

## Book Reviews

to be at variance with Galenic vascular anatomy (chapters 6, 8, and 9); and a modern medical justification of Galen's use of venesection as an evacuant (chapter 10).

My second reservation about the volume focuses on the texts translated. In the cases of the first and third texts, Brain translates from C. G. Kühn's 1821–33 edition of the *opera* that is based on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printed editions. In the cases of textual difficulties, Brain consulted some manuscripts (but not all those regarded as significant) for clarifications that are reflected in his translations, but the text upon which his translation is based can in no sense be regarded as reliable. The second translation, 'Galen's Book on Venesection against the Erasistrateans in Rome', is based on the 1970 dissertation edition of R. F. Kotrc with an exhaustive collation of an additional manuscript. This translation appears to be based on a critically defensible text, but the reader must be aware that the appearance of new editions of the early work against Erasistratus and the late work summarizing Galen's views on venesection—both desiderata—may render Brain's translations nugatory in part.

These two reservations are, I believe, significant ones, but I do not think that they can be taken as justification for ignoring this book. *Galen on bloodletting* deserves to be recommended by every teacher of the history of medicine as a sensitive and thought-provoking treatment of the theories of illness and therapy espoused by the most influential of ancient physicians.

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MARY KILBOURNE MATOSSIAN, *Poisons of the past: molds, epidemics, and history*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. xiv, 190, illus., £18.00, \$25.00.

This is a slight (in every sense of the word) volume. The text manages to exceed 150 pages, but only just, by the liberal use of full-page illustrations and extensive presentation of well-known facts of the life cycle of *Claviceps purpurea* and of the symptoms which its ingestion may produce in man; plus the description of the much more recently observed effects of the trichothetenes, especially T-2 toxin, produced by species of the genus *Fusarium*. Evidently inspired by the latter work, this book is an historical projection of the explosive and fashionable interest in mycotoxins that followed the identification of aflatoxin in the early 1960s.

Rumination on possible effects in man of ergot alkaloids and of *Fusarium* toxins has led Matossian to an intriguing hypothesis. She has come to believe—and on the evidence of this book, one is tempted to say has become obsessed by her belief—that demographic shifts in populations, in Europe, east and west, and in North America, can be explained in terms of food poisoning by mycotoxins, directly and indirectly; indirectly because the mycotoxins act as "immunosuppressants" (that other fashionable concept of the 1980s), paving the way for epidemics of infectious diseases, from plague in the Middle Ages (in *rats* as well as in man) to streptococcal throat disease in New England in 1939.

If one is initially excited by this novel hypothesis, one's feelings tend to turn to disappointment and mild irritation as ideas, seemingly plucked out of thin air and only sketchily and selectively documented, are subjected to elaborate statistical treatment to support the author's tenets. It must be said in all fairness that in her preface Mary Matossian attempts a disclaimer: in somewhat purple prose she disarmingly acknowledges her own ignorance, aware that her "claims may seem excessive". Less disarming is her wishful thinking that she speaks "in the spirit of science", using "the logic that many scientists use" when she makes judgements based on "a little information about a lot of people". It is a comparison which would make the blood of most self-respecting scientists run cold, and make them reflect with Pope on the danger of shallow draughts from the Pierian spring.

Ergot poisoning, in one form or another, in different parts of the rye-growing world, and at different times and centuries, accounts for much of the book's substance. This is of course no new subject; nor are the putative connections with reported outbreaks of witchcraft, and Saint Anthony's fire and other neurological manifestations. New on the other hand is the author's

## Book Reviews

suggestion, appropriately in the year of the bicentenary of the French Revolution, that unrest among peasants, triggered by symptoms of ergot poisoning, contributed to the events leading up to that revolution. This engaging theory is supported by a great many “puzzling facts”, “clues” which purport to show that “in the summer of 1789 many French citizens may have suffered from ergot poisoning” (“may”, “perhaps”, and “maybe” appear with alarming frequency on page after page). Another favourite concept in this connection is “suppressed fertility”, also caused by ergot poisoning, which the author thinks may have been largely responsible for stagnation of population growth in Europe prior to 1750. The problem with this last argument is an apparent difficulty of definition. Given the paucity of surviving records, how does one distinguish between early or late miscarriages, and failure to conceive? Worse still, how does one measure such values? Matossian does it all by statistics, invoking a near bewildering wealth of “economic and temperature variables”. The reader’s confidence in these proceedings is hardly enhanced by the gratuitous inclusion of facetious remarks concerning the sexual activities of French (p. 102) and Russian peasants (p. 26).

One must finally give Mary Matossian full marks for her enthusiasm and perseverance. It does seem a pity that she must reject all other explanations so decisively in order to promote her own, as when, writing of the mortality decline in Europe after 1750, she comprehensively dismisses the opposition by declaring that it is “reasonably clear that improvements in sanitation and medical care, the decline in war casualties and deaths associated with famine, or even smallpox inoculation [inoculation or vaccination—or both?] cannot be taken seriously as solutions”. For readers unencumbered by one-track minds, it is, of course, possible to believe that more than one factor could have been in action at any one time.

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VIVIAN NUTTON (ed.), *Medicine at the courts of Europe, 1500–1837*, Wellcome Institute Series in the History of Medicine, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, 8vo, pp. x, 301, £35.00.

From the fine introduction through to the last essay, this anthology works very well. The Continental and early-modern focus, the common themes raised by most of the essays, and the importance of the clearly-defined subject matter make this an unusually coherent collection. As Nutton mentions in his introduction, historical questions about the influence of royal and princely courts on European culture have drawn some serious attention in recent years, especially because of the influential work of Norbert Elias. Now much more than the chronicling of the doings of great personages, such historical work—as in most of these essays—often seeks to analyse whether the concerns and patronage of the court might have influenced historical changes. Not all the authors of the volume answer the question affirmatively, some seeing court medicine as rather more reflecting than causing change in medical culture. But the various approaches to the subject taken by these authors are often suggestive of important historical movements, so that the best of them will be of interest to a variety of historians.

Two of the authors and the editor contribute essays that attempt to set out large themes and general patterns, bringing in examples to illustrate their points; the other seven concentrate more closely on the empirical details of particular courts, allowing generalizations to emerge. Nutton’s introduction is an excellent overview of the general importance of the subject of court medicine, ranging from the Hittites to the nineteenth century, while Hugh Trevor-Roper’s wide-ranging essay on the importance of royal and Protestant patronage for the spread of Paracelsianism is carried off with his usual panache. Werner Friedrich Kümmel’s attempt to systematize the medical literature on disease found at court does not work quite as well, with its stress on the bourgeois “Enlightenment” as the cause of changes in the relationship between the court doctor and his patients, but he has much of interest to say about how the court doctors gained influence as the “State” developed, a development they whole-heartedly supported.