

Book Reviews

CHRISTOPHER C. BOOTH, *Doctors in science and society: essays of a clinical scientist*, London, The Memoir Club (*British Medical Journal*), 1987, 8vo, pp. xv, 318, illus., £14.95.

Christopher Booth has had an extremely distinguished medical career, at various times being professor of medicine at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, president of the British Medical Association and director of the Clinical Research Centre at Northwick Park Hospital. Throughout his life, he has belied the jibe that doctors only take up history as a hobby in their retirement by producing a steady stream of scholarly historical papers. This volume is a collection of them, reprinted from various sources.

The first half of the book consists of eight papers about some remarkable people of the mid-eighteenth century, who shared the interconnected themes of Quakerism, the American Revolution, and the lovely dales of North Yorkshire whence they came. The first essay shows how the Age of Reason, rather than being merely the age of vigorous purging, cupping, and quackery as popularly portrayed, saw the work of Hunter, Lind, Jenner, and Withering pointing to the future. Samuel Garth's contribution to fashionable London as physician, poet, and politician is followed by a paper on the lesser-known William Hillary, who spent much of his life in Barbados and wrote one of the first books on tropical diseases. John Fothergill and his caring sister, who was his housekeeper, are discussed not only regarding the study of angina pectoris, but also their friendships with Rush and Franklin and vigorous political attempts to avert war in America. Robert Willan, the dermatologist, was another in this group. He was taught mathematics in Yorkshire by John Dawson, a local doctor who had twelve senior wranglers among his pupils, as well as John Haygarth and Adam Sedgwick. Essays on such little-known men as Dawson and Hillary are worthy of a wide distribution.

Joining the two parts of the book are essays on the eradication of smallpox, which is a model of the kind of lecture that should be given regularly to all medical students, and a study of the growth of medical journals in Britain. Modern history, the second section, is served with reviews of the role of technology, the rise of clinical research, and the development of the Hammersmith Hospital, much of which is written from personal experience. We are sadly warned of worse medical care if money, and therefore time, are not made available for research.

This volume is the first in a series published by the *British Medical Journal*, the Memoir Club, which should bring back into fashion books of essays such as this. It should also foster the recording of contemporary history. The book is well produced, easy to read, and published at a price that can give it the very wide readership that it deserves among those who enjoy good writing, scholarship, and thoughtful reminiscence.

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GUNTER MANN and FRANZ DUMONT (editors), *Samuel Thomas Soemmerring und die Gelehrten der Goethezeit. Beiträge eines Symposions in Mainz vom 19. bis 21. Mai 1983* (with a Soemmerring bibliography by Gabriele Wenzel-Nass), Stuttgart and New York, Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1985, 8vo, pp. 437, DM 98.00.

RUDOLPH WAGNER, *Samuel Thomas von Soemmerrings Leben und Verkehr mit seinen Zeitgenossen* (reprinted from the 1844 edition, with an introduction by Franz Dumont), Stuttgart and New York, Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1986, 4to, pp. 731, DM 118.00.

Samuel Thomas Soemmerring (1755-1830) was probably the most highly regarded German anatomist of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. His particular interests were neuroanatomy and the anatomy of the sense organs. Although he contributed to comparative anatomy and vertebrate palaeontology, much of his research was restricted to the human body, and one of his best-known books was *Vom Baue des menschlichen Körpers* (1791-6).

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Soemmerring corresponded with many eminent contemporaries—other naturalists, as well as philosophers and poets. In the process, he came to occupy a central place in the cultural life of the German *Länder* during the period which the Germans tend to refer to as “the Goethe era”.

This central position has made it possible for Gunter Mann, Jost Benedum, and Werner F. Kümmel to give the title of ‘Soemmerring-Forschungen’ to a new publications-series in which not only Soemmerring material will appear but also contributions to the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science and medicine in general. The aim of the editors is to encourage the study of these subjects within a broad context of cultural history so as to bring out the many-faceted nature of the growth of science and medicine.

The first volume in this new series admirably matches the editors’ high historiographical ideals. *Samuel Thomas Soemmerring und die Gelehrten der Goethezeit* is a rich collection of essays, in which Soemmerring’s life and accomplishments are explored through the network of contacts which he kept. There are separate chapters on his relationship to Goethe, Blumenbach, Peter Camper, Alexander von Humboldt, Cuvier, Merck, Gall, Kant, the poet Wilhelm Heinse, Soemmerring’s close friend Georg Foster, his teacher Ernst Gottfried Baldinger, the illustrator Christian Koeck, the writer Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, and the historian Johannes von Müller. Added to these biographical essays are a chapter on German academic institutions of the period, and also a comprehensive Soemmerring bibliography. An interesting array of topics is thus presented, including several of Soemmerring’s scientific “errors”. Among these were his refusal to accept Goethe’s discovery of an *os intermaxillare* in man, his objections to Cuvier’s interpretation of pterodactylus as a reptile, his partial concurrence with Gall’s phrenology, and, most prominently, his interpretation of the intraventricular, cerebrospinal fluid as “the organ of the soul”.

A definite shortcoming of this collection of essays is the lack of a synthesizing introductory or concluding chapter. Some of the general questions raised by the individual contributions are therefore left unanswered. Among these questions is: why should mere anatomical expertise have made Soemmerring such a sought-after and central figure on the German cultural stage? Or, to turn the question around: why were not just the contemporary naturalists, but so many of the leading poets, philosophers, and historians, deeply interested in Soemmerring’s anatomical work? The answer may be found in the fact that one of the great intellectual pre-occupations of “the Goethe era” concerned the meaning of organic form and diversity. Anatomy was one of the most pertinent areas of research in this connexion, and, through comparative anatomy and palaeontology, its results were perceived in an increasingly historical, developmental light adding substance to the organicist philosophy of history advocated by Herder and others. Thus Soemmerring’s social eminence may in part be explained by the importance which his subject had as a pillar of the Romantic *Weltbild*. Even if one were reluctant to bring in the concept of “Romanticism” as an answer, the question itself should not be ignored.

The second volume in the new series of ‘Soemmerring-Forschungen’ is a reprint of the largest and most informative of two Victorian-type ‘Life and Letters’ of Soemmerring, written by the Göttingen zoologist Rudolph Wagner. It is useful to have this classic source of information about Soemmerring back in print.

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RICHARD J. EVANS, *Death in Hamburg. Society and politics in the cholera years 1830-1910*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, 8vo, pp. xxv, 676, illus., £55.00.

Cholera studies have blossomed since Lord Briggs pointed out a quarter of a century ago that responses to Asiatic cholera would afford a remarkable touchstone of the interplay of disease, state, and populations in the nineteenth century, and called for large-scale, cross-cultural analyses of the social crises produced by the disease. But, as Richard Evans notes in his magisterial monograph, Briggs’s call to action has been only partially realized. Above all, historians have concentrated overwhelmingly on the visitations of the 1830s. This selectivity has its justifications: the disease was then new to Europe, and it was the earliest outbreaks that