

Book Reviews

Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum, by ELIAS ASHMOLE, reprint of the London 1652 ed., with introduction by Allen G. Debus, New York, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966, pp. xlix, 486, illus., no price stated.

Alchemy, like Astrology, is a close relative of Medical History—there are many *dramatis personae* whom they have in common from antiquity to the eighteenth century and some of these form the best possible company—to recall only Rhazes, Arnaldus de Villanova, Paracelsus, Cardanus and Van Helmont. Its influence is far reaching in the history of therapeutics and clearly emerges in the introduction of the ‘chemicals’ into the *London Pharmacopœia* of 1618. Paracelsus, the father of this ‘iatrochemistry’, had little patience with gold-making. He used, however, the term alchemy advisedly for his thoughts and labours in ‘transmuting’ chemical poison into medicine. Indeed, neither his world nor that of other iatrochemists of the time can be separated from that of the alchemists proper. All of these betray the stamp of their medieval sources. Boyle and Boerhaave recognized the importance of alchemy in the development of chemistry and today it seems even permissible to mention and to delve into the large *corpus* of alchemical writings by Isaac Newton. The facsimile reprinting of the rare volume under notice will therefore appeal to wide academic circles including medical historians and extending to the student of early English mystical poetry and indeed the late medieval and seventeenth-century English scene. For the collection of alchemical poetry here offered centres around the *Ordinall of Alchimey* by Thomas Norton (1477) and the *Compound of Alchemy* by Sir George Ripley (1471)—it is difficult to overrate their influence in the following two centuries when they were frequently cited, printed and translated. There is also Chaucer’s *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* (c. 1390) with the insight which it allows into alchemical practices at the time, and there are other charming pieces of mystical symbolism connected with late medieval attempts at unravelling the miracles and *magnalia* of Nature. The work, of course, forms a first-rate monument to the scholarship, wide antiquarian and ‘occult’ interests and literary influence of Elias Ashmole, F.R.S. (1617–1692)—a key figure, perhaps mostly for epitomizing the connection between the ‘secret’ tradition of alchemy and astrology and the founder-fathers of the scientific revolution incorporated in the Royal Society. How all this emerges from the history and significance of alchemy as a whole and in particular the English Paracelsians is beautifully and most competently described in the Introduction from the pen of Allen Debus. His original work in opening up the sources to the Paracelsian doctrine in English medicine and the Paracelsian compromise in Elizabethan England as well as on Robert Fludd and kindred figures from the twilight between mysticism, *magia naturalis* and science, enabled him to produce the present fine volume—an indispensable tool for research and an ornament for library and book collection alike.

WALTER PAGEL

The British Postgraduate Medical Federation: The First Fifteen Years, by FRANCIS FRASER, London, The Athlone Press, 1967, pp. vii, 69, port., 15s. 0d.

The organization and development of postgraduate medical education in London owes everything to the imagination and foresight of Sir Francis Fraser. In this book, Fraser describes his work as the first Director of the Federation, a position he held