

Book Reviews

Emphasizing the unusual fact that a significant proportion of HGP funding has been allocated to reflexive ethical analysis of the project, they stress society's obligation to display "knowledgeable judgement and sympathetic tolerance".

Perhaps this is the "take-home message" of this thought-provoking book: when the rhetoric stops, the thinking must begin.

Mark Weatherall, Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, Cambridge

CLIFFORD M. FOUST, *Rhubarb: the wondrous drug*, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. xxii, 371, illus., £27.50 (0-691-08747-4)

Children in Russia during the 1960s were fully aware of the existence of rhubarb which, together with castor oil, was one of the staple home medicines. Attitudes varied according to the method of administration. The lucky ones consumed it as compotes and kissels, others as a murky liquid prepared from the dried root. English readers will doubtless recall rhubarb and custard served at school. *Rhubarb: the wondrous drug* evokes, therefore, some uncomfortable memories.

Professor Foust's book pursues several goals. It is a biography of this curious plant, tracking it through European history like a secret agent, powerful in effects but mysterious in identity. Professor Foust traces the steps of European naturalists and physicians, as they searched for rhubarb's origins, and the even more determined efforts of the merchants and governments that traded in the drug. The scale of the task becomes apparent as one follows centuries of fruitless attempts to identify the most potent variety of rhubarb. The painstaking process of empirical research, handicapped by a lack of data, is vividly and fascinatingly presented. This book is therefore a valuable contribution to the understanding of the development and accumulation of botanical and medical knowledge.

The book's greatest attraction is that it suggests almost as many questions as it answers. It would appear that linguistic research into the etymology of the word could provide some clues to the date of rhubarb's appearance in various parts of Europe. Professor Foust suggests that Russian interest in the rhubarb trade developed in the 1630s, but he is careful not to be too categorical as he is presumably aware that the plant was known there much earlier, even entering Richard James's Anglo-Russian dictionary of 1618. Grigori Kotoshihin, a clerk of the Foreign Office and therefore involved with the rhubarb trade, firmly stated in 1666 that the exported plant grew in Siberia and was gathered there by order of the Tsar. What happened to this rhubarb? Further investigation of the seventeenth-century trade and the eighteenth-century Russians who searched for the true rhubarb might shed light on this problem.

Much of the book is taken up with sketches of European physicians and botanists and their attitudes towards the plant. Although medical historians might find these passages rather slight, often leaning too far in the direction of modern-mindedness, as when Foust states that Culpeper anticipated homeopathy, they will be invaluable for nonspecialists. The medical and social contexts of purgative consumption, especially from the point of view of the patient, need further consideration from future historians.

Rhubarb: the wondrous drug is a useful study of an interesting subject and will attract readers from several disciplines, particularly historians of botany and those interested in the problems of early modern trade.

Maria Unkovskaya, Wellcome Institute

LISE WILKINSON, *Animals and disease: an introduction to the history of comparative medicine*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. x, 272, illus., £40.00, \$69.95 (0-521-37573-8).

This book gives an account of the development of man's understanding, mainly by experiment, of the diseases of domestic animals in relation to human medicine and agriculture. It is not a history of veterinary medicine *per se*; it covers only the main epizootic diseases and touches only lightly on the profession, institutions and personalities. Apart from the direct interest in specific diseases such as