

## Book Reviews

students and others if made available through college libraries. Publication of this work also highlights the need for a giant-sized historical dictionary of scientific ideas.

G. N. Cantor

Division of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Leeds

S. E. D. SHORTT (editor), *Medicine in Canadian society. Historical perspectives*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981, 8vo, pp. xiii, 506, \$23.95 (\$11.95 paperback).

The history of Canadian medicine, like other varieties of Canadian history until quite recently, has suffered from an abiding conviction that "history is about chaps" and from primitive research techniques. To these disabilities has been added, in the case of Canadian medical history, the circumstance that, as in other English-speaking countries, the discipline was for long the pastime of practitioners, frequently elderly, who were unversed in the ways of history. Though a succession of distinguished Canadian medical scholars, beginning with Osler, contributed significantly to the historiography of medicine, the history of *Canadian* medicine is yet a long way from producing great historical scholars in the tradition of Sudhoff, Sigerist, Temkin, O'Malley, and Pagel.

But in the last few years non-medical historians have been writing informatively, if not profoundly, about Canadian medical topics, as the very interesting collection of articles published in *Medicine in Canadian society* makes evident. Most of the eighteen papers are either institutional studies (health care of the indigent in Nova Scotia, psychiatric care in the Maritimes, medical licensure in Quebec, early history of the profession on the Prairies, comparison of Canadian and American medical institutions, medical attendance in Vancouver); public policy studies (public health in the schools of Ontario and British Columbia, public health in Montreal, public health insurance before 1945); socio-intellectual studies (women doctors and feminism, American sex manuals at the beginning of the century, birth control before 1920, the resistance of Ontario doctors to Ernest Jones and Freudianism); and general descriptions of epidemics (epidemics among Western Indians in the early nineteenth century, cholera in the same years, and the influenza epidemic of 1918–19 in Canada). It will be seen that these may all be subsumed under what the editor of the collection has called "the social history of medicine" and what Leonard Wilson has called "the history of medicine without medicine".

In general, these are competently researched and well written. Several (those on the Maritimes and the influenza epidemic, notably) display regrettable parochial ignorance of the larger setting of their respective topics. Others appear to be extrapolations of American themes to Canada, displaying little interest in examining the interaction of distinctively Canadian institutions and values with the phenomena under discussion. As too frequently happens in studies that purport to be of Canada-wide scope, there is also a tendency on the part of several authors to read "Ontario" and even "Toronto" for "Canada". Medical topics by and about the French Canadian part of Canada have been largely, though not quite entirely, ignored by the editor.

Only three of the contributors, in fact, have medical training, and only two of the eighteen papers concern clinical subjects. One of these, Robert Fortuine's 'The health of the Eskimos as portrayed in the earliest written accounts' (from the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*) is quite the best in the whole collection, providing an original, highly skilled, and suitably cautious analysis of the early accounts of Eskimo health.

The editor's introductory essay, 'Antiquarians and amateurs', provides a useful survey, both of the shortcomings of the history of Canadian medicine, and of what ought to be pursued in the future. Like many historians of medicine who have recently discovered social history, he is inclined to exaggerate the importance of the discovery and to deplore, without much understanding, the preference of medical practitioners for historical accounts of clinicians struggling to effect great (or small) medical improvements. Surely the preference is understandable; naturally the clinician will identify with his mirror image. Surely, too, the history of medicine, in Canada and elsewhere, is in urgent need of good histories of clinical medicine – of what doctors do – which is being lost sight of in the battle of the books between supporters of

## Book Reviews

the history of medicine as the history of medical science and the history of medicine as a chapter in the struggle for social emancipation.

The book concludes with a most useful bibliography of the history of Canadian medicine which demonstrates that the condition of the study is not quite as desperate as Dr. Shortt has indicated. In any case, he and his contributors are to be congratulated on having produced a handsome, widely informative, and useful volume.

John Norris

Division of the History of Medicine and Science  
University of British Columbia

JOHN GRAHAM SMITH, *The origins and early development of the heavy chemical industry in France*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, 8vo, pp. xiii, 369, illus., £36.00.

The author teaches history of science at Loughborough and the present work is written for students of economic and social history as well as for readers with general interests in the history of science and technology. The book is richly documented, most of the 900 references relating to French archival material and many carrying expansive explanation. A preliminary catalogue of weights, measures, currency, and the Revolutionary calendar enables the reader to greet with confidence such bizarre units as the *quintal*, the *pied de roi*, the *denier*, and the month of three *décades*.

The four main divisions of the book deal with the distillers of *aqua fortis* (nitric acid), the growth of sulphuric acid manufacture, the development of chlorine bleaching, and the beginnings of the Leblanc soda industry. The narrative, however, is by no means restricted to these headings for there are accounts of such trades as soap, glass, pottery, gelatin, phosphorus, alum, copperas, and pigments; a good deal of attention is devoted to the contributions of pharmacists to the industry. There are also useful insights into the working of Revolutionary committees (not always as heavy-handed as English readers might have supposed).

Readers of *Medical History* will perhaps turn first to the chapter on chlorine. The use of saturated chlorine water as a bleaching agent gave the workers a most unpleasant time. In addition to the obvious attacks on eyes and chest, such symptoms as headache, pains in the small of the back, and nose-bleeding were attributed to working with chlorine. Rudimentary gas-masks were devised and the operation transferred to draughty sheds; some operatives chewed liquorice as a palliative. The substitution of *eau de Javel* (potassium hypochlorite solution) for chlorine water removed the major hazard of chlorine gas. In France, these hypochlorites became popular stain-removers on a domestic scale, whereas in England most households used oxalic acid, often with fatal consequences.

Meanwhile, Guyton de Morveau advocated chlorine gas as a fumigant and anticontagiant on the ground that it devoured the putrid miasmas which were the presumed causes of infection. It found employment in ships, cemeteries, crypts, dissecting rooms, prisons and – especially – hospitals. (Readers may remember Wohler's cruel lampoon of Dumas and his substitution theory, in which it was alleged that fabrics of "spun chlorine" were sold in London to make nightshirts and bandages.) A traveller could even buy a portable flask of chlorine to ensure personal protection against disease. *Eau de Labarraque* (sodium hypochlorite) was introduced as a disinfectant in 1819, its first use being to relieve the conditions of the catgut makers in their noisome environment of animal intestines. Smith also relates a cautionary tale which contrasts the lying-in-state of Louis XVIII with that of the poet Byron; the former, thanks to the benefits of French hypochlorites, could be exposed to public gaze whilst the latter had to lie sealed in his lead coffin for lack of them.

The medical historian will find much more to interest him in this book, for example, the arguments about the beneficial consequences of breathing hydrochloric acid gas. This book is an example of an all-too-rare species, a work of scholarship which is eminently readable. It is well indexed and nicely produced. The price is what we must expect nowadays.

W. A. Campbell

Department of Inorganic Chemistry  
University of Newcastle upon Tyne