

## Book Reviews

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ROBERT FORSTER and OREST RANUM (editors), *Biology of man in history. Selections from the Annales Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1975, 8vo, pp. x, 205, illus., £6.60 (£1.65 paperback).

The *Annales* began publication in 1929, under the joint editorship of the two distinguished French historians, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, and ever since then it has pioneered an interdisciplinary type of history. This concerns itself with social history in the widest sense of the term, with an attempt to cover all of human activity in a given society, and with the rejection of narrative history and the classical biographical approach in favour of problem-oriented history. This type of "total history" advocated by the French school of history, chiefly by way of the *Annales*, includes the use of demography, quantification, meteorology, sociology, anthropology, economics, biology, linguistics and group psychology. These approaches, and others, have brought entirely new interpretations and dimensions to historical studies, thereby complementing the more traditional historiographical methods.

The editors of this book plan to produce each year a series of translated essays from the *Annales*, dealing with a particular theme. This, the first, contains eight articles on medical and social history. Two deal with changing attitudes to marriage and birth control; one discusses the latter in the early Byzantine Empire and shows how it was determined by cultural imperatives; the other is entitled 'Contraception, marriage, and sexual relations in the Christian West', demonstrating that Western theologians came gradually to accept birth control in extra-marital relations. Two articles are concerned with disease: the great Justinian Plague; and disease and the sick at the end of the eighteenth century. Here the medical characteristics, the geographical course and the psychological results of epidemics, as well as the political and social consequences, receive attention. The next two take up the problems of diet and famine: diet of the various classes in the Medieval Levant, and famine amenorrhoea in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Finally there are research proposals concerning 'The biological index of the buying power of money' and 'Blazing a trail to a history of customary law, by means of geographic hematology'. The second of these is more controversial than the others, for the author attempts to relate ethnic groups of different blood types with certain practices of private law and in so doing brings together serology, geography, local history and local folklore.

The sceptic may not accept wholeheartedly this multidisciplinary activity in history, but without doubt it introduces a new imagination into the subject. The whole French school has provided, and continues to provide, a host of exciting and potentially significant studies which have particular relevance to the history of medicine, itself an interdisciplinary discipline. Of course some control of this type of research must be exercised, and certain projects, like the correlation of epidemics with terrestrial or astronomical events, may not be profitable.

The editors of this book will do the world of historiography a signal service by disseminating these new and fruitful ideas. They are also honouring the French historians who began it all. Their book will be essential reading for historians of medicine and biology as well as for historians, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists. In these days of frightening book prices £1.65 is not expensive.