

Book Reviews

PETER RAZZELL, *The conquest of smallpox. The impact of inoculation on smallpox mortality in eighteenth-century Britain*, Firle, Sussex, Caliban Books, 1977, 8vo, pp. x, 190, £8.00.

A demographic study which in spite of the author's persuasive writing and extensive quotes (at least a third of the text consists of frequently inordinately long verbatim quotations) by no means justifies the staggering claim on the dust jacket that the book "shows how [the practice of variolation] virtually eliminated smallpox before the end of the eighteenth century".

The statistics presented certainly show an impressive impact of variolation in the localities examined, most of which have been culled from the relatively small area covered by the Sutton family and their disciples (comparisons with the very different situation on the continent of Europe would also have been interesting). The net is thrown somewhat wider in an astonishing table on p. 133, which purports to trace the "increase in natural virulence of smallpox" by comparing case fatality rates over a period of 150 years in 13 different towns and cities, making no attempt to compare rates for the same locality in different outbreaks at different times.

As in his previous exercise, concerned with the debunking of Jenner, the author does not hesitate to present near-clichés as though he had just invented them. Thus he remarks somewhat sententiously in his preface: "One of the lessons to emerge from this book, is that effective medical measures do not always come from highly organized and expensive research programmes, but sometimes arise out of the traditional skills of folk medicine"—William Withering, among others, must be turning in his grave. As a matter of fact, that particular lesson had already been well learnt by 1766, when Sir George Baker wrote, also apropos of smallpox inoculation: ". . . it cannot but be acknowledged that the Art of Medicine has, in several instances, been greatly indebted to Accident; and that some of its most valuable improvements have been received from the hands of Ignorance and Barbarism".

ROBERT S. GOTTFRIED, *Epidemic disease in fifteenth-century England. The medical response and the demographic consequences*, Leicester University Press, 1978, 8vo, pp. xiv, 262, £10.00.

Dr. Gottfried has examined minutely a large number of primary sources dealing with East Anglia in the fifteenth century. He has employed new methods and techniques to analyse his data, which are mainly wills and testaments. The end-result is an outstandingly important book, both as concerns the detailed contents and conclusions, and also on account of the research methods used. Although it deals with a restricted part of England, some generalizations are, however, permissible.

The prime factor of mortality, which controlled population growth, was epidemic disease, especially plague, characterized by repeated outbreaks of lethal consequence. Famine had little part to play, although colder weather may have had a role. Towns and the country were usually equally affected. Low levels of fertility were a second demographic peculiarity, and helped to bring about a population decline or halt. An explanation for this is more difficult to come by, and several possible factors are discussed.

The author, a historian, has made a significant contribution to medieval medicine