

Book Reviews

Material things are now the *raison d'être* of museology, but its practitioners, and general historians, find it hard to extract "history" from "things". The authors of the thirty-three papers in this volume only occasionally draw conclusions from those rarities that survive from the curiosity cabinets. Most use literary sources—inventories, catalogues, and contemporary descriptions—to compile accounts of major cabinets at their peak, and of major areas of collecting interest. These papers chronicle a fascinating record of collecting and display—a record of selective acquisition and rejection, which ought to be amenable to historical analysis and contextualization. Unfortunately, however, some authors offer no context at all for the delineation of collections, or of collecting interests. They are content with description and narrative. Most of those who do attempt analysis are concerned, not surprisingly in the face of such a diversity of artefacts, with elucidating an organizing principle. There is thus much discussion as to whether various cabinets were primarily "scientific" or aesthetic, were intended for artificialia or naturalia, were *Schatzkammern* or *Wunderkammern*.

The collections—the bags of tricks—however, repeatedly sabotage these attempts. Satisfied of the truly "scientific" nature of Peter the Great's intentions in forming a cabinet, Oleg Neverov is then at a loss to explain why it included his wife's executed lover's head in a bottle. Similarly, taxonomic characters subsequently discarded by disciplines which now have well-established classificatory systems get short shrift in some accounts. John Dixon Hunt, for instance, sees hints of "unscientific motives" in the division of a botanical garden into twelve plots named after the apostles. Elisabeth Scheicher considers that Archduke Ferdinand II's adherence to classification by material at Schloss Ambrass resulted in "the collapse of the cosmological scale of the whole", since it "inevitably ignored the evolution of the universe", and she finds the inclusion of both turned ivory objects and the arm-bone of an ancestor under "bone" anomalous. Inevitably, authors taking this approach have most difficulty in explaining the inclusion of the miraculous and the monstrous in collections. William Schupbach circumvents the problem by sympathetically allowing the collectors a fascination with "the old, the fragmentary and the enigmatic".

There are relatively few attempts in this volume, apart from the now customary interpretation of the cabinet collection as a world-mirroring device, to relate the phenomenon to wider currents of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought. Michael Hunter's treatment of the Royal Society's collection is an exception, suggesting links not only with the Society's classificatory efforts for the natural world but with their intended construction of a new, rational language.

The history of collections and collecting lacks a context. This volume, the most exhaustive study of the curiosity cabinet since von Schlosser's in 1908, will undoubtedly begin to create one. But, as the varied approach of the authors, and the wide-ranging bibliography indicate, the enterprise hovers uneasily between art history, whose main analytical traditions remain stylistic or iconographical, and the history of science, and the varied traditions which that subject now embraces. The interdisciplinary approach of this book is to be welcomed, but it is to be hoped that newer perspectives within the disciplines involved will not be ignored. There remains much work to be done on the order of things.

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WALTER PAGEL, *From Paracelsus to Van Helmont. Studies in Renaissance medicine and science*, edited by Marianne Winder, London, Variorum Reprints, 1986, 8vo, pp. xi, 350, illus., £32.00.

This is the second collection of essays by Walter Pagel collected into a volume of Variorum Reprints (the first being, *Religion and Neoplatonism in Renaissance medicine*, 1985). Like the earlier volume, it is edited by Marianne Winder and includes papers dating from the whole of Pagel's long career as a historian of medicine, specifically from 1931 to 1981. It includes two essay reviews and three articles which Pagel wrote in collaboration with other scholars: P. M. Rattansi, Marianne Winder, and J. J. Bylebyl. All of these pieces have a great deal to offer the historian of Renaissance and early-modern medical thinking but perhaps the most important are his essay on 'The reaction to Aristotle in seventeenth-century biological thought', his

investigation of the Harveian antecedents of Glisson's concept of irritability, and a number of seminal essays on different aspects of J. B. Van Helmont's work: his concept of disease, his concept of "Gas", and a long study and translation of his concept of "biological time".

Pagel was a historian of the old school who believed, together with H  l  ne Metzger, that "L'Historien doit se faire contemporain des savants dont il parle" and, moreover, believed that good scholarship could make this possible. On reading these articles now, however, we can see that for all Pagel's excellent scholarship and exquisite sensitivity to the concerns of his subjects he always remained fully aware of his own role as a historian writing in and for the twentieth century. Underlying his repudiations of whiggishness in the history of science and his pleas to see early scientists "as undivided wholes and not dissected in order to save what is 'useful' and to discard what is not" is a firm conviction that history is of fundamental importance for the present. Pagel's passion for the past and its relevance to tomorrow burns in all of these essays but it is most explicit in the first essay in the collection, 'Julius Pagel and the significance of medical history for medicine' (1951). Here Pagel provided us with an "adapted translation" of the introductory chapter of his father's *Einf  hrung in die Geschichte der Medizin* (Berlin, 1898) and so perhaps the father spoke for the son when he ruminated ruefully upon "the deplorable lack of encouragement which there is" for the history of science and medicine. Undaunted by this, they continued to believe that "history is the best link between past and future". Yet, Pagel *p  re et fils* believed in "historical truth", a notion which many historians would now be embarrassed to defend. Today, the historian does not seek truth but merely interprets; he is content to argue for what might have been possible. There is not one privileged History, just many possible histories. It might strike such historians *   la mode*, therefore, as somewhat na  ve to write, as Pagel did, "Learn history in order to learn from history". However, no historian could deny that while reading these essays by a great writer of history one is learning historiography in order to learn from historiography.

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HOWARD S. BERLINER, *A system of scientific medicine. Philanthropic foundations in the Flexner era*, New York and London, Tavistock Publications, 1986, 8vo, pp. x, 190, \$29.95 (\$12.95 paperback).

The origins of the Flexner report and the relations of capital, philanthropy, and scientific medicine will probably long remain a focus around which American historians will orbit. The latest body to appear in this gravitational field is Howard Berliner's *A system of scientific medicine*. At the outset it can be said that this study is, by and large, well written, lucid, and a good tale. It is broad in the explanatory factors it invokes, and detailed in its use of archival material. These things, plus its relative brevity and unexceptional price, make it an invaluable work for teaching purposes. Berliner's approach is Marxist and, with reservations, he makes an excellent job of arguing that the scientific turn taken by American medicine was not unique to that subject, but part of a more general change in the labour process determined by capital, which, in the case of education in general and medicine in particular, used philanthropy as the intermediary.

Only briefly, and disastrously, does Berliner juggle with the history of ideas. Vacillating uncomfortably between social constructivism and realism, he treats the reader on successive leaves to a relativist indictment of the late nineteenth-century capitalist construction of disease, in which "People were not unhealthy because of the system of production under which they laboured and the relations of production engendered by that system, rather they were sick because of germs, which could be identified and eliminated" (p 79), followed by a realist ticking-off for the ignorant scientific boffins, "The conventional understanding of germ theory, as opposed to the scientific understanding was . . . mechanical and reductivist" (p 81). The problem being "scientists of the time exaggerated the importance of specific aetiology" (*ibid.*), Whig history is by no means the prerogative of the positivist.

There is a further and rather curious thing about this book, it has appeared within a well-populated historical field yet fails to address any of the other literature and interpretations.