomy and palaeontology, its results were perceived in an increasingly historical, developmental light adding substance to the organicist philosophy of history advocated by Herder and others. Thus Soemmerring’s social eminence may in part be explained by the importance which his subject had as a pillar of the Romantic *Weltbild*. Even if one were reluctant to bring in the concept of “Romanticism” as an answer, the question itself should not be ignored.

The second volume in the new series of ‘Soemmerring-Forschungen’ is a reprint of the largest and most informative of two Victorian-type ‘Life and Letters’ of Soemmerring, written by the Göttingen zoologist Rudolph Wagner. It is useful to have this classic source of information about Soemmerring back in print.

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RICHARD J. EVANS, *Death in Hamburg. Society and politics in the cholera years 1830-1910*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, 8vo, pp. xxv, 676, illus., £55.00.

Cholera studies have blossomed since Lord Briggs pointed out a quarter of a century ago that responses to Asiatic cholera would afford a remarkable touchstone of the interplay of disease, state, and populations in the nineteenth century, and called for large-scale, cross-cultural analyses of the social crises produced by the disease. But, as Richard Evans notes in his magisterial monograph, Briggs’s call to action has been only partially realized. Above all, historians have concentrated overwhelmingly on the visitations of the 1830s. This selectivity has its justifications: the disease was then new to Europe, and it was the earliest outbreaks that

produced in many places the severest mortality and universally the greatest panic. But it is also unfortunate. For one thing, it means that the endeavours of medical scientists later in the century to grapple with the epidemiology of the disease have been relatively passed over; for another, it has resulted in the neglect of perhaps the most remarkable outbreak of all, that which struck Hamburg in 1892.

Within little more than a month, some ten thousand Hamburgers died, and thousands more were stricken. In purely numerical terms, "Hamburg 1892" did not constitute the most catastrophic death rates of the century: Moscow, for example, had been proportionally worse hit in 1831. Yet Hamburg's devastation was sharp and striking. And what made the Hamburg epidemic so extraordinary was that it was the only European town decimated in that year. Why did Hamburg succumb while all the rest of Europe had seemingly become immune to cholera? As Evans rightly stresses, the disaster is comprehensible only if the historical socio-politics of the city are fully investigated.

Hamburg, he demonstrates, was a mercantile city whose life-blood was free trade, whose political philosophy was liberalism, and whose ruling oligarchy pursued policies of benign neglect sanctioned by the names of *laissez-faire* and economy. Its merchant élite wanted to be left alone to make money, and trusted that Hamburg's problems—the expanding proletariat, the immigrant community, urban squalor—would dissolve away in a wash of prosperity. Hamburg was thus more like John Bright's England than Bismarck's Reich, whose encroachments it staunchly resisted.

Hamburg muddled through for most of the century. As its sanitary problems worsened, it invested—as late as possible, as stingily as possible—in centralized piped water and mains drainage systems (built by English engineers!) and made some hospital provision for the poor; it then sat back with a complacency one can only call Dickensian. The city's doctors were hand-in-glove with the burghers; they too turned a blind eye to festering urban conditions. They found Max von Pettenkofer's essentially miasmatic theory of epidemics highly attractive; by attributing infections chiefly to a combination of essentially natural factors—local variations of soil, water-table, and climate above all—it absolved the governing classes of responsibility for such visitations, while looking to individual vigilance (temperance, bathing, fresh air, etc.) for remedy. No more than its Senators did Hamburg's doctors want the introduction of the quarantining (implied by "contagionism") which would have brought the city to a standstill. Whereas elsewhere "miasmaticism" provided rationales for action, in Hamburg it legitimized apathy.

As Evans demonstrates in detail, Hamburg's chickens came home to roost in 1892. The terrifying epidemic stemmed from polluted drinking-water, itself resulting from the fact that Hamburg, almost alone of German's major cities, had, for reasons of economy, delayed installing a sand-filtration system. The cause was traced by Robert Koch, dispatched from Imperial Berlin to investigate the outbreak. Koch's detective work was a triumph for the new bacteriology. More than that, the initial attempts of Hamburg's Senate and doctors to conceal the outbreak lest it damage trade came to light, as did their culpable delay in acting (echoes here of Ibsen's *Enemy of the people*). The scandal shamed Hamburg before the world ("I forget that I am in Europe", announced Koch, inspecting the riverside slums). One consequence was that semi-autonomous Hamburg had to bow at last to increasing integration within the "Prussianizing" system of the Kaiser's Germany.

By choosing to produce a work of quite epic proportions, and by researching equally thoroughly Hamburg's system of urban life and government on the one hand, and its medical history on the other, Evans has demonstrated in compelling detail, backed by masses of maps, charts, and statistics, the congruency between the distribution of urban wealth, poverty, and inequality, the political ideology which animated Hamburg's political order, its prevailing medical temper, and, not least, Nature's ultimate retaliation (which, unjust as ever, slaughtered plebeians more than the patriciate). "Hamburg 1892" spelt a deathblow equally to the nightwatchman state of old mercantile liberalism and to its sanitary analogue, miasmaticism. Koch, with his new-style contagionism, and the Kaiser, with his centralist imperialism, emerged jointly triumphant.

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There have been many calls of late for the study of medical politics; Evans has put precept into practice, going beyond analysis of abstract ideologies to plot the precise interplay of real power politics with medical crises. Not least, he has drawn explicit international comparisons. Hamburg turns out to have been more English than the English: by contrast to the ramshackle public health arrangements in Hamburg, mid-Victorian England is made to look positively Prussian!

As Evans is the first to admit, much remains to be done: his rich-textured study makes one wish for a comparable in-depth account of Berlin or Munich, or indeed Birmingham or Manchester for that matter. Even within a 650-page book, Evans himself says tantalizingly little about Hamburg's own medical community and its medical services for the poor. Yet this is a remarkable work which has surely pitched the study of urban health, epidemics, and medical politics on to a new plane.

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FRANK MORT, *Dangerous sexualities. Medico-moral politics in England since 1830*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, 8vo, pp. ix, 280, £7.95 (paperback).

There are numerous ways of telling the story of the rise—and apparent fall—of concern with public health in England over the last century and a half. The Whiggish recension sees sanitarian state medicine emerging, doing its job in overcoming the environmental threats of industrial society, and finally leading to the National Health Service. A much more subtle reading, as offered in Jane Lewis's *What price community medicine?* (London, 1986; reviewed in *Med. Hist.*, 1987, 31: 368-369), focuses its attention on how the public health profession lost its way early in the twentieth century, becoming marginalized in 1948 and more or less extinguished in 1974. A thoroughly jaundiced interpretation, drawing upon the work of Foucault, views the basic missions of public hygiene and state medicine with fundamental distrust, seeing them essentially as engines for the social control of difficult and dangerous elements of the community.

Frank Mort reassesses these issues in his provocative yet judicious survey of attempts by reformers, including doctors associated with the public health movement, to deploy the law and state power to police sexuality in England from the 1830s. In one respect he accepts the premises of the “social control” theorists: all programmes for the medical solution of problems such as venereal disease or national “unfitness” were, in reality, moral crusades as well—indeed, were often primarily moral reform movements hiding behind the apparent neutrality of medico-scientific rationality. Yet Mort is adamant that it would be a grave mistake to conclude from this that the history of the medico-politics of controlling sexuality should be treated as a conspiracy. This is clearly an important point to establish, given that, faced with certain public responses to the AIDS crisis today, it might be tempting for historians to maintain that the medico-political Establishment has traditionally whipped up sexual-moral panics both to marginalize the “immoral” and to augment its own legal authority.

But, as Mort rightly contends, this interpretation simply will not fit the facts. True, those in favour of maximizing central policing powers got off to a good start. The Chadwickian sanitary reforms, the advent of the Medical Officer of Health, the introduction of compulsory smallpox vaccination, and then the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s left supposedly *laissez-faire* England a more heavily medically-policed nation than most in Europe. But thereafter, campaigners for the enforcement of sexual hygiene by the state in the name of health had little joy of it: in matters sexual, state medicine was eclipsed. In the wake of the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Mort skilfully shows the emergence, yet also the failure, of a variety of pressure groups—from feminist purity movements out to stop the evils of male sexuality, to the eugenists with their plans for sterilization of the unfit. They failed in part because they were perceived as “cranky”, in part because they were confronted by entrenched vested interests (was the male establishment likely to submit to the kind of curbs that militant feminists demanded?).