

Book Reviews

physical state, arrangement and access to the records. Some of the historical sketches are tantalizingly incomplete, since so little is known of the firms. Descriptions vary from single items to quantities of material—often completely unsorted. Archives of many firms are scattered in several locations: those of British Xylorite Co. Ltd. (for example) are at Hackney Archives Dept., Suffolk Record Office, Vestry House, and the Science Museum.

The handlist is completed by five invaluable indexes to archives and repositories; personal names; firms and works; place names; products and materials; and subjects.

Records of organizations and individuals are not systematically included although a short appendix includes notes on a few of these. This would be a section well worth expanding and publishing separately.

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T. D. V. SWINSCOW, *Reap a destiny: divagations of a Taoist*, The Memoir Club, London, British Medical Journal, 1989, 8vo, pp. xii, 334, £14.95, abroad £17.50, USA \$29.00 (incl. air postage).

Douglas Swinscow's divagations have, in the best possible way, a faintly Victorian air. They seem to echo distantly the exploits of one of the great Victorian divagators, Francis Galton. Like Galton, Swinscow studied medicine, but became involved in administration rather than practice (in his case, as deputy editor of the *British Medical Journal*). Like Galton, he is an amateur scientist—a botanist, and founder of the British Lichen Society—whose amateurism has sometimes put the professionals to shame. Like Galton, he has chosen to pursue his scientific interests in the most exotic places, notably Africa. Throughout his adventures—whether parachuting into Holland, refereeing power struggles at the *BMJ*, or confronting racism in South Africa—he has displayed an unruffled decency that Galton might have struggled to achieve.

Hostility between his father and mother meant a difficult childhood, and perhaps motivated his search for philosophical and aesthetic, as well as scientific, principles of harmony. His memoir is engagingly written, and salted with mottoes and reflections, mostly of a Taoist tendency. (Is it Taoism that led him to reflect, when pinned down by exceptionally accurate mortar fire outside Arnhem, that the Germans “have a cultural affinity with the mortar bomb's parabolic flight, its trajectory having some resemblance to the gothic architecture that they favour and their elongate female nudes”?) But what stands out is the warmth and acuteness of his response to individuals. I particularly enjoyed the story of his half-brother, Alister, a perpetually improvident, perpetually cheerful man who lived out a “lifelong fantasy” of leisured wealth, cosmopolitanism, and secret service work. Someone should make a film about Alister.

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