

Book Reviews

F. NEIL JOHNSON, *The history of lithium therapy*, London, Macmillan, 1984, 8vo, pp. xvii, 198, illus., £35.00.

Since its emergence as an independent branch of medicine in the nineteenth century, psychiatry has drawn on a wide variety of physical, social, and psychological forms of treatment. Nonetheless, therapeutic achievement founded on an understanding of causation remains confined to a relatively small group of disorders. Where the facts are best established, as with phenylketonuria or the psychoses of pellagra, there is general agreement on the principles of intervention. For the most part, however, the field of therapeutics has been dominated by an empiricism which has lent itself all too readily to dogma.

It was understandable, therefore, that the arrival of a range of novel, centrally-acting chemical compounds in the 1950s should have led to the belief that “psychopharmacology” would provide a logical foundation for the treatment of mental illness, a belief based on the assumption that an understanding of a drug’s mode of action would illuminate the nature of the relevant disorder. In the event, this hope has proved elusive. Treatment has remained largely symptomatic, and an informed observer has commented with tart justice that psychopharmacology has generated “an illuminating flash of brilliance, a promising excavation into the mountain of ignorance and an exceptionally large amount of flying rubble”. Even so, within a short time most of the crude physical procedures that had previously dominated the therapeutic scene—deep insulin coma, electronarcosis, brain surgery, sleep treatment, etc.—were rapidly replaced by pharmacotherapy, and have passed into virtual oblivion.

A sea-change of this type lends itself very well to a historical approach, and a sound model has been furnished by the medical historian, Judith Swazey, in her study of chlorpromazine, a story that illustrates *par excellence* the devious paths by which a major drug was developed and the ways in which it affected the theory and practice of psychological medicine in the USA.¹ Commenting on the objective and dispassionate nature of her monograph, Seymour Kety pointed to its further significance in indicating “what we can learn about how scientific discoveries take place, how their social application is determined, and how we can facilitate the ‘psychopharmacologic revolution’”.

F. Neil Johnson does not include Swazey’s book in his bibliography and his account of the history of the treatment of psychiatric illness with lithium salts follows a very different tack. The summary of the early history of the rise and fall of the use of lithium in general medicine is the most factual and least controversial part of the book. When the author, a psychologist by profession, comes to its use in psychiatry, however, he is more concerned with hype than with history, and makes no pretence of being objective or dispassionate in his personal approach to the topics: “Those who see science and its metamorphoses as reflections of general trends in social history, have a breadth of vision that I envy but cannot emulate: I state the lithium story as I see it, and I leave it to these gifted others to draw the social lessons. I have set about my task with the simple aim of entertaining and of telling a story that I find quite fascinating. I am, however, hardly unbiased in my view of the importance of lithium—the ‘king of drugs’ . . .” (pp. x–xi). And again: “The way in which the scientific community receives a new idea is very much dependent upon how that idea is promulgated by the person who first puts it forward. Whilst a certain amount of circumspection is both expected and appropriate, it is nevertheless necessary that the idea should be projected enthusiastically, forcefully and, above all, frequently, if maximum impact is to be achieved” (p. 45). Most of Johnson’s monarchists are, accordingly, forceful enthusiasts who have laboured to promote the view, in the face of much contrary evidence, that lithium, toxic effects notwithstanding, is specifically effective not only in the treatment of mania but also in the treatment and prevention of depressive disorders. “It was”, he concludes, “probably the advent of lithium therapy which, like no other such event, led to psychiatry becoming truly interdisciplinary” (p. xv).

At the end of his sustained panegyric, punctuated only by the throwing of brickbats at

¹J. P. Swazey, *Chlorpromazine in psychiatry: a study of therapeutic innovation*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1974.

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scientific scepticism, Johnson still finds it “curious that, of all available psychiatric drug treatments, lithium therapy is still the one treated with most suspicion and mistrust by so many clinicians and even with outright and overt hostility by a few”(p. 129). There are many more obvious reasons than he is prepared to entertain.

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TERRY CLIFFORD, *Tibetan Buddhist medicine and psychiatry. The diamond healing*, York Beach, Maine, S. Weiser; Wellingborough, Northants, Thorsons, 1984, 8vo, pp. xx, 268, illus., £12.95.

Eastern medical systems are enjoying a great vogue at the moment because they are holistic, endeavouring to heal the whole person, not just bits of the patient's body or mind. This book is an excellent example of a description of this method because the intertwining requirements of body, mind, and spirit are each shown to receive treatment. This treatment then helps the other strands of the personality. (1) Buddhist medicine deals with the spiritual and ethical requirements. It provides inner peace as a prerequisite for well-being. (2) Tantric medicine purifies the invisible system of channels and wheels known from yoga. (3) Somatic medicine deals with the body; and (4) psychiatric medicine with the troubles of the everyday mind. They are not watertight compartments and influence one another.

The core of the book is formed by a translation of three chapters on psychiatric medicine from the Tibetan, with part of the original text in facsimile. Tables of plants and other substances used in psycho-pharmacology are provided, with explanations on their appearance and details of their application. Subjects difficult for Western readers, such as the concepts of deities and demons, are explained in Western terms.

Any criticism made of such a comprehensive and well-balanced survey of the field is really of small importance. While history is touched upon only where it is useful for elucidating some connexions, it is alleged in three different passages that uroscopy was an indigenous Tibetan invention. This is by no means certain, because Western influences existed during the Middle Ages. Though the genuine works of Galen do not deal in detail with the diagnosis of diseases from the urine, Byzantine writers like the fourth-century Magos of Emesa in Syria and the seventh-century Theophilus Protospatharios of Constantinople had worked out elaborate systems. Syriac and Byzantine learning was taught at Gondeshapur in Persia, and Persian ideas are known to have travelled to Tibet via the trade routes.

Some other small criticisms could be made about inconsistent terminology, such as the indiscriminate use of the words “airs” and “winds” instead of deciding to use one or the other. The sources mentioned are sometimes secondary but the detailed bibliography will help the more interested reader to consult the primary sources.

To keep the price within the reach of the ordinary reader, the book has foregone glossy colour plates, but it has a great number of very useful working illustrations.

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H. A. SNELLEN, *Two pioneers of electrocardiography. The correspondence between Einthoven and Lewis from 1908–1925*, Rotterdam, Donker, 1983, 8vo, pp. 140, illus., Dfl.55.00.

Although Willem Einthoven received the 1924 Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology for the discovery of the mechanism of the electrocardiogram, he fully realized that it was Thomas Lewis who had made the prize possible by demonstrating clinical application of the instrument. Starting in 1908, Einthoven and Lewis wrote to each other frequently between their respective homes of Leiden and London, and by 1924 they had become good friends. Fortunately, Einthoven saved almost all of his letters. Thanks to H. A. Snellen's continued interest in publishing Einthoven's writings, we now have this complete collection of the correspondence between Lewis and Einthoven. Professor Snellen has supplied biographical sketches of these two men and has summarized key developments every year or two. He