

Book Reviews

PIETRO CORSI, *Oltre il mito: Lamarck e le scienze naturali del suo tempo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1983, 8vo, pp. 432, L.30,000 (paperback).

While Charles Darwin still awaits a satisfactory scientific biography, four studies have appeared recently which illuminate the position of Lamarck in the history of science. While two of them, by R. Burckhardt and L. Jordanova, come from the Anglo-Saxon world, the other two come from Italy: Corsi's work has a predecessor in a monograph by Giulio Barsanti entitled *Dalla storia naturale alla storia della natura*. Italian history of science is, with a few notable exceptions, written by historians with a philosophical background, and Lamarck has always been more approachable from that standpoint than Darwin, which perhaps helps to explain the vitality of Lamarckian studies in Italy.

Corsi's important purpose is to outline Lamarck's contribution to natural science *in its scientific context*. He approaches Lamarck not as an isolated thinker but as an outstandingly important episode in a flow which he rightly depicts as much wider and more varied than we usually think. Lamarck's work is seen as closely related to, on the one hand, that of the followers of Buffon, especially Jean-Claude de la Métherie, and, on the other, to the views later expressed by E. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. Further, Lamarck's work on transmutation is seen as inextricably connected with his early work in geology, chemistry, and physics. Corsi depicts with clarity the connexions between the organic and inorganic foci of Lamarck's research.

In some respects, those parts of the book dealing with natural science in Lamarck's time are even more interesting than those treating Lamarck himself, and it is perhaps a pity that the book could not have covered that field even more thoroughly. For, reading this book, one feels that there are very few historians of science whose mastery of a whole period is as evident as that of Corsi. The only weakness in the work, occasioned by its concentration on the figure of Lamarck, is that it does not give sufficient prominence to his great contemporary, Georges Cuvier. Cuvier may have been unpleasantly preoccupied with the politics of the French academic world, but his influence on all major aspects of nineteenth-century life sciences was as great as that of anyone, including giants like von Baer and, later, Charles Darwin.

In short, this is an excellent book, which places Corsi in the front rank alongside Giuliano Pancaldi, Giulio Barsanti, Antonello La Vergata, and other young Italian authors. It seems that English-speakers have to choose between learning Italian and expediting translations of their works.

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URS BOSCHUNG, (editor), *Johannes Gessners Pariser Tagebuch 1727*, Berne, Hans Huber, 1985, 8vo, pp. 420, illus., S.Fr.62.00.

In the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, Paris was a medical Mecca. Students of medicine from all over northern Europe flocked to the French capital to gain the practical experience in anatomy, surgery, and obstetrics that their native faculties of medicine did not provide. It was not that the best faculties in Europe, such as Leiden, did not offer courses in these subjects, because they did. It was rather that no faculty had the facilities to allow students to perform dissections and practise surgical operations themselves. At Paris, however, such facilities existed, for independently of the faculty a number of physicians and surgeons undertook for a fee to initiate students in the mysteries of preparing an anatomical specimen, performing surgical operations, or attending a labour. Necessarily, such individuals tended to be medical men attached to the Jardin du Roi or the city's hospitals, who thus had access to a suitable locale and a ready supply of bodies. One foreign student who came to Paris in this period was the Swiss Johannes Gessner (1709–90), in later life the leading natural scientist in his home town of Zurich. Gessner was urged to finish his medical education in the French capital by no less a person than Boerhaave, and in the winter of 1727–8 became a private pupil of the surgeon Henri Le Dran (1686–1770), a renowned lithotomist attached to the hospital of La Charité. Gessner took his training under Le Dran very seriously and kept a careful record of his daily