

Book Reviews

The Dawn of Australian Psychiatry, by JOHN BOSTOCK, Sydney, Australasian Publishing Co. (for Australian Medical Association), 1968, pp. 219, illus., \$A4.50.

The history of psychiatry in Australia begins in the Commission given to Captain Phillips, R.N. in which he was entrusted with the care, commitment and custody of idiots and lunatics and their estates in the new colony. On a more human level, it began with an outbreak of mass hysteria aboard the *Alexander* as she was waiting to sail from England, which Surgeon White dealt with most effectively by a mixture of kindness and commonsense. Starting from these good beginnings, psychiatry in Australia developed in its own specific way, conditioned by the environment in which the settlers found themselves. The first mental hospital opened in 1811 at Parramatta, its first Surgeon being appointed in 1814. From then on, there was a slow and sometimes even erratic development of psychiatric facilities, which Professor Bostock discusses in detail, particularly as it concerned New South Wales, for the documentation relating to the other States is by no means so extensive. This book has clearly been a labour of love, an enormous number of original sources have been consulted, so that it will remain a mine for future studies on the history of Australian psychiatry. It ends with the case notes of Dr. F. Campbell, the Superintendent of Tarban Creek, written between 1848 and 1850, who was perhaps the most outstanding Australian psychiatrist of his time. This is a pioneer piece of work, and it is good to see it in print at last.

DENIS LEIGH

Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France, by ROBERT DARNTON, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; London, Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. xiii, 218, illus., 57s.

Mesmerism had its origins in the ideas of Paracelsus, Robert Fludd, and Van Helmont and particularly in the theory that health depended on the harmony between the individual microcosm and the celestial macrocosm. These were elaborated and made more plausible by borrowings from the eighteenth-century writings on electricity, the mysterious 'fluid' which seemed to be present throughout the universe and the effects of which upon the human body were already being tried out by others as a possible cure for a variety of diseases. Franz Anton Mesmer was a Doctor of Medicine of the University of Vienna and the claims made for his system of cure did not seem at all bizarre to his contemporaries. On the contrary, they seemed to accord well with what were popularly understood to be the most advanced scientific ideas, and when they were dressed up in the elegant and dramatic form offered by Mesmer they had an irresistible appeal for fashionable society of the time.

In his well-documented book, Robert Darnton traces the influence of mesmerism on contemporary social ideas, demonstrating its attraction for political radicals, occultists and romantics from the eve of the French Revolution up to Victor Hugo. With this emphasis on the historical significance of mesmerism it may be seen as a model of many other 'off-beat' medical and scientific theories which continue to attract the support of groups very similar to those who hailed Mesmer as a scientific and medical genius.

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