BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM WITHERING OF BIRMINGHAM, M.D., F.R.S., F.L.S.

By T. WHITMORE PECK, M.P.S., and K. DOUGLAS WILKINSON, O.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P. Pp. viii + 239, with 52 plates. Bristol: John Wright & Sons, Ltd. 1950. 21s.

Every medical student knows how William Withering first came to try out infusion of foxglove in dropsy. Few, at least outside Birmingham, have any idea of the scientific manner in which he set out to discover the precise methods of preparation and administration which gave the best results. In these days when empirical methods are often condemned his careful piece of clinical research can be studied with benefit and admiration. It should also be noticed that, though it was left to Bright to differentiate between renal and cardiac oedema, Withering was undoubtedly able to select the cardiac patients who responded best to the exhibition of foxglove.

Withering was a man of wide interests and extensive knowledge, a botanist with a European reputation, chemist, horticulturist, antiquarian and mineralogist. He even constructed an air-conditioned house to prevent the harmful effects of the Birmingham climate during the winter. It is unfortunately difficult to form as clear a picture of what he was as of what he did. The graphic description of Erasmus Darwin in the letters of Mrs. Schimmelpenninck conveys more of the man in two pages than we can learn of Withering from the remainder of the book. From the letters written to his wife from Portugal one visualizes him as a kindly, serious, dry man lacking a sense of humour. The last impression and the fact that he was oversensitive to criticism is apparently confirmed by his tedious and at times querulous correspondence with Robert Darwin. Letters, however, do not necessarily provide the best material for judging character, particularly when the writer is suffering from the effects of pulmonary tuberculosis as was Withering in Portugal. Of his ability, his conscientiousness and his humanity there can be no doubt. His reputation among his colleagues was high, and it is unfortunate that more information is not available concerning his way of life.

This book is far more than an account of the life and interests of William Withering himself. In carrying out what was evidently a labour of love, the authors have ranged among the contemporary figures of scientific importance for our benefit. We are given much information concerning Erasmus Darwin, gluttonous, quarrelsome and intelligent; Matthew Boulton, scientific industrialist, inventor and public benefactor; Priestley, chemist and philosopher; James Watt, inventor of steam power, and many others.

Striking changes in manners, way of life and knowledge have taken place in the relatively short time since Withering lived and worked. We cannot help regretting the passing of days when scientific knowledge was sufficiently limited to enable intelligent men in all branches of research to keep in touch with one another's discoveries, and even to add to knowledge in branches other than their own. We marvel at the hardihood and patient endurance of doctors who undertook journeys by carriage in all weathers to see patients 20 or 30 miles away, sometimes several times a week. Withering in one year travelled 6,000 miles at an average of eight miles an hour, and a fractured collar bone did not prevent him carrying on with his daily routine. Finally, in times of compromise and restraint, we wonder at, deplore and yet derive a certain pleasure from the robust and outspoken quarrels over the niceties of medical practice and professional etiquette comparable in their directness and pertinacity with the prize-fights then so popular in a different sphere of life.

Those days are gone, however, and, though their passing may give rise to a feeling of nostalgia, we cannot regret that times have changed. Fortunately, men of Withering's enthusiasm and disinterestedness still remain to carry on the traditions he helped to found. This book, which is well produced and illustrated with fine plates, can be thoroughly recommended to all medical men. Even those who have no special interest in the history of medicine cannot fail to obtain pleasure from its perusal.

R.S.B.P.

A MANUAL OF THE PENICILLIA

By KENNETH B. RAPER and CHARLES THOM. Pp. ix + 875, with 172 figures and 10 coloured plates. London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox. 1949. £4 11s. 6d.

This manual is a '20 years' after' of Thom's original monograph published in 1930, and much the same method of presentation has been adopted in the second work. During these 20 years some 4,000 strains of penicillia have been examined, but of the total of more than 700 species which have previously been described by various people, the authors of the manual recognize only 137 species. The book will be welcomed by mycologists, bacteriologists, microbiologists, medicals, biochemists, industrialists and many other workers, as representing the last word of expert treatment of an extremely difficult but nevertheless vitally important branch of mycology.

The book is divided into three parts. The first some 100 pages, deals with such matters as his-