

### Book Reviews

In spite of the mass of papers both printed and in manuscript belonging or relating to William Hunter, his work and achievements, information about his private life, his household, nature, beliefs, and pastimes, is surprisingly scant. Sir Charles Illingworth's biography is the more remarkable, therefore, for making the subject appear as a real person. The way that this has been done is to make full use of such documents as reveal his thoughts and ambitions and, as the author states in the Preface, 'I have written it in the first person to be able to give a more intimate picture of the man and for the same reason I have made free use of expressions and forms of speech taken verbatim from his own writings'. The book contains much interesting and valuable information about eighteenth-century London, its people, architecture and events, as well as a useful background of national and international history. There are 184 references to original sources; a complete list of William Hunter's publications and three other valuable appendices: a record of the five known portraits and four engravings; a list of the biographies which consist of six full-length publications and eight short notices; and a detailed account of students' notes of his lectures and their whereabouts. Unfortunately Section 2 of Appendix D contains details of only one set of volumes in the Library of the Royal College of Surgeons of England; the full holding includes a dozen more, together with two sets in which some of the notes are from lectures given by William Hewson.

The illustrations are excellent, consisting of twenty plates of which three are in colour: an illumination from the *de Consolatione Philosophiae* (1385) of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius; another from the York Psalter (c. 1173); and part of a page from Cicero's *de Officiis*, the first dated edition of any classical author (printed at Mainz in 1465, on Gutenberg's original press by Schoeffer, one of his assistants, who married the daughter of Fust or Faust, the lawyer immortalized by Goethe), all from William Hunter's own collection.

The author has been commendably restrained, even regarding those events which would provide rich material for sensational anecdote. No more than reasonable assumptions have been made where facts have been lacking and he is careful not to exaggerate the relationship between the two brothers, particularly in regard to the disagreement between them in the matter of the placenta.

William Hunter has been neglected by medical historians in comparison with his brother John. Sir Charles Illingworth's book has done much to make good this deficiency and will, it is hoped, reawaken interest in him not only as one of the leading gynaecologists of the eighteenth century but also as a pioneer in the promotion of reform and improvement in medical education.

The author is to be congratulated upon this work; the production is in the customary excellent style of E. & S. Livingstone Ltd. The only serious drawback is that the index is rendered of less value by lack of detail and many omissions.

JESSIE DOBSON.

*The Midwife and the Witch*, by THOMAS R. FORBES, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1966, pp. xii, 195, illus., 48s.

Folk-lore is perhaps the most difficult subject on which to write. It is not difficult to define, the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* has it as 'beliefs, legends and customs of the

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common people', in other words almost anything commonly accepted and practised. This is fair enough, but before medicine became scientific how, in this day and age, can we separate folk-lore from orthodox practice? The beliefs and customs of the past are so numerous that it is impossible to make a complete collection, and any attempt to do so must result in an unreadable jumble. The study of folk-lore is important for many reasons; there can be no proper understanding of life in medieval England or in any other period without a knowledge of the customs of the common people, and not of the common people only. The study of folk-lore, as Tylor showed a hundred years ago, can reveal striking affinities between places far apart and these must be taken into account when studying culture and communications between peoples. Some customs are common to peoples whose languages spring from different roots. Out of folk-lore was born empirical medical practice. Professor Forbes prefers to consider the customs of the past as superstitions, irrational beliefs and fears. In this book it is these which he describes with a wealth of detail and copious references. In this he has done uncommonly well and has produced an intriguing book on the customs surrounding conception, pregnancy and confinement. He has not set out to produce a complete history of witches and midwives, but has chosen those facets of the subject which interest him most. In so doing he has avoided losing himself in his subject as so many in the past have tended to do. For the most part he lets the facts—if superstitions can be called facts—speak for themselves and does not attempt to draw inferences from them.

It is his last two chapters which are the most important for the medical historian and are most satisfying. These describe the early rise of the midwife from the woman whose only qualification for the work was the personal experience of many childbirths, to a professional person, or at least a woman skilled in her art. In the final chapter he has collected together much original material on the licensing of midwives.

Professor Forbes devotes an interesting chapter to pregnancy and fertility tests and another to the prediction of sex. The superstitious uses of the caul are described in a chapter on 'the veil of good fortune'. One of its most popular uses was to prevent sailors from drowning and shipwreck. The caul was always preserved and fetched a price on the market which fluctuated in England according to whether a war was being waged or not, varying from thirty guineas in 1779 at the beginning of the Napoleonic wars, to as little as one pound in 1895.

There is much little-known information in the pages of this book but its lasting use for the historian will be the wealth of references which it contains. These are important and will be of help to all those who wish to study the, as yet, neglected subject of the early history of childbirth and the rise of midwifery.

R. M. S. MCCONAGHEY

*Ärzte und Medizin in Afrika*, by LUDWIG BRANDL, Pfaffenhofen/Ilm, Afrika Verlag, 1966, pp. 200, illus., DM. 9.80.

Although Germany was a late starter in the race for Africa, the Dark Continent nevertheless exercised its spell on those Germans who went there whether as conquerors or civilizers. This small paperback of 200 pages is one German's testament to