

Book Reviews

ROBIN PRICE, *An annotated catalogue of medical Americana in the Library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine. Books and printed documents 1557–1821 from Latin America and the Caribbean Islands and manuscripts from the Americas 1575–1927*, London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1983, pp. 319, illus., £22.50 or \$35.00.

Latin Americanists throughout the world have long been aware of the magnificent collection of works relating to medicine in the continent, housed in the Wellcome Institute, though it is little known outside the ranks of the *cognoscenti*. It is to be hoped that the publication of this sumptuous catalogue will repair that omission. Robin Price, Deputy Librarian at the Institute, has performed a splendid task in compiling this guide to a collection composed essentially of three personal libraries, those of Sir Henry Wellcome, Dr Nicolás León, and Dr Francisco Guerra. Though Sir Henry's own interest in Latin American medicinal plants led him to purchase Dr León's largely Mexican collection in 1927, the work of Dr Guerra in the Institute itself, to which he brought in the 1960s an unrivalled knowledge of American medicine, was the catalytic agent in organizing and recording this splendid library, as is handsomely acknowledged in the preface.

Robin Price, however, has produced the definitive guide to a unique collection of material on Latin American medicine, covering eleven countries, though Mexico takes pride of place. The catalogue details printed materials, periodicals, and manuscripts in the field which are held at the Institute, and includes an excellent bibliography and index, together with appropriate illustrations. It is superbly organized and printed, and each entry is comprehensively annotated. In short, it is much more than a bibliographical tool: it is also a work of substantial scholarship.

The range of subjects covered is very wide, and it is impossible in a short review to do it justice. But it does bring out very strikingly the remarkable interest of Latin American *savants* – long before Latin America existed as a continent liberated from colonial control – in all aspects of medicine. It is, of course, well known that the pre-colonial civilizations of the Aztecs, the Inca and Maya, as well as others, had already discovered a large range of medicinal plants and practised surprisingly advanced forms of surgery – such as trepanning – long before the Europeans arrived. And, as the discovery of the New World almost doubled the number of food-plants then known to the Old, so the native pharmacopoeia was absorbed by European civilization to its lasting benefit. But the colonial period, as reflected in the Institute's collection, serves to underline once again that the post-independence portrayal of it as an intellectual desert is absurd, and to reveal the wealth and diversity of intellectual enquiry it really represented. For this reason alone, the *Catalogue* should be of the greatest interest to more than medical men, though the latter will find in it abundant material, ranging from native recipes and their efficacy, including the use and abuse of chocolate, to detailed accounts of epidemics of various kinds, laws relating to them, surgery, hospital administration, midwifery, medical theory and practice, and so on, at least to entertain if not, indeed, to enlighten them.

This is a splendid guide to a rare collection of *materia medica* which should encourage greater use of the Institute's library itself. No self-respecting library of Latin American Studies should be without it.

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