

## Book Reviews

clear whether the manuscript survives. Nevertheless, beginning in 1870, references to Alexina regularly appear in European legal and medical literature, as well as in Armand Dubarry's medical fantasy-novel *L'hermaphrodite* (1899) and, even more explicitly, in a novel entitled *A scandal at the convent* (1893) by the German playwright Oscar Panizzi. After 1900 Alexina, now dead for a quarter of a century, continued to claim the attention of writers such as F. L. von Neugebauer who discusses her in his inventory of hermaphrodites in history (1908). Alexina's diary is not a work of literary art but deserves to stand beside second-rank novels of the late nineteenth century. It is impossible to improve on the jacket description which summarizes the diary as follows: "With an eye for the sensual bloom of young schoolgirls, and the torrid style of the romantic novels of her own day, Barbin tells the story of her life as an hermaphrodite." Alexina herself has captured the diary's significance this way: "I have to speak of things that, for a number of people, will be nothing but incredible nonsense because, in fact, they go beyond the limits of what is possible" (p. xv). The diary, now admirably translated into English for the first time, may be compared with English accounts of the same period in order to learn what were the pathetic confessions of those "other Victorians" who, like Alexina, were sexual underdogs of their day. If such diaries continue to be published, psychiatrists as well as medical and literary historians will eventually possess a new archive from which to formulate hypotheses about sexual otherness in history.

From another vantage, Alexina and her diary are less significant than the author of this book: by now Michel Foucault has established himself as a thinker of international, if controversial, significance. The very fact that he should choose to introduce and discuss this diary in particular is far more crucial than any intrinsic merit or medical-historical value the diary possesses. Foucault's multi-volume *History of sexuality* notwithstanding, even his last book introduced the case history of extraordinary sexual otherness: *Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother . . .* (1975). The pattern Foucault adopts is clear: Pierre, Alexina, these types are the protagonists of the forthcoming volumes in the history of sexuality, and this is why Foucault notes in the present book (p. 119) that "the question of strange destinies like her [Barbin's] own, which have raised so many problems for medicine and law, especially since the sixteenth century, will be dealt with in the volume of *The history of sexuality* that will be devoted to hermaphrodites." Foucault has charted his own road through the country of sex; it covers not only the untrodden land between medicine and the law but also retrieves the still lonely voices of those with intense religiosity and remarkable sexual histories from the past.

G. S. Rousseau

Department of English, University of California, Los Angeles

JOHN T. ALEXANDER, *Bubonic Plague in early modern Russia: public health and urban disaster*, Baltimore, Md., and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, 8vo, pp. xvii, 385, illus., £15.50.

The Moscow plague epidemic of 1771 may have caused the death of 60,000 citizens of a total population of the city of some 250,000. It was the last major plague epidemic to ravage a European metropolis, yet this study by John T. Alexander, Professor of

## Book Reviews

History and of Soviet and East European Studies at the University of Kansas, is the first detailed account of it to be published in English; indeed it surpasses in its comprehensiveness anything so far published on the subject in any language, Russian included.

The account of the epidemic is preceded by a survey of the social, demographic, and architectural conditions in Moscow at that time, an analysis of Empress Catherine II's attitude towards Moscow (the largest city and the most important ecclesiastical, trading, and manufacturing centre in Russia although no longer its capital), a survey of previous epidemics in Russia, and a sketch of the contemporary Russian medical establishment.

Plague was encountered by the Russian army advancing into Moldavia and Wallachia in pursuit of the retreating Turks in late 1769; it reached the Dniester the following June, Kiev by early September, and the first cases in Moscow occurred in early December 1770.

The outbreak of plague which developed in Moscow in spring 1771 caused panic among the populace and consternation among the ruling circles. The usual difficulties of diagnosis of what had become an unfamiliar disease were compounded by the reluctance of the Empress and her ministers to accept the truth in view of the stigma attached to plague in a civilized country. The rich fled. Quarantine measures were enforced harshly but ineffectively, the medical authorities not surprisingly were hated and distrusted, and a major breakdown in law and order occurred with the riot of 15 September, culminating in the murder of Archbishop Amvrosii. The military restored order, but not until winter had halted the epidemic, which fortunately did not recur, was the normal life of the city resumed.

Professor Alexander has analysed a formidable mass of data, including much in documents he examined personally in Soviet archives. As a non-medical historian, he has paid due consideration to the criticisms and criteria of those with special epidemiological expertise, and the result is a well-documented, well-researched and well-balanced account of this natural disaster. Not only that, his narrative of the course of events is a fascinating story which will appeal to a wider audience as well as to the specialist reader.

Why did the epidemic occur? Alexander shows that the textile mills, which were scattered throughout Moscow and employed some 12,000 workers, were important foci of infection where, especially in the larger enterprises, hundreds of workers with their families lived in overcrowded and insanitary barracks. Raw materials imported from the south could have brought in infected fleas or even rats. The role of rats is discussed at length, but, not surprisingly, there are no reliable data on populations of *Rattus rattus* and *R. norvegicus* in Moscow at that time, and whether or not *R. rattus* still infested Moscow on a large scale and had not been ousted by the brown rat remains a matter for conjecture. The distance travelled by the plague from Moldavia to Moscow (600 miles) in a year, moreover, is compatible with the natural spread of an epizootic among rats, so that quarantine measures and prohibition of trade with the south would not have prevented the spread of human plague to Moscow.

One crucial causative factor of the epidemic seems to have been the weather, for the winter of 1770–71 was unusually late starting, and the summer of 1771 was long and

## Book Reviews

wet. Alexander concludes that: "The Moscow plague was the extraordinary product of a unique combination of weather, warfare, and textile weaving in a wooden metropolis."

The book reveals the vast scope for research into medical problems in pre-Revolutionary Russia, the availability of the material, and the willingness of the authorities to provide facilities for access. It is a field which is and has been neglected by Soviet medical historians; it has also been neglected by British medical historians, by contrast with some excellent work being done in, for example, Germany and the United States. The many institutions which provided financial support for Professor Alexander's investigations and for publication of his book can congratulate themselves that their money was well spent.

A minor criticism is that the maps are generally uninspiring and their message is not always clearly stated. Map 1 suffers from local congestion in the south-eastern part of Russia – perhaps a large-scale inset would overcome this problem; Map 4 is tilted through 20 degrees and an arrow pointing N is needed; in Map 6 the River Oka is shown as a tributary of the Kliazma, whereas the opposite is the case. But these are small blemishes which, indeed, serve to emphasize the value of the book as a whole as a unique contribution to our knowledge in the West of what is still a largely unexplored field in medical history.

Basil Haigh  
Cambridge

JOHN A. SHEPHERD, *A history of the Liverpool Medical Institution*, Liverpool Medical Institution, 1979, 8vo, pp. xi, 319, illus., £6.50.

The Liverpool Medical Institution was formally constituted in 1840. The Institution, though housed in a new and impressive building, was, in fact, an amalgamation of two older bodies: the medical library founded in 1779 and the medical society founded in 1833. Mr. Shepherd's book commemorates the bicentenary of this magnificent library. But because the Institution provided for the social as well as the academic needs of Liverpool medical men, the book is also a history of the medical profession in the city.

The concept of a central institution to unite the profession was that of John Rutter (1762–1838), a member of a local Quaker family. He belonged to the circle which included William Rathbone, William Roscoe, and James Currie and which was responsible for the richness of Liverpoolian culture around 1800. Rutter's vision of a medical institution materialized only at the end of his life, but during a crucial period in the establishment of the medical profession nationally. It is unfortunate that the links between the Institution and the medical reform movement are not explored in this book. Nevertheless, we are left in no doubt of the local importance of the Institution through Mr. Shepherd's extensive documentation of its funding events and personalities.

The scandals and arguments generated during the early decades of the Institution are not neglected, but their significance is often lost in the descriptive chronology. The most striking example is the debate which flared up in the 1850s and continued periodically for many years over whether papers on homoeopathy should be accepted