

medicine's "greatest hits", beginning in the fleshpots of Akkadian Mesopotamia and ending in the laboratory of Robert Koch. Our host—who carries his learning with the solemnity due to one who is almost five thousand years old by the end of the book—is initially named "Bal-sarra-uzur", though this Babylonian handle has been dropped in favour of "Paul Baldassare" by the time he and his companion Telesphorus reach medieval Europe.

According to the blurb, the book—a revised and expanded edition of Richardson's *Medicine through the ages with Dr Baldassare* (1999)—is intended as a general guide and revision aid for final-year A-level students, undergraduates and those studying for the Diploma in the History of Medicine of the Society of Apothecaries. In line with the demands of this readership, Richardson and Morris—a medical practitioner and historian, and an Apothecaries Lecturer in the History of Medicine respectively—aim to edify and educate in roughly equal measure. Each of the 22 chapters finds Bal-sarra-uzur/Baldassare in what the authors consider to be a key moment in the history of medicine: the teachings of Hippocrates, the European response to the Black Death, the rise of Paris medicine and so on. He talks or writes to the relevant "great men", and ruminates on the state of medicine and the spirit of the age. Each chapter begins with a time-line of relevant events in European history and ends with a "commentary"—six or seven numbered points explaining names or terms used in the text—and a list of sources for the authors' imaginative reconstructions.

Such a method has obvious advantages and disadvantages. Contemporary historians might question the unrelentingly progressive rhetoric and the absence of any reference to Chinese or Indian medical cultures, but Richardson and Morris provide a comprehensive (though admittedly traditionalist) exposition of the history of western medicine and have an easy gift for evoking the feel of the past through judicious use of illuminating detail. Their highly imaginative approach is far more engaging than a straightforward recitation of the facts (if not on a par with the Socratic

dialogue Richardson alludes to in his preface) and the amount of information they have packed into less than 300 pages is at times astounding.

Where this book falls down is in its poor characterization. Both the central character and the historical actors are rendered in a wooden and earnest style, leavened with only an occasional flash of (creaky) humour. The dialogue, too, lacks vitality, full of over staged debates and long passages of exposition. This is a real problem when it comes to writing for the authors' stated audience: though the content of the book may be too advanced and detailed for A-level students, it is difficult to imagine its rather naïve style appealing to anyone beyond this age. *History of medicine* is a brave and original book, but Roy Porter's *The greatest benefit to mankind* (1997) still provides a better introduction to the history of medicine.

**Richard Barnett,**

The Wellcome Centre for the History of  
Medicine at UCL

**Tom Atkinson,** *Napiers history of herbal healing, ancient and modern*, Edinburgh, Luath Press, 2003, pp. x, 272, illus., £16.99 (hardback 1-84282-025-7).

The overlap, interaction and rivalry between medical herbalism and official medicine in Britain form an interesting subject. This book sets out to illustrate these interconnections using the history of one family business of herbalists. Napiers was founded in 1860 by Duncan Napier and is now a thriving multi-outlet business.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is an over-ambitious world history of herbalism. Such a vast subject cannot be adequately covered in seventy pages. Strictly, much of this first part is a history of medicine rather than of herbalism itself, and it is perhaps unwise of the author to try to cover such disparate traditions as the ancient Babylonian, Roman, Arabic, Chinese and Indian ones. Since the aim of the book is to present the history of one firm of Edinburgh herbalists, it might have been preferable to omit much of this and concentrate on the origin and history of

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herbalism in Britain. Part two is a history of Scottish herbalism, and this is interesting and totally relevant to the theme of the book. The third part is a history of Napiers of Edinburgh, and this I found fascinating. It is illustrated with contemporary photographs and traces the rise and fall of the business from its birth in 1860 to the death of the last of the Napier herbalists in 1978, and the subsequent modernization and expansion of the business. This is an authentic and valuable account consisting of hitherto unpublished material.

The book contains five appendices. The first is an account of a modern herbalist and her introduction to the business of Napiers. The second is an account of what the author calls “traditional herbalism”, a hybrid term in that it is unclear whether he means healing by a professional or by folk medicine as practised by uneducated rural communities. The third appendix lists herbs used in the Highlands, and again it is unclear whether this refers to the herbs used solely by trained herbalists, or those used in official medicine, or those that might be strictly regarded as folk herbs. Appendix four is a partial autobiography written by Duncan Napier, the founder of the firm. This is original material, presented in print for the first time, and deserves a more prominent position in the book. Lastly, appendix five consists of some of the case notes

written by Duncan Napier in his practice, with comments written by a present-day medical herbalist. What a pity to leave the best till last!

Each part of this book has its own interest but, for me at least, the multiple sections do not gel together to form a cohesive whole. The book does not profess to be an academic work of reference, but nevertheless its lack of a bibliography is a pity. There are a large number of misprints in botanical names, irritating to any botanist reader, and some other unfortunate misprints including “dioxin” (a synthetic poison) for digoxin, the heart drug obtained originally from foxgloves.

Whilst appreciating the aim of the author to put into context the part-autobiography of Duncan Napier, I think the book would have benefited from a change of emphasis. It should perhaps have begun with a briefer introduction not to world but to Scottish herbalism, then proceeded to the life and times of Duncan Napier, and finished with modern herbalist comment. Such a structure might have produced a more cohesive whole. There is a lot of valuable and fascinating material here, which deserves to be better highlighted.

**Gabrielle Hatfield,**  
Beeston, Norfolk