

A comparison with the *Liliaceae* in Rothmaler (pp. 605–6) shows that the second plant is in fact Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum multiflorum* L., var., also called *Meyglockchen*). These examples reiterate a common pattern among medieval herbals. The pictures do not always show the plant in question. Rather, they reflect the botanical biases of the illustrator.

Though these volumes are undoubtedly valuable, readers may also find it useful to supplement them with Edourd Ghaleb's *Dictionnaire des sciences de la nature*, 3 vols. Beirut, 1965 (Arabic-Latin-English-German-French), and, more recently, Albert Dietrich (ed.), *Dioscurides triumphans. Ein anonym arabischer Kommentar (Ende 12. Jahrh. n. Chr.) zur Materia medica. Arabischer text nebst kommentierter deutscher Übersetzung. Teil 1,2* Göttingen 1988.

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**Fédéric Obringer,** *L'Aconit et l'orpiment. Drogues et poison en Chine ancienne et médiévale*, Penser la médecine, Paris, Fayard, 1997, FF 150.00 (2-213-59891-6).

More than a study of drugs and poisons in ancient China, this is an analysis of the concept of toxicity in Chinese medicine and culture, from the first written documents to the dynasty of the Sung (960–1279).

The author deals first with the use of toxic substances for therapeutic purposes, a widespread practice in ancient China which shows a deep ambivalence about the notions of drug and toxic agent, perfectly expressed in the chapter title: 'Les drogues toxiques en médecine ou l'art de l'attaque' (toxic drugs in medicine or the art of attack). Further, he focuses on two main classes of toxic agents, widely diffused in China: snakes and the various species of aconite (chapters 2 and 3). Here the analysis is factual: he identifies, as far as possible, the toxic agents, and studies the symptoms of their toxicity or their therapeutic action, as well as therapeutic strategies, the

indications and doses of therapeutics, as well as all other relevant information, using, when necessary and possible, modern data in order to clarify the ancient texts.

In the fourth chapter, Obringer considers the so-called "powder of cold eating": a mixture, supposed to have a therapeutic effect, which became very fashionable from the third century onwards, and which is diversely described in the treatises. He lists its ingredients (among them arsenic), studies its indications and uses, and looks at the social phenomenon it represented. After that, he focuses on what was called *gu*, a very large concept, which extended from magic to true pathologies, and included: social subversion, political fighting or devils, with probably a common notion underlying all these phenomena, that of cannibalism. In conclusion, the author tries to identify the general concept linking all the aspects of toxicity he has studied, which he compares with that of *pharmakon*, associated in ancient Greece with the "seduction of the word". There are differences, however. While in Greece the harm lay in the writing, in China it was located in the word itself; moreover, in Greece the *pharmakon* was considered as an artefact opposed to the reality of being, in China, on the other hand, it was perceived as one of two forces pertaining to being, and in perpetual transformation.

In each chapter the analysis is followed by the French translation (with notes) of ancient Chinese texts dealing with the argument of the chapter (mainly the so-called *Zhubing yuanhou lun* written in 610). At the end there is a bibliography with sources and modern studies; a Chinese index in alphabetical order of the transcriptions into the Latin alphabet accompanied by the original Chinese writing; and index of proper names and of subjects (among others Linnean identification of plants, medical products and active principles).

This book covers a large range of disciplines—from botany and zoology to anthropology and ethnology, including pharmacology and pharmacy—with a skilful use of the sources, translated from the original texts by the author himself. The view is thus

large and aims to show that the concept of toxicity in ancient China was not only medical, but also cultural. This theme is not gone into deeply enough, as can be seen in the comparison between China and ancient Greece, which is far too generic to be significant, and leads to a generalization perhaps more apparent than real.

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**Thomas M Daniel**, *Captain of death: the story of tuberculosis*, University of Rochester Press, 1997, pp. viii, 296, illus., £37.50, \$49.95 (1-187882-2969).

Yet another book for the general reader on the history of tuberculosis, by a retired professor of medicine. Admittedly, most of the others are elderly, but one even has almost exactly the same title—J Arthur Myers' *Captain of all these men of death* (1977). The prospect is enough to make the professional historian of medicine sigh, and the opening chapters of this book, which recount evidence for the presence of tuberculosis in ancient societies, from Egypt and South America to Greece and Rome, and on into the Middle Ages, will not cause any recantation. The determined reader will discover, however, that the book is not without merit; indeed, with suitable health warnings, it might prove useful in certain types of teaching. Thomas Daniel has that rarest of gifts, the ability to explain scientific concepts clearly and comprehensively, and even the most unregenerate arts student could hardly fail to understand, for example, the workings of the immune system under his guidance. He also makes intelligent use of familiar material: another account of the illnesses of John Keats and Robert Louis Stevenson may make the heart sink, but Daniel's specific use of these case histories to illustrate "opposite poles on the sphere of resistance to tuberculosis" is admirable.

The clarity and intelligence with which Daniel deploys his scientific knowledge to make the science of tuberculosis accessible to the general

reader make this book both enjoyable and instructive. It is all the more depressing, therefore, that his literary style is old-fashioned enough to trouble most people with any historical training—and that surely must encompass a good share of the potential readership of this book. He employs the imagery of warfare unremittingly and intensively throughout the book: adversaries, enemies, struggles, battles, conquests, defeats and victories rampage unchecked across these pages in a most anachronistic fashion, somewhat at odds with the author's rather tacit recognition of cycles of tuberculosis virulence, and the failure of most primary infections to develop into actual disease. Daniel is a great hero-worshipper, too. Robert Koch is "one of history's most brilliant and most rigorous medical scientists"; Edward Livingston Trudeau, "a man destined to have an effect on medical practice in the treatment of tuberculosis unparalleled even by Koch". Worrying is the table on page 40 which depicts, on no statistical and very little other evidence, five epidemic waves of tuberculosis since 2000 BC. English readers will be irritated by Daniel's inability to spell English names correctly: Lady Mary Wortley [*sic*] Montagu and Joseph Priestly [*sic*] deserve better than that.

Pretty mixed blessings, then, for this volume. Blame, perhaps, lies with Rochester's editors, not just for the copy-editing, which is shoddy, but for being historically naive enough to let Daniel get away with a circa 1950 historical prose style which went out of fashion in the 1960s.

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**Phyllis Hembry**, *British spas from 1815 to the present: a social history*, edited and completed by Leonard W Cowie and Evelyn E Cowie, London, Athlone Press, 1997, pp. x, 292, illus., £50.00 (0-485-11502-6).

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Leicestershire town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch underwent a transformation from a