

Book Reviews

R S Bray, *Armies of pestilence: the effects of pandemics on history*, Cambridge, Lutterworth Press, 1996, pp. xiii, 258, £19.50 (0-7188-2949-2).

In this volume Dr Bray—a former vice-president of the Royal Society for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene—seeks to show “that the course of history has been and can be affected by the major pandemics of infectious disease”. “Practitioner history” generally enjoys low esteem in the eyes of medical historians, and—with some very distinguished exceptions—this is all too often justified by an anecdotal, “presentist” approach allied to a readiness to impose current bio-medical paradigms on inadequate or contradictory historical evidence. For their part practitioners often condescend to professional historians, being keen to “set them right” not only on matters epidemiological but on such points as the fall of the Roman Empire (all that lead in the drinking water) or the origins of capitalism (obviously bubonic plague).

Historians may thus approach *Armies of pestilence* with some foreboding—probably deepened by the dust-jacket’s promise of a “vigorous style and timely injections of humour”—but if they persist and actually read it they will have a very pleasant surprise. Bray is both judicious and modest in his approach (the book, as he acknowledges, is based on secondary or tertiary sources) and displays a genuine historical sense when it comes to weighing theory against evidence. The humour is largely directed at the claims of colleagues willing to diagnose conditions centuries, or millennia, in the past, on the basis of poorly defined symptoms in fragmentary sources—Shrewsbury’s strangely neglected account of sodomy and haemorrhoids in Philistine population dynamics is a gem in this respect.

In substance the book is a fairly conventional round-up and examination of the usual suspects—from the Great Plague of Athens to the Great Influenza Débâcle of 1970s America—but what distinguishes it from many other offerings is the author’s willingness to acknowledge how difficult it is to diagnose

diseases in the past, and how constrained is the contribution that bio-medical theory can make to our understanding of their epidemiology, given the inadequacy of the sources, and the possibility that pathogens may have altered so as to change their behaviour significantly. The discussion of plague is particularly interesting in the latter respect and could be read to advantage by anyone interested in the question of its dramatic appearance and equally mysterious disappearance.

The question of what impact disease had on politics and society in the past is notoriously beset with traps for the unwary, and here too Bray displays a commendable caution—taking a defensibly “strong” view of plague but acknowledging current views that nineteenth-century cholera played a very minor role in this respect. The generally cautious tone makes the book longer on narrative than analysis, and Bray’s apparent ignorance of the demographic literature leads him to misinterpret the role of birth rates—which more often rose than fell in the aftermath of epidemics—but in most respects *Armies of pestilence* can be recommended to the “interested layman” and,—with its useful bibliography—to first year undergraduates. Unfortunately the author has been let down by his editors—the text is marred by too many typographical errors including missing words and mis-datings of both the Franco-Prussian and American Civil Wars.

John Landers, All Souls College, Oxford

Franz Graf-Stuhlhofer, *Humanismus zwischen Hof und Universität: Georg Tannstetter (Collimitius) und sein wissenschaftliches Umfeld im Wien des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, Schriftenreihe des Universitätsarchivs Universität Wien Bd 8, Vienna, WUV-Universitätsverlag, 1996, pp. 212, illus., öS 168.00, DM 37.00 (3-85224-256-X).

One of the major difficulties facing the historian who wishes to understand the changes brought about in medicine by the Renaissance is the lack of studies of Latin humanist physicians.

Book Reviews

The changes brought about by those who demanded a return to the Greeks are well known, unlike the relationship of these Hellenists to their contemporaries who looked back to ancient Rome. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, these Latin humanists could be seen as progressive, for they distinguished themselves from the barbarities of the Middle Ages and, often inspired by developments in Italy, sought to recreate features of Roman Antiquity. Graf-Stuhlhofer, in his revision of his 1980 dissertation, draws attention to a neglected centre of this humanism among doctors, the University of Vienna, and to one of its leading members, Georg Tannstetter Collimitius (1482–1535), who combined the roles of Dean of the Vienna Medical Faculty and Physician to the Holy Roman Emperor.

Collimitius was a man of wide interests, a poet, a writer of elegant Latin, a doctor, a historian, a geographer, and, above all, a mathematician and astronomer. His friends included many of the leading scholars in south Germany and north Italy, notably Joachim Vadianus, and he was instrumental in furthering the interests of the humanists at both court and university. Although he edited some medieval texts, he was more devoted to those of Rome, especially Pliny, and his involvement with Proclus and Ptolemy comes through the translations of others, not through his own knowledge of Greek. Failure to appreciate the very late arrival of Greek-based medical humanism, only from 1528, leads the author into contorted explanations of Collimitius' role in a type of medical humanism that he could have known, if at all, only in the last years of his life, and that triumphed around Europe only after his death.

What this biography reveals above all is the significance of astrology in university medicine, certainly north of the Alps and perhaps even in Italy. Vienna, with a famous mathematical tradition, chronicled by Collimitius, was particularly favoured, and contemporaries remarked on Collimitius' role in extending further the alliance of astrology and medicine. Apart from a small plague tract, his sole medical publication was a lecture of 1526/7, edited by a

pupil, on the application of astrology to medicine, especially in determining critical days and times for bloodletting. His abilities as a caster of horoscopes were appreciated by the emperor, and he was often called upon, like Paracelsus later, to provide an almanac for the year to come. That German physicians in particular were heavily involved in the publication of such astrological calendars has long been known, as some of the author's footnotes show, but it is good to be reminded of the continuing importance of astrology both within and without medicine. A degree in arts provided the would-be doctor with the technical training necessary to interpret the heavens, and Galen and the Arabs gave him the justification for employing his astrological observations within medicine.

Of Collimitius' activities as Dean, little is said, not least because he himself wrote only extremely brief summaries of them in the Faculty Minute Book, but more space is given to his role in various literary academies, and to his humanist passion for poetry. Although almost forgotten by medical historians, he still claims recognition from historians of Austrian humanism, and of the University of Vienna. Although the revised thesis ranges less widely than the original, and is tailored to fit an audience already familiar with the history and institutions of the University of Vienna, it deserves notice because it describes accurately and succinctly the life of a man who represents a neglected stage in the development of renaissance medicine. If nothing else, it serves to remind the historian that there was intelligent medical life outside Italy.

Vivian Nutton, Wellcome Institute

Almut Lanz, *Arzneimittel in der Therapie Friedrich Hoffmanns (1660–1742) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Medicina Consultatoria (1721–1723)*, Braunschweiger Veröffentlichungen zur Geschichte der Pharmazie und der Naturwissenschaften, Band 35, Braunschweig, Deutscher Apotheker Verlag, 1995, pp. 241, DM 45.00 (3-7692-1959-7).