The focus on reciprocal sociocultural, political, and intellectual influences—the titular “entangled matter”—is coherently pursued by the authors, whose work (and that of the editors) deserves to be also commended for the wealth and breadth of the historical reconstruction, the accuracy of archival research, and the scrupulous attention to detail.

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Newton the Alchemist: Science, Enigma, and the Quest for Nature’s “Secret Fire.”

In the first chapter of this magisterial study, William Royal Newman asks the question, “What did Newton want from alchemy?” (11). He leaves his tentative answer for the epilogue, twenty-one chapters and nearly 500 pages later, but hints at it as he sets out a map for the journey ahead. Some possible answers are quickly knocked aside. Newton did not seek a spiritual practice to supplement his heterodox Christianity. Nor did he share the hope of radicals during the recent English Civil War that society would be reformed once a master alchemist made gold available to all. It seems that he found a certain pleasure in the imagined company of alchemical adepts whose work he read and copied, and whose procedures he tried to reproduce.

Over the last three decades, Newman has achieved academic adeptship in the writing and theorizing of alchemical history. He produced a landmark study of Geber, the Latinized form of Arabic Jābir (1991), and he identified an elusive cosmopolite of seventeenth-century alchemy in a study of George Starkey (2003). He has also written about the historiography of early modern “chymistry,” as he likes to call it. But none of the alchemists studied thus far approximates the status that Newton holds today. Newton the Alchemist represents the labors of fifteen years, including work in the laboratory and online.

In the first chapter, Newman sets a three-pronged approach for himself: philological, in learning the language that Newton used in his extensive writings on alchemy; textual, in reading everything Newton wrote about alchemy as well as the books Newton read in the process; and experimental, in replicating Newton’s laboratory work insofar as that is possible. The challenges are considerable, for Newton’s alchemical manuscripts ran to more than a million words and were widely dispersed in the Sotheby’s sale of his remaining manuscripts in 1936. Many of them are now online at sites like The Chymistry of Isaac Newton (www.chymistry.org), run by Newman and offering an index of Newton’s alchemical terminology.

Newman does not use the word alchemy metaphorically, as writers sometimes do in books on change in everything from health to wealth. He uses it quite literally to mean chrysopoeia, or goldmaking. Nor does he suggest, as some have done, that alchemy gave
Newton ideas about gravity and optics. Meanwhile, he seems to take literally, and to reject, the view of John Maynard Keynes that Newton was “the last of the magicians” (3–4). Keynes had bought a portion of the Sotheby’s sale containing, as he soon found, many of the alchemical manuscripts. He considered them totally unscientific. Nevertheless, readers of this journal may think of ways that the term magician is appropriate to Newton—for example, Pico della Mirandola’s thesis “magic is the practical part of natural science,” by which the Renaissance philosopher may have meant the element that makes ideas about nature practicable. In the radio talk prepared five years before his essay was posthumously published, Keynes asked, “Why do I call him a magician? Because he looked on the whole universe and all that is in it as a riddle, as a secret which could be read by applying pure thought to certain evidence, certain mystic clues which God had laid about the world to allow a sort of philosopher’s treasure hunt to the esoteric brotherhood” (“Newton the Man,” in John Maynard Keynes, Essays in Biography [2010], 366).

A chief difference between the alchemists of Newton’s time and the scientists in the Royal Society of London, to which he belonged, concerned the knowledge that they had acquired. To alchemists, it was known as “natural secrets,” but to scientists it was only valuable when shared openly and made subject to testing by others. The difference was brought home in The Skeptical Chemist, by the great Robert Boyle (1661). It may seem strange to learn, in the last chapter, that Newton and John Locke, though members of the Royal Society, swore each other to secrecy when they shared Boyle’s alchemical manuscripts after his death. Perhaps each of them felt, as even the modest Boyle may have done, that if anyone ever discovered the Philosophers’ Stone it should be a man of reason and, preferably, an Englishman.

Newton the Alchemist includes ten color plates showing, among other things, material produced by Newman and his associates in the laboratory.

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Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance. Su Fang Ng.

As indicated by its title, this book retraces the cultural presence of the mythic Alexander the Great in Britain and Southeast Asia during the early modern period. Situated in the larger enterprise of a global history, it is an important contribution to the unfinished program of writing a world literature, and a shared global intellectual history. The analyses in this book rest on the main argument that early modern imperial rivalries between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, which claimed the same classical heritage, helped