

## Book Reviews

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J. K. ARONSON, *An account of the foxglove and its medical uses 1785–1985*, Oxford University Press, 1985, 8vo, pp. x, 399, £25.00.

The bicentenary of the publication of William Withering's *Foxglove* has been well and largely perceptively celebrated the world over, but the most permanent tribute comes in the form of this book by J. K. Aronson. Aronson is very well qualified for the job he has set himself. He is an eminent authority on the pharmacology and clinical practice involved, and he now shows himself to be a fine and meticulous historian.

The first half of the book is a facsimile of the original *Account of the foxglove and some of its medical uses*. This has been annotated in the margins with helpful notes on people, diseases, practices, and drugs. Here Aronson reveals an encyclopaedic grasp of his material. The second half of the book consists of mostly historical chapters putting Withering and the *Foxglove* in perspective. The account is vastly more balanced than that of Peck and Williamson (1950, *William Withering of Birmingham*) and forms a valuable addition to the insight already given by Schofield (1967, *The Lunar Society of Birmingham*).

I noticed very few possible slips or omissions. The only one of any importance relates to George Eliot's reference in *Silas Marner* to the use of the foxglove for the "terrible symptoms of heart-disease and dropsy". Aronson says the source of the information is unknown to him. I think we can be almost certain that it came from George Henry Lewes, who, amongst his other accomplishments, was a physiologist with a formidable range of knowledge. It is inconceivable that he did not know of Withering's work. He and George Eliot frequently talked about his physiological work (some of her correspondence refers explicitly to this), and the medical parts of her novels are probably the main evidence of Lewes's influence on her.

A novel feature of Aronson's book is the analysis of Withering's own results using statistical methods. In this way, Aronson fairly convincingly shows that Withering's success owed as much to his previous experience as to his switch of method of preparation. I also find Aronson's analysis of the contrasting characters of Withering and Erasmus Darwin rings true. Withering was "the sort of man most likely to annoy Darwin". My own reading of this famous quarrel was that it cannot have been true that Withering was completely innocent, though he was clearly right.

The book finishes with a brief and helpful review of work on digitalis during the twentieth century.

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ROBERT AUSTRIAN, *Life with the pneumococcus. Notes from the bedside, laboratory, and library*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985, 8vo, pp. xi, 168, £25.00.

As these lines are being written, the University of Pennsylvania is preparing to unveil a portrait of Robert Austrian and to announce the creation of a Fellowship in Infectious Diseases bearing his name. These are the customary methods by which universities honour distinguished members and are the methods by which names and faces are encased in a certain amount of tradition, although succeeding generations are unlikely to be able to identify the names or the faces, let alone the accomplishments that led to the honours.

Son of one of Baltimore's distinguished clinicians, Robert Austrian trained at Johns Hopkins in the Medical School and in the Hospital. His loyalty to these institutions and to his native city has never been doubted by those of us who have known him. Academic opportunities carried him to the Downstate Medical Center and the King's County Hospital in Brooklyn, New York, and then to his present position as the John Herr Musser Professor of Research Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

Early in his career, he encountered the inevitable pneumococcus and had the good fortune also to come into close contact with several major figures in the study of this organism, most notably Colin MacLeod and W. Barry Wood, Jr. Austrian's interest in the pneumococcus has