

## Ornithologist-watching

### A Passion for Birds: American Ornithology after Audubon

by Mark V. Barrow Jr

Princeton University Press: 1998. 326 pp.

\$39.50, £24.95

John W. Fitzpatrick

Because they are ubiquitous, variable in shape and behaviour, and easy to study, birds engage our curiosity and provide an extraordinary window onto how nature works. They have been subjects of both human passion and rigorous scientific investigation for centuries, yielding founding principles in ecology, evolutionary biology, population biology, animal behaviour and conservation sciences.

In the United States these fields emerged almost simultaneously around 1900, as the age of exploration and description gave way to more process-oriented inquiry. In Mark Barrow's *A Passion for Birds* we experience this transition in science through the lives and letters of individuals long revered as the fathers of American ornithology (a few mothers also appear, very late). The result is at once copiously footnoted history and lively drama, complete with colourful characters, harrowing escapes, class struggles and personal triumphs.

Barrow exposes a rich portrait of human strength, frailty and ego in the transformation of a popular nineteenth-century hobby into first a scientific discipline and ultimately an influential mainstream profession. Moreover, because of the unique passions that birds elicit in humans, ornithology has long been a field in which the lay citizen plays a large role. Thus, Barrow also exposes a spectacular example of science and popular culture being inextricably — if sometimes unwillingly — bound together. Tensions produced by this nexus provide pertinent reading a century later in light of the burgeoning role of 'citizen-scientists' in ornithology today.

The story opens with vivid accounts of the post-Audubon fascination with bird collecting among pioneer naturalists. The plot is thickest between 1883, when the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) was founded, and 1930, when an ageing aristocracy of museum-bound ornithologists lost clout as university scientists focused increasingly on the living bird. Barrow concludes with homage to a young immigrant from Germany who struggled during the 1930s to reform the AOU against a senescent and narrow-minded élite. Ernst Mayr, always a champion of the amateur naturalist in ornithology, would become America's most influential professional in the field.

Barrow interweaves several subplots into



Atlantic puffins, from Audubon's *Birds of America*: the starting point for American ornithology.

the emergence of an interdisciplinary science from a field dominated by taxonomists. One explores the profound yet schizoid role played by American ornithologists in the movement to protect nature. It seems curious today that a venerable and staunchly scientific body (the AOU) and an equally venerable body of conservation activists (the Audubon Society) were conceived by the same individuals at exactly the same time. No sooner did the two organizations emerge than they parted company. It took a group of Boston society women outraged by the slaughter of birds for hat plumes to breathe activism into Audubon. In contrast, after early triumphs, the AOU's role in bird conservation became detached and muted, and struggles to define itself even today.

Engagement of the AOU in bird protection waned partly because of public concern over bird collecting, an activity that many scientists viewed as the lifeblood of ornithology. Ironically, this discipline, launched mainly by interested amateurs, then distanced itself from those very amateurs who had begun to *watch* birds, even as the pastime gave rise to new scientific opportunities. Tensions and emotions run high to this day over the issue of scientific collecting. Borne out of the human passions that birds elicit, debate still rages within both professional and amateur ornithology. Modern zealots on both sides should read Barrow's accounts of this century-old argument with care. Unfortunately, his unflattering treatment of scientists who steadfastly defended the importance of collecting voucher specimens reveals an underlying bias that colours many passages in this book.

A related subplot spotlights the rise to power, decades of control and ultimate obsolescence of a small band of men who established and narrowly defined American ornithology for a generation. Museums

provided the first bastion of the profession, but they fostered such a fortress mentality among the practitioners that the very structure of the AOU was built to exclude new blood from a small inner sanctum. Still reflecting a profound desire among professionals to distinguish themselves from growing throngs of amateurs, remnants of this class system are only today breaking down within the AOU.

As an American scientist with — yes — a passion for birds, I was gripped from cover to cover by this book and gained enormous insight into my roots. Scientists and historians of science on both sides of the Atlantic will appreciate this illuminating case history of the human side of a profession's origins. □

John W. Fitzpatrick is in the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14850, USA.

## Mediaeval cures and casualties

### Medicine in the English Middle Ages

by Faye Getz

Princeton University Press: 1998. 192 pp.

\$32.50, £21.95

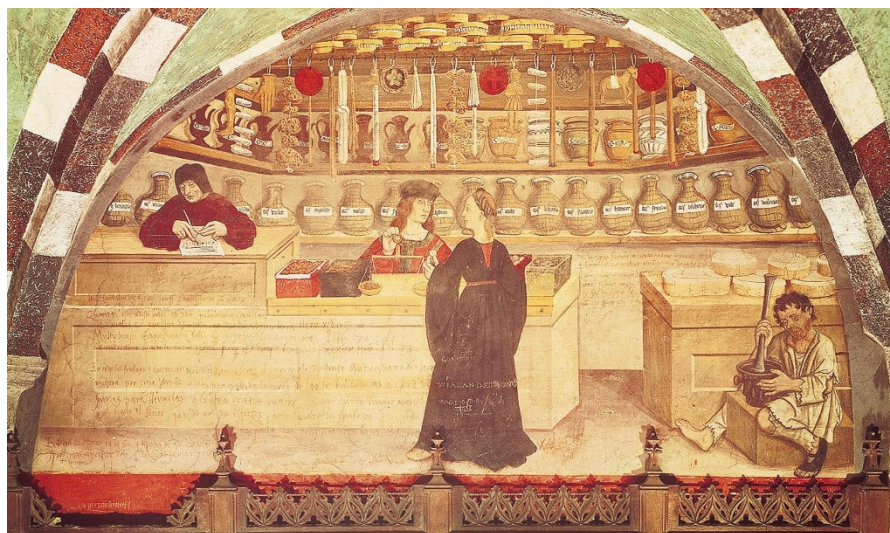
Vivian Nutton

Medicine in England in the Middle Ages offers a melancholy prospect to the historian. There are few great names — John of Gaddesden, Gilbert the Englishman and the surgeon John of Arderne were almost alone in having a reputation on the Continent as well as at home — and the lack of any effective authority, whether from the king, Parliament or the universities, rendered futile all attempts to establish a kingdom-wide organization for either physic or surgery.

Faye Getz takes a more optimistic line in this clearly written and well-organized new survey. She stresses the variety of medical assistance available, from housewives and travelling salesmen up to the tiny number of university-trained doctors serving the very rich as counsellors and cultural assistants, as well as physicians. She raises the question of the effectiveness of the learned élite compared with those who lacked Latin, insisting, perhaps too strongly, that all major treatises in English are only translations from the Latin. We are reminded, too, of how the growing tendency to define proper medicine as university medicine led to the exclusion of those with healing skills but without the qualifications to enter Oxford or Cambridge, especially women and Jews (although the numbers of Jewish healers can hardly be determined).

The English were also stay-at-homes (Wales, Scotland and Ireland are not considered here). Few ventured across the Channel, and fewer still beyond Paris — although more might have been said in the book about the medical learning of such universal scholars and continental travellers as Walter Burley. Foreigners who came to England usually followed a wealthy patron, or confined their attentions to their countrymen resident in London. Some practised astrology, some were clearly in search of quick money, and several are known from their appearances in (not at) court.

Law and medicine are here intertwined. Complaints about incompetence are listed alongside a catalogue of deaths and injuries, some tragic, others simply bizarre, like the case of the collapsing privy. Child abuse is no modern phenomenon, and the elderly and infirm are still seen as a drain



Too far from home: the cures in this Italian pharmacy may well have been unknown in England.

on community resources.

Getz succinctly lists the ways in which those in need of care and assistance might find it in a monastery (although these increasingly excluded the sick) or a hospital (where medical help was rare), or within the extended family. She emphasizes the religious orientation of mediaeval hospitals, which were hospices aiming to secure the long-term salvation of the soul far more than the immediate cure of the body, as well as their sheer variety. Some had a handful of inmates; a very few had more than 100; some excluded almost every kind of patient; others ended up as schools or university colleges.

Less is said about disease and its treatments, and the outbreak of the Black Death is, rightly, played down as the defining point of English mediaeval medicine. Whatever the plague's social consequences, doctors

continued to be consulted both during and after it, and neither in 1348 nor in any of the subsequent outbreaks do surgeons supplant physicians in popular affection, as some have argued.

Getz's book is short (a mere 92 pages of text), abundantly footnoted, at times to excess. It is packed with facts, and its conclusions are well argued. But its brevity is also its weakness. It lacks space to breathe; individual instances pile one on top of the other, where what is needed is a broader exposition. Challenging ideas are raised, but rarely developed, and the wider context is often missing. It is unusual to complain that a book is too short, but this is one instance, proof of the solid quality of the scholarship it contains. □

Vivian Nutton is at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE, UK.

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