Book Reviews

MARK NATHAN COHEN, *Health and the rise of civilization*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. x, 285, £22.50, $35.00.

The reviewer's burden is a light one when the book to be reviewed is bad. Then he can rock along comfortably, pointing to one egregious error of fact or misstep of interpretation after another. But a very good book is an onerous problem: book review editors frown at squeals of delight, however justified, and the quoting of one nugget of wisdom after another soon becomes a bore. Mark Cohen's latest, *Health and the rise of civilization*, is, therefore, a problem.

The book is as provocative as his groundbreaking *The food crisis in prehistory*, and as useful to the bleary-eyed student of the human experience in its largest dimensions as two other recent and admirable works, Stephen Boyden's *Western civilization in biological perspective* and Thomas McKeown's *The origins of human disease*. The text, 142 pages, is blessedly brief and crystal-clear, and most of the technical discussion about the numerous controversial matters it touches upon is relegated to the 82 pages of endnotes. For readers who want to pursue matters further, the bibilography is massive, 45 pages' worth. Neither the busy scholar nor the general reader could ask for a better introduction to the enormous subject of the consonances and dissonances of civilization and the anatomies and physiologies we inherited from our hunter and gatherer ancestors.

Some anthropologists, tape recorder or camel's hair brush in hand, build careers on the meticulous examination or disinterment of a single village. Cohen seizes whole continents and millennia—the entire Neolithic, for instance—as his bailiwick. In this book he exercises his knowledge, logic, and wisdom to answer the momentous question, what did and is civilization doing to our birth, morbidity, and mortality rates, and to our general health? Once upon a time many of us believed in a golden age in the past in which youthful vitality was prolonged far into middle age, and death came late and with dignity. Then, in the nineteenth century, most of us signed on as Darwinists and embraced Lewis Henry Morgan's theory of social evolution as a step by step progress upward from savagery to civilization, with the obvious implication that health improved and longevity of life increased with every such step. The thought that the growth or acquiring of civilization has been and still can be disastrous still strikes many as a contradiction in terms.

For several decades archaeologists, physical and cultural anthropologists, physicians, epidemiologists, demographers, historians, and observers in general have produced a large but scattered body of articles and books on exceptions to "the rule" that the rise or arrival of civilization, particularly European civilization, has accompanied an improvement in health. Mark Cohen has ploughed through the articles and books, and then has taken a very hard look at our preconceptions of what civilization is and what it means. A review is no place to try to summarize his intellectual journey (though I must note that the chapters on what we know about the health of contemporary hunters and gatherers and what we can derive about the well-being of our prehistoric ancestors from their bones are fascinating), but I will dare to summarize his conclusions. They are, that hunters and gatherers usually had, and have, perhaps not a lot of but a sufficiency of quite nourishing food; that they, in their scattered bands, suffered and suffer from fewer infectious diseases than we do; that, on average, health and the length of life declined with the arrival of agriculture; and that the so-called primitives—the hunters and gatherers—were and are probably better off than Third World city dwellers today. Hunters and gatherers were and are saved from population explosion not by infections and high mortality, but by inconstant menstruation, a side effect of vigorous exercise and slight and fat-free diets, plus extended lactation, which possibly limits fertility. Infanticide also had and has a role, though to what extent is debatable.

Improvement in diet and the advance of science and sanitation have raised the mass of the citizens of the twentieth century's First World to a level of health and life expectation previously

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unknown at any time or anywhere, but this is a very recent and fragile development. Of special fascination to historians of European imperialism from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century is Cohen's statement on page 141 that "a good case can be made that urban European populations of that period may have been among the nutritionally most impoverished, the most disease-ridden, and the shortest-lived populations in human history". Caucasian chauvinists will find it hard to accept Columbus and Captain John Smith as Typhoid Marys.

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TONY HUNT, *Plant names of medieval England*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1989, 8vo, pp. lvi, 334, £35.00.

The history of English plant-name usage remains to be written. The various stages in the development of English here have been unevenly covered (if covered at all). The obvious starting-point for a delineation of English plant-name history is Peter Bierbaumer's monumental *Der botanische Wortschatz des Altenglischen* (1975–9). Naturally, this work is considered by Tony Hunt in his book on Middle English plant names, as is the relevant information available for the ensuing periods. A welcome recent addition to the comparatively meagre literature on English plant names—which appeared too late to be included in Hunt's book—is Juhani Norri's *Compound plant-names in fifteenth-century English* (Publications of the Department of English, University of Turku, 1988), based on four collections of medicinal receipts.

Ideally, assessments of paradigmatic word history, i.e., of the diachronic development of sets of "synonyms" or equivalents, should be founded on period-specific studies. In other words, the overall chronological perspective cannot be duly evaluated until the synchronic spectra have been clarified. This does not mean, however, that we must start from the beginning in our synchronic analyses, although a reliable diachronic background is of course an asset here.

In spite of the work done and being done (e.g. the publication of the *Middle English Dictionary*), our knowledge of plant names as used in medieval England is deficient. Many relevant texts await scrutiny. Dr Hunt has searched 64 (non-edited) medical texts, dating from *c.*1280 to 1500, which include *synonyma herbarum*. These lists of plant names "were compiled as practical aids to the understanding and making up of medical prescriptions" and they were obviously found useful. The amount of plant-name data unearthed is astounding: over 1,800 "vernacular" names (many of which can be classified as French in form or origin), about 500 of which represent additions to those recorded in the *OED*, covering over 600 plant species. As is well known, the *OED* is particularly weak at citations in the years prior to 1520.

The Introduction, albeit rather short and sketchy, supplies an account of how the material collected has been organized, a discussion of the MSS examined and of the "principal sources of medieval botany" (from Theophrastus onwards), and lists of additions and antedatings for the *OED* and bibliographies. It also touches on problems of plant identification, on synonymy (i.e., plant-name equivalence), the general character of *synonyma* lists, and the motivation of plant nomenclature. As pertinently noted by Hunt (p. xlix), "it is not easy to establish the independent creation of vernacular names".

The main part of the book is a dictionary of the plant names recorded, with the alphabetically arranged Latin terms, as found in the MSS, as headwords. Each item is provided with an identification or identifications (with or without a question mark), in terms of the modern Latin name(s) and the current standard English name(s), and, when applicable, with lists of English synonyms arranged in the sequence of MSS dates (by century).

Two indexes complete the book: one offering English and French names (largely modernized), accompanied by the medieval Latin name(s) as found in the MSS, the other the modern Latin names followed by their medieval counterparts (occasionally, as with *Allium porrum*, an item is misplaced here). Unfortunately, there is no index of the Middle English synonyms as grouped under their modern scientific names. Hence, if you, for instance, want information on Middle English names for orchids, you have to look up *Orchis* (or *Anacamptis*!)

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