

THURSDAY, MAY 29, 1913.

OLD HERBALS.

Herbals: their Origin and Evolution. A Chapter in the History of Botany, 1470-1670. By Dr. Agnes Arber. Pp. xviii+253+xxi plates. (Cambridge University Press, 1912.) Price 10s. 6d. net.

IN this age of literary activity it is difficult to find a sphere of knowledge that has not been hitherto exploited by the makers of books. It is therefore a refreshing experience to find that the work before us is the first attempt to present to the public a popular survey of this fascinating old literature of herbals. The active life-period of this literature extends over a course of two hundred years, beginning in the latter part of the fifteenth and ending during the second half of the seventeenth century.

These curious old books treat of the medicinal virtues of plants and herbs, and were written chiefly by physicians for their own convenience and the use of the public at a time when botany was still a branch of medicine. But, in addition to the medical, they possess an artistic interest, being illustrated from the earliest times with woodcut figures of plants. This is exemplified in the profuse collection of choice and beautiful illustrations in Mrs. Arber's work.

The mediæval encyclopædia of Bartholomæus Anglicus has a section dealing with herbs and trees and their medicinal properties, and although this is perhaps the first printed book containing information of a strictly botanical nature, the earliest work to which the term "herbal" is generally applied is the Latin *Herbarium* of Apuleius Platonicus, first printed at Rome about 1484 by the physician to Pope Sixtus IV. This little book, based on classical writings, and illustrated with figures coming down from late Roman art, was, in its manuscript form, the chief text-book of medicine of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers.

But we must turn to Germany for the *doyens* amongst printed herbals. These are the Latin "*Herbarius*" (1484), the German "*Herbarius*" (1485), and the "*Hortus Sanitatis*" (1491), all three representing a tradition of great antiquity and printed at Mainz. It is also to the German "fathers of botany," Brunfels and Fuchs, that we owe the handsome herbals which, for the beauty and faithfulness of their illustrations, remain not only unsurpassed by any other herbal, but perhaps unequalled. In the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, and France the herbal attained great popularity, and for an account of its origin and growth in these countries Mrs. Arber's work must be read.

The first work printed in our own country, dealing exclusively with the medicinal virtues of herbs, was a small quarto volume without illustrations published anonymously by Richard Banckes in 1525. During the next four decades this book was in great demand, no fewer than about fourteen editions appearing, some with the names of Macer, Linacre, and Askham on the title-pages, and others attributed erroneously to the physician Walter Cary and to the printer William Copland. But a year after the appearance of Banckes's book there appeared the fine folio, with woodcut illustrations, called the "*Grete Herball*." This was a translation of the French work "*Le Grant Herbier*." Nevertheless, it may be looked upon as the *doyen* of the English herbals, and no lover of books would wish to dispute this claim after reading the delightful old phraseology in the quaint black letter fount of our early printers. The herbals of the great English botanists, William Turner, John Gerard, Henry Lyte, and John Parkinson, are all described in the work before us.

We wish we had space enough to deal adequately with other interesting parts of Mrs. Arber's work. The chapter on the evolution of botanical illustration, and the well-chosen illustrations numbering upwards of one hundred and twenty, show clearly the important position this old herbal literature occupies in the history of wood-engraving. But our concluding remarks must be confined to the chapter on signatures and astrological botany. Absurd and preposterous as these doctrines are, they nevertheless make delightful reading. According to the former, many medicinal plants were stamped, as it were, with some indication of their uses. In this extraordinary superstition of the mystics, described by Dr. Paris as the most absurd hypothesis that ever disgraced the annals of medicine, the best botanists of the period had little belief; and in astrological botany they perhaps had less. Nevertheless, as Mrs. Arber rightly explains,

"a number of books dealing with such topics appeared during the period we have considered, but their writers form a class apart, and must not be confused with the herbalists proper, whose attitude was, on the whole, marked by a healthy scepticism, which was in advance of their time. It would, naturally, be far from true to say that they were all quite free from superstition, but, considering the intellectual atmosphere of the period, their enlightenment was quite remarkable."

The few inconsistencies we have noticed are chiefly bibliographical in their nature, and do not detract from the merits of the book. We confidently recommend it to all lovers of antiquarian lore.