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MEDICINE IN SHAKESPEARE'S WRITINGS

Shakespeare and Medicine

By R. R. Simpson. Pp. vii+267. (Edinburgh and London: E. and S. Livingstone, Ltd., 1959.) 25s. net.

ACCORDING to Chambers's bibliography on authorities on books on Shakespeare, comprising some 450 volumes, only one deals with the medical aspect of Shakespeare's writings, that by Dr. John Bucknill, which appeared just a century ago. The present book by Mr. Simpson is therefore opportune. It is based on lectures to various medical societies and its object is "to record the medical references in the plays and poems, to assess Shakespeare's knowledge of the medicine of his day, to consider the uses to which he put it and to discuss some of the possible sources of his medical knowledge". Although the study was undertaken primarily from the medical point of view, it should be of interest to the literary reader even though it makes no purely literary contributions. Any fresh study of Shakespeare is of interest and value.

The author has collected more than seven hundred medical references, major and minor, and classifies them under twenty pertinent headings. The discussion of these entails some overlap and consequent repetition which detracts from the interest if the book is read as a whole. This drawback would not appear if various sections were used for reference or for lectures.

Mr. Simpson emphasizes that Shakespeare often uses a medical image to illustrate a point, or a medical situation at a moment of dramatic intensity. Among notable passages he recalls is the brilliant description of death in the typhoid state as it befalls Falstaff in "Henry V". Also the quite remarkable description of tertiary syphilis in "Timon of Athens", IV, 3.

It is not possible to say whether Shakespeare was acquainted with the literature of contemporary Elizabethan medicine, but that he was certainly aware of current medical thought is evident from numerous quoted passages. This inevitably leads to the question of how much Shakespeare learned from and was influenced by Dr. John Hall, the physician who married his daughter and who lived and practised in Stratford. In an interesting chapter on this subject, Mr. Simpson proves quite definitely from a chart giving the plays in their chronological order and the numbers of medical references in each that any influence must have been slight. Hall did not enter Shakespeare's life until 1600, and up to that year the plays contain 215 major medical references; after 1600 there are 225.

Shakespeare's references to almost all aspects of human activity and life are so rich and so strikingly apt that one could make a fair comparison with almost any important profession or calling just as with medicine, and this would not necessarily imply he had

special connexions. His genius enabled him to embrace so much with clarity, ease and conviction.

Any doctor with literary interests will profit by reading this book. Any non-medical student of Shakespeare should be familiar with its presentation of an important aspect of the plays and poems. It is a good reference book for the doctor and a useful bedside book also.

RUSSELL BROCK

THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS OF ENGLAND

The Royal College of Surgeons of England

A History. By Sir Zachary Cope. Pp. xii+360+78 figures. (London: Anthony Blond, Ltd., 1959.) 63s.

SINCE his retirement from active surgery, Sir Zachary Cope has become a well-known and trusted public servant. He has also produced a series of learned writings on the history of his own profession, not the least of which is the surgical record of the Second World War. In all these works he has shown good sense, good temper and good judgment. Here he displays these qualities towards a famous corporation of which he has long been a prominent member. Its story is by no means one of continual progress nor always even wholly edifying, yet he makes no attempt to cover the bad patches. But the record has had a happy development in the last generation under the guidance of men of temperament comparable to that of the author himself.

It must be remembered that until about a hundred years ago, in England—and in England alone of the Western countries not excluding Scotland and Ireland—serious instruction in the practice of medicine was not held to be any part of the duty of our ancient universities. These had, of course, nominal professors of medicine, of anatomy, and of other para-medical subjects, but their teaching—so far as it existed—was of book-learning and not on practical lines. By this time certain of the 'new universities' were giving medical degrees. But before the rise of the new universities, almost the usual way to become an effective practitioner was through apprenticeship to a surgeon with the view of becoming a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of London. This body was instituted as such in 1800. To it were consigned, by Act of Parliament, the magnificent collections of John Hunter.

The College thus constituted had a very defective constitution. Its Council was self-elected and elected for life. It thus came to consist largely of aged and often eccentric men, though it also contained some of the highest eminence. This Council acted as examiners, and the examination was entirely oral. There was not even a syllabus for several decades. The result of all this was that the process became a rather sour joke. Mr. Bob Sawyer and Mr. Benjamin Allen must have been fairly average students of those bad old days. The process of transforming the