

Book Reviews

The Story of the Progress of Medicine, by C. F. V. SMOUT, Bristol, John Wright, 1964 pp. 168, 54 illus., 30s.

This is an account of the progress of medicine throughout the ages, culminating in the triumphs of the present. It is written in a buoyant and somewhat naive style, the atmosphere of positive enthusiasm being splendidly illustrated by the portrait of the author as a frontispiece. The readership is to be the general public and in consequence medical terms are explained. The object is frankly propagandist. It is to let the layman know what benefits he is getting from medical advances and to stimulate his interest in continuing them; and to set a good example the author is devoting any profits to research in the University of Birmingham. Now it is not an easy task trying to get the layman to realise how much better off he is. Attempts tend to degenerate into a negative catalogue—that formerly they did not have penicillin, nor anaesthesia nor this or that. Or it may become accounts of horrific treatments that patients suffered for illnesses we cannot recognize and which do not seem to be relevant to us. The author has largely avoided these difficulties and his brisk straightforward account at least shows that modern medicine has been worked for and is not just an ‘inalienable right’ to be piped into every home by a minister. But to picture what it would be like for oneself to be a patient in the past requires the art of the novelist as well as the knowledge of the historian. Here we do see occasional flashes. The account of the Birmingham women with their varicose ulcers, for example, goes straight to the heart and bypasses the higher critical centres. We can only wish the author every success in his mission.

J. BISHOP HARMAN

Green Medicine. The search for plants that heal, by MARGARET B. KREIG, London, G. G. Harrap, 1965, pp.463, illus., 35s.

It is not very often that a reviewer is assigned a book whose characters have been to him familiar figures in their professional capacities. This may lead to prejudice or lack of perspective. In the present case pharmacological research on natural drugs made it possible for the present reviewer to know Schultes, Reko, Marker, Taylor, Osmond, and many others engaged in pursuits so well described by Mrs. Kreig in her interesting book.

Her journalistic style and personal acquaintance with those involved give great fluidity to a narrative describing the explorations which gave us new plants for the treatment of disease. The old story of digitalis is re-told, together with those of chaulmoagra oil, quinine, curare and sarsaparilla. The biographical sketches of some contemporary ‘scouts’ of pharmacognosy are vivid and lead very properly into the chemical and clinical studies which produced the therapeutic use of the drugs.

As a whole the book is accurate and makes good reading, though the specialist in the field may feel that we are told only of the successes and that the potential use of plants in the treatment of cancer has been overstated.

F. GUERRA