

Book Reviews

Herman Boerhaave, the Man and his Work, by G. A. LINDEBOOM, London, Methuen, 1968, pp. xx, 452, illus., £7 7s. 0d.

Professor Lindeboom has assembled in this biography of the leading European physician of his age, twenty years or more deep study of Boerhaave and his works. It is a *magnum opus* which must for the foreseeable future remain the standard biography of a rare polymath, and it appeared happily in time for the tercentenary celebrations of Boerhaave's birth in 1688. Its publication fills a longstanding hiatus in medical biography for no definitive life of Boerhaave has been published in English since 1743, when there appeared anonymously a short biography by one of Boerhaave's former pupils, William Burton, whose identity was soon unmasked. There had been in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1739 a short unsigned tribute to Boerhaave (based on the funeral oration, in 1738, given by Albert Sculpens, the Professor of Oriental Languages at Leyden) later known to have been written by Dr. Samuel Johnson.

What emerges clearly from the picture painted by Lindeboom is a dignified figure, who paid little attention to his appearance (though Aert de Gelder, a pupil of Rembrandt, in his portraits draped Boerhaave in rich garments), of prodigious energy and industry, and of towering personal magnetism. It was the last which led Baas to observe that 'his prescriptions were less effective than his personal appearance'.

Boerhaave's scholarship cannot be gainsaid; he was described as 'a Triton among minnows'. He occupied at the same time three of the five chairs (chemistry, botany and medicine) in the Faculty at Leyden. His scholarship and industry are shown by his own massive writings including his *Elementa Chemiae* (1732), and his widely-used clinical texts—*Institutiones Medicae* (1708) and *Aphorismi* (1709)—repeatedly published not in Latin only but in many European tongues, including English, and often in pirated editions. He also published critical editions of the works of Vesalius (1725), Luisinus (1728) on syphilis, Aretaeus the Cappodocian (1731) in two volumes, Swammerdam (1737–38) in two volumes and others.

His fame as a clinician was legendary in Europe and spread beyond to the East Indies, Ceylon, and China. Indeed, it is said that a letter from China addressed to 'Mr. Boerhaave, Europe', reached him. He saw patients at his home (after his early years he did no domiciliary practice) but most of his consultations were by correspondence.

Boerhaave's original clinical observations were few. He described, amongst others, cases of ruptured oesophagus, the aura-like pain preceding rabies, and dilatation of the heart with suffocation from a fatty tumour of the chest. He used a pocket lens in inspection, and introduced a 'Thermoscope, made by the skill of Fahrenheit, an Amsterdam technician', to measure fever. 'His therapeutic armamentarium was very limited', writes Snapper, but he used the *materia medica* of his day and had deep faith in the *vis medicatrix naturae*. Some of his prescriptions became widely known and bore his name. But there is little doubt that his fame as a clinician owed much to 'the psychological influence that radiated from a man, commonly recognised as an oracle'.

As a clinical teacher he was unsurpassed in his age. He taught a class of one hundred students, half of them foreigners, for five hours a day, four days a week; it is estimated

Book Reviews

that during his tenure of the Chair at Leyden 2,000 doctors matriculated. Among his pupils were von Haller at Göttingen—the master physiologist of his time, van Swieten and de Haen (the leaders of the ‘old Vienna’ School), Gaub of Heidelberg, Eller and Buddeus of Berlin, Cullen of both Glasgow and Edinburgh, Sir John Pringle, and indeed many others who spread his teachings throughout Europe. All nine members of the newly-established Faculty of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1725 (including Alexander Monro *primus*) had matriculated at Leyden and studied under Boerhaave, and through Edinburgh his teaching spread to North America. Haller’s tribute—*Communis Europae sub initio hujus sacculi praeceptor*—was richly merited.

Boerhaave certainly shone as a bedside teacher, but as Lindeboom points out, there were pioneers in this field before him. Giovanni Battista da Monte (Montanus) had taught at the bedside after his appointment to the Chair of Medicine in the University of Padua in 1543, and this was followed in Europe by der Straten of Utrecht in 1636, and in Leyden in 1637, though little enthusiasm was shown for it at Leyden, except by Boerhaave’s predecessor, Sylvius, until Boerhaave was himself appointed lecturer in Medicine there.

Lindeboom describes in detail Boerhaave’s contributions to chemistry (perhaps of greater originality than those to medicine) and to botany, including his interest in, and support of (although not without its reservations) Carl Linnaeus.

It is impossible to pay just tribute to this outstanding biography of Herman Boerhaave in this brief notice. For all interested in the history of medicine in the eighteenth century this work is indispensable; it is a searching and accurate analysis of a many-sided genius and his works, presented with an elegance, felicity and distinction of style that many a practised author, native to these isles, might envy.

COHEN OF BIRKENHEAD

The Story of my Life, by J. MARION SIMS (reprint of the New York 1884 ed., with a new preface by C. Lee Buxton), New York, Da Capo Press, 1968, pp. xi, 471, no price stated.

This welcome reprint of one of the best medical autobiographies of the last century will enable a new generation of readers to make the acquaintance of the founder of American gynaecology and the surgeon who became widely known in Europe as the leading American surgeon of his time. Marion Sims gave his name to a speculum but his greatest contribution to surgical gynaecology was undoubtedly the operation which he designed to repair vesico-vaginal fistula, then considered to be an incurable condition. The story of his years of obsessive work on this problem, when his chief collaborators were a handful of negro patients who were as determined that he should succeed as he was himself, is one of the most remarkable in the history of surgery, and this alone makes the book a classic. First published in New York in 1884, the autobiography ends twenty years before his death, but is supplemented by numerous letters and other appendices.

F. N. L. POYNTER