

## Book Reviews

BARTHOLOMAEUS ANGLICUS, *On the properties of things*. John Trevisa's translation of . . . *De proprietatibus rerum*. A critical text, edited by M. C. Seymour et al., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, 2 vols. (of 3), pp. xix, 1397, £30 the set. Reviewed by Eric J. Freeman, B.A., Librarian, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP.

The medieval encyclopaedists, with the partial exception of Isidore of Seville, have been neglected by historians of science. Scholarly uncertainty about their relevance is a reflection of modern, post-Romantic, unease about a society which saw comparatively little virtue in originality, innovation and individual priority in matters of learning. George Sarton spent much of his academic career gathering and publishing a vast amount of information on medieval scientific thought. Yet, ironically, those pages of his *Introduction to the history of science* which deal with the Middle Ages betray a distaste amounting almost to loathing for the scientific work of the centuries between the Greeks and the European Renaissance. Like Sarton, many historians still find it difficult to sympathize with writers who ignored conventions and principles central to modern science.

The contemporary popularity and durable influence of the encyclopaedists make it obvious that it is in their books above all that we should seek common, educated opinion on a host of scientific and medical matters. It is not yet sufficiently realized that, in most cases, the larger part of a medieval encyclopaedia deals with topics which (by any definition not hopelessly anachronistic) must be considered scientific. It is in these texts that the medieval "world picture" is most conveniently displayed, in ordered systems which are themselves of interest because they illustrate slowly changing fashions and priorities in education and learned thought.

The prevailing uncertainty about the encyclopaedists' relevance for the history of science is demonstrated by the capricious way in which the ultimate accolade, entry in the *Dictionary of scientific biography*, has been bestowed. Isidore is in, together with Michael Psellus and Hugh of St. Victor. Hrabanus Maurus and Alexander Neckham are out, and it will be interesting to see if Vincent of Beauvais makes volume fourteen. In particular, Bartholomew the Englishman, despite his contemporary and long-lasting popularity, and despite his usefulness as a convenient reference source for the modern student, has not been considered worthy of notice.

The omission is particularly irritating because a modern assessment of Bartholomew is badly needed. Not much is known about him except that he was a Minorite Friar with a large reputation as a teacher of theology at Paris. The *Dictionary of national biography*, which perversely hides him under the already discredited name of "Glanville", claims that his *De proprietatibus rerum* was one of the texts hired out at a regulated price to the Paris students. Other sources find his work, or selections from it, in the medical curriculum of Montpellier. All these details, and whatever else the record holds, need confirmation and amplification.

Meanwhile, at least the text of his huge book has been made available, although in a form that will be strange to most historians of science. In 1398/9, John Trevisa (c. 1340–1402) translated the book into English, and it is a critical text of this Middle English version which has now issued from the Clarendon Press. What Bartholomew and John managed on their own, has absorbed the energies of seventeen modern

### Book Reviews

editors for at least seven years. A valuable side-product of this concentrated editorial activity has been the stream of theses and articles produced by the team during the period of their labours. The editors properly distinguish their edition as "critical" because, as they point out, "the absence of any Trevisa holograph . . . the loss of his latin copy-text, some unresolved *cruces* and ambiguities of syntax and synonyms . . . impose at every turn a need for editorial discrimination and so make textual finality impossible". There are, of course, Latin manuscript texts extant which derive, at some remove, from the copy-text, and there are also the early printed editions. The student has a convenient 1964 German reprint of the Frankfort printed Latin edition of 1601. A third volume to complete the edition under review is promised "about 1978". This will contain Introduction, Commentary and Glossary.

What does this edition provide for the student of medieval science? That the language is Middle English is less of a hindrance for the non-philologist than might be supposed. The format is one which will be familiar to anyone who has used recent editions published for the Early English Text Society. Three or four letters peculiar to medieval English will give trouble for the first few minutes only. Even in the interim before the promised Glossary appears there is very little in the vocabulary to cause difficulty, provided due caution is observed. Readers with a smattering of Latin will find most of their problems resolved by a glance at a text in that language.

Here, at last, is a reasonably accessible, comprehensive, reference tool on most of the topics relating to the natural world which exercised the mind of medieval man, or at least the minds of that tiny sub-species of medieval man which inhabited the universities and centres of learning. Of the nineteen books into which *Of the properties of things* is divided, seventeen deal with subjects falling within the domains of medicine and science. The other two, appropriately at the beginning, pass in rapid review the more metaphysical parts of theology concerned with the nature of God and of those "creatures" (e.g. angels) higher up the chain of being than man. Other books describe the Soul which (according to medieval ideas) has psychological and biological dimensions as well as theological ones; the human body, its attributes and ills; the universe; times and seasons; and the "matter and form" of all created things. There are books dealing with birds and animals, plants, stones and metals, with meteorology (in both its ancient and modern senses), topography, and a splendid final section on matters ranging from colours to spiders' eggs, weights and measures, and musical instruments. *Of the nature of things* represents the "normal science" of the high Middle Ages. That this science was circumscribed by tradition to the point of stasis, compared with the science of later centuries, does not detract from its present fascination or its historical importance as a facet of thirteenth-century society.

Any review before the appearance of volume three must reserve final judgement. What we have so far deserves the warmest praise and welcome. A single, crippling drawback is the price, which will put the book beyond the reach of most of the individuals likely to need it.

DAVID ELLISTON ALLEN, *The naturalist in Britain. A social history*, London, Allen Lane, 1976, 8vo, pp. xii, 292, illus., £9.00.

The British naturalist is here chronicled for the first time, and his activities and