

Book Reviews

RICHARD S. WESTFALL, *The construction of modern science. Mechanisms and mechanics*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, 8vo, pp. xiii, 171, illus., £7.95 (£2.50 paperback).

The author addresses his book to the undergraduate, offering him an introduction to the history of science in the seventeenth century. He hopes that it will form a coherent interpretation of the scientific revolution, seen by him as constituting the interaction of two main themes: the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition, which considered nature to be based on the principles of mathematical order; the mechanistic philosophy, which looked at nature as a gigantic machine, the hidden mechanisms of which had to be sought. These two approaches and their resultant conflicts affected the life sciences and chemistry. There is, therefore, a chapter on 'Mechanical chemistry' and one on 'Biology and the mechanical philosophy'. All those, therefore, who are concerned with the history of medicine or biology in the seventeenth century must be aware of this excellent, scholarly work.

JUDY BARRETT LITOFF, *American midwives, 1860 to the present*, Westport, Conn., and London, Greenwood Press, 1978, 8vo, pp. xi, 197, £11.50.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the midwife played a prominent role in childbirth amongst the American poor, but not the middle and upper classes. The author claims that in the early twentieth century the medical profession began to treat childbirth as an abnormal process, and thus the midwives began to decline in popularity as medical and public health forces were mounted against them. In 1910 half the babies in the States were delivered by midwives, but by 1973 the figure was fifteen per cent.

This interesting story is well recounted here in a scholarly book written by a historian of feminism. It could, however, have been improved by the more frequent use of comparative information regarding contemporary conditions and events in other parts of the world, especially European countries from whence a high proportion of Americans had derived.

PHILIP RHODES, *Dr. John Leake's Hospital*, London, Davis-Poynter, 1977, 8vo, pp. 400, illus., £12.00.

Professor Rhodes, who was on the staff of this hospital and a governor of it, has provided an excellent account of the life of an outstanding institution. He has drawn upon a rich store of local records and his own knowledge of the history of obstetrics in particular and of the history of medicine in general to do so. His book, however, has a serious defect, and one frequently perpetuated by the amateur historian. Although admittedly most of his data derives from the minutes of board meetings and some of the literature is cited in the text, no method of referencing has been adopted and the 'Bibliography' is limited to seventeen titles. Moreover, even at a time when no book is cheap, the price for a work of limited and parochial interest seems excessive.