

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

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rabies, anthrax and tuberculosis, which are transmissible to man, there was also the realization by the early modern scientist that animal disease provided opportunities for experiments which could not be carried out on man, e.g., isolation, lethal injections and post-mortem examinations. The comparative approach also led to the development of the basic principles of epidemiology and immunology generally. The methodology of animal modelling was employed, although that term had not then come into use.

The volume adopts a chronological approach, from the ancient world up to the contemporary mad cow disease but, as might be expected, the nineteenth century predominates. With such a long time span the coverage of many topics is brief, but the essential points are clearly made often laced with a touch of humour, e.g., François Magendie, when dealing with rabid mastiffs from an establishment for fighting dogs, found it advantageous to be accompanied by “students known for their courage, sang froid and dexterity”. Two of the many interesting topics which emerge are: first, the much greater contribution to research made by medical men (no women had yet come to prominence) compared with veterinarians, this was especially true in Britain where veterinary education did not favour research despite the solitary lead given by Sir John McFadyean; and second, the greater support for research in mainland Europe than in Britain. Compare the underfunded, legally hamstrung Brown Institution in London with the Pasteur Institute in Paris.

There is a fluency about the writing which makes for very enjoyable reading undeflected by obtrusive footnotes, but this is not at the expense of the references themselves which occupy 36 pages at the end of the book and provide excellent starting points for anyone going beyond an introduction.

It is becoming the stock-in-trade of reviewers to complain about the price of academic books and this reviewer is no exception. This is mainly because many potential readers may be put off by the price and thus miss the pleasure and the profit which this stimulating book provides.

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