Medical Americana

The Toadstool Millionaires. A social history of patent medicines in America before federal regulation. James Harvey Young. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1961. xii + 282 pp. Illus. $6.

"Somebody buys all the quack medicines," wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes, "that build palaces for the mushroom, say rather, the toadstool millionaires." This tragicomic quip supplies a title with appropriate overtones for the definitive, interesting book by James Harvey Young, chairman of the history department at Emory University. Like Holmes' epigram, Young's book conveys significant information without being dull. It should satisfy the reader lured by its main title, just as it should fulfill the promise of its subtitle for the more serious seeker.

The book ought to be in public and college libraries, for I think anyone who wants to read a single book on the social history of patent medicines would do well to read this one. Even those already rather knowledgeable on the subject will find it valuable.

The author divides his account of American patent medicines before 1906 into five parts:

About a third of the book, devoted to the early period, covers English patent medicines in Colonial America, the American beginnings—under the stimulus of such colorful characters as Thomas Dyott and Samuel Thomson—the relationship of the press to nostrum peddlers, and the early voices of criticism.

The heyday of the nostrum kings, before federal regulation (occupying about a fourth of the book), is viewed in relation to the Civil War and its aftermath, outdoor advertising, almanacs published under patent-medicine auspices, and the quackish use of the germ theory. Here we meet such "toadstool millionaires" as William Swaim, Benjamin Brandreth, Henry T. Helmbold, and David Hostetter.

A third part of the book (about 14 percent of the total) discusses promotional methods and psychology, including the techniques of medicine shows. Then we follow the rising tide of criticism against excesses (about 15 percent), which culminated in the Federal Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906. A factual epilogue (about 5 percent of the total) permits the reader to form an impression of the rather massive reform that occurred during the ensuing half century.

Throughout the book the author draws upon a wide range of primary, and secondary, sources. Neither he nor the publisher tries to hide the precise and judicious documentation. In addition to the footnotes, an admirable bibliographic essay (7 pages) and an adequate index enhance the reference value of this readable book.

Young's book takes a clear lead over Stewart Holbrook's *The Golden Age of Quackery* (Macmillan, New York, 1959) through the documentation and wider range of sources, a more mature historical style, and a better index. Both books are similar in length, scope, and time span, but they are organized differently.

A sumptuous pictorial supplement to *The Toadstool Millionaires,* rather than a competitor, may be found in Gerald Carson's new book, *One for a Man, Two for a Horse* (Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1961), which has as its subtitle "A pictorial history, grave and comic, of patent medicines." In Carson's volume we see the old style nostrum hucksters' rolling and redolent phrases in their original typography and pictorial setting.

Yet it is *The Toadstool Millionaires* that gives us the picture most memorable, and worth remembering. It is a historical picture that moves and flashes color, leaving a sense of the futility of free enterprise misdirected and of medication misused in hands that achieve "success" more by exploiting than by mitigating our vanities and afflictions.

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Sourcebook

Biochemists' Handbook. Compiled by 171 contributors. Cyril Long, Ed. Van Nostrand, Princeton, N.J., 1961. xxii + 1192 pp. Illus. $25.

Truly a superb synthesis of contributions by authorities in their respective fields, this book is more than a handbook; it is a portable, concisely written encyclopedia of factual biochemical information. It has many useful tables of data, but more important, it also has unembellished, critical discussions of facts and principles. More specifically, the book has six main sections and an excellent index.

"Chemical Data." Here, in addition to tabulations of physicochemical data and the composition of buffers and salt solutions, there are discussions of physicochemical topics and procedures.

"Data on Individual Enzymes." Following a brief discussion of enzyme kinetics, nearly 300 enzymes are individually considered, and references to pertinent original papers are given.

"Metabolic Pathways." The pathways, as elaborated through 1959, for carbohydrate, lipid, and protein utilization and biosynthesis are verbally and diagrammatically presented. With these summations available for reference, extensions and changes as they appear in current journals will be more understandable and appreciated.

"Chemical Composition of Animal Tissues and Related Data." Anyone who has sought through the literature for quantitative data on the composition of various tissues will be sincerely grateful for the comprehensive tabulations in this section.

"Chemical Composition of Plant Tissues and Related Data." The thoroughness with which this volume covers the field is evidenced by the fact that plants are included.

"Physiological and Nutritional Data." The composition of foods, the effect of disease on the chemical composition of human blood, and the determination of the intra- and extracellular chemical components in tissues without disorganization are a few of the subjects considered in this section.

The index is excellent and usable, and by using it, one can quickly find the desired information on a point of interest. A further important feature of the book is the comprehensive bibliography. The references pertaining to a particular subject or table follow the discussion or table.

Instead of expounding on the merits and probable usefulness of the book I suggest that those whose interest is in biochemistry, physiology, and allied disciplines sample the contents for themselves. It will be a pleasant experience. I recommend the handbook without hesitation.

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