Book Reviews

a distinct discipline, and the integration of scientific culture and general politics. Hard as it is today to move beyond the amusing mental images of piled unicorn's horns, dragon toes, mandrake roots, mineral specimens, herbs and animals, these extraordinary assemblages were accumulated with very serious intent, primarily for the generation of knowledge. These museums were, Findlen convincingly argues, laboratories in which nature could be experimented with, and just as importantly, spoken of and argued about. They were spaces for learning and for sounding off—Kircher introduced speaking trumpets into his repository for precisely this purpose.

Much of this learning and debate was medical in nature: there is some evidence of anatomy having been practiced in museums, and much more of the testing of materials for their medicinal principles. Aldrovandi, like many who followed him, held the reform of materia medica to be a primary goal for his museum work. The medical disputes that museums played host to were often fought in professional terms. Renaissance museums then provided both the evidence to shore up an argument and the chamber in which to conduct the debate.

Findlen also looks in depth at the protocols of patronage, civility and prestige that were observed in museums, showing them to be "a microcosm of elite society as well as nature herself". How could these accumulations of goods not have played a social role in a society that increasingly measured personal worth in terms of the conspicuous display of material objects? More than just crude presentations of wealth, however, museum collections were manoeuvred within complex economies of exchange, and to such an extent that, for Findlen at least, they represent "the quintessential product of the patronage culture of early modern Europe".

Possessing nature thus provides important insights into a still relatively neglected part of the scientific revolution—natural history—and powerfully places them within a rich social context. It is not, however, a book without problems. As with so many works spun out in "thick descriptions", one looks in vain for a convincing sense of development—either as a story or a history. Structurally, the book feels more like a collection of essays than a single narrative. And while statements of change are periodically interjected, and an epilogue pursues the story up to the eighteenth century, the book does little to break up the impression of a fairly monolithic phenomenon.

Dense with detail and citation to the point of overload, this is neither an elegant, nor indeed all that readable a book. Most disappointingly, for this reader at least, the account seemed at times only dimly to reflect the glitter, sparkle and magic of the material under discussion. The work's strength in analysing what was written about the museums and the spaces they occupied is not matched when the collections themselves are being discussed. Findlen is clearly happier as an historian of texts than things, and for this subject that leaves a rather big hole. Essential reading for historians of science then, Possessing nature offers far less for students of material culture and its history.

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Nearly two decades have elapsed between the publication of this forth volume of the Wellcome Historical Medical Library's A catalogue of printed books and the preceding volume. The first volume of the Catalogue series, a description of the Wellcome's pre-1641 imprints, was issued in 1962. The second volume, actually the first in the series describing books printed 1641–1850 (authors A—E), followed four years later. The third volume was issued early in 1977 (title-page dated 1976), and continued the author catalogue up to the letter L. Many in our
One cannot look at this fourth volume in its familiar blue casing without wondering whether this is not the end of the printed library catalogue? However accurate its data and however much its continuation may have been anticipated, might not future users be better served by the inclusiveness, updatedness and manipulation of data fields made possible by bibliographic databases? An electronic version of *A catalogue of printed books*, for instance, would become more than an author catalogue. Parsing fields from its tens of thousands of entries would allow it to become a tool for the compilation of lists by place of publication, by publisher and printer, or by whatever elements historians of medicine, publishing or the book may be able to extract from the database.

Though we may be a way from the realization of this scenario, much of the editing of the fourth volume of *A catalogue of printed books* was done on disks. One wonders how much longer before such data become the catalogue rather than an editing tool or mechanism for typesetting? The fifth and most recent edition of *Morton’s medical bibliography* (1991) was typeset entirely from text entered onto disks. If a sixth edition of *Morton* is issued, it will surely appear in an electronic version. Whatever format the fifth and final volume of *A catalogue of printed books* assumes, it will continue to represent the holdings of one of the finest medical historical collections in the world, will present a comprehensive view of western medicine through the evidence of its publishing history, and remain an invaluable tool for the professional bibliographer. One only hopes we need not wait two more decades.

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