General Books

A MAN OF MYSTERY

Elias Ashmole (1617-1692)

His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, his Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources relating to his Life and Work. By C. H. Josten. Vol. 1: Biographical Introduction. Pp. xx + 1–308 + plates 1–24. Vol. 2: Texts, 1617–1660. Pp. 309–808 + plate 25. Vol. 3: Texts, 1661–1672. Pp. 809–1290. Vol. 4: Texts, 1673–1701. Pp. 1291–1898. Vol. 5: Index. By M. A. Hennings. Pp. 1899–2065. (Oxford: Clarendon Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1966.) 378*s*. net per set.

ELIAS ASHMOLE was a man who loved mystery, and made of his own life a far from plain and simple story. Its most important transaction, his acquisition of the celebrated Tradescant collection which Ashmole later presented to the University of Oxford augmented by his own rarities, coins and manuscripts, is full of darkness as well as comedy. According to Ashmole's later recollection it was in December 1659 that "Mr.: Tredescant [the younger] & his wife told me that they had been long considering upon whome to bestow their Closet of Rarities when they dyed, & at last had resolved to give it unto me". But no sooner was the deed of gift signed than Mrs. Tradescant decried it as a fraud, and when Ashmole surrendered it, defaced the deed; John Tradescant later made a will leaving the collection to one or other of the universities. After his death, however, in 1664, the Lord Chancellor pronounced the deed valid and despite much further persecution from the widow (in whose possession the collection was to remain) Ashmole obtained possession of it on her death. Perhaps there is a kind of injustice in the perpetuation of Ashmole's name through this slightly second-hand act of munificence to Oxford, whereby in May 1683 the first museum in England was opened to the public. (The building, paid for by the university by a cessation for some years of book-purchases for Bodley's Library, possibly owed something to the genius of Wren; it is now the Museum of the History of Science.) Perhaps Ashmole would more justly deserve his niche in history on the grounds that he was himself an antiquary, the author of a history of the Order of the Garter, learned in heraldry, the publisher of the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652) and a capable administrator (as it seems) of the finances of the Crown.

Dr. Josten has compiled the life-records of this extraordinary individual from his own fragmentary autobiography and letters, from university and legal documents and many other manuscripts, some of which Ashmole wrote in shorthand (like Pepys' *Diary*). These records (nearly 1,600 pages) occupy Volumes 2, 3, and 4 of the work; in Volume 1 is a narrative biography based on them by Dr. Josten—himself a former curator of the History of Science Museum at Oxford—while Volume 5 contains the index, most elaborately prepared by Miss Hennings. The first volume can be read, though, being strictly confined to the business of Ashmole's personal life, it does not cast much light on the age in which Ashmole lived except in so far as depicts squabbles among the heralds and other minor aspects of court life, and emphasizes the lingering appeal of the pseudo-sciences to which Ashmole and his closest friends devoted so much study. The life-records are to be consulted rather than read—Ashmole was no Pepys, no Evelyn—and Dr. Josten has furnished a most careful guide to them; compiled with loving industry over many years and adorned with scholarly commentaries, one can confidently believe that they say the last word so far as Elias Ashmole is concerned.

Although he was chosen an original Fellow of the Royal Society, Ashmole played no part in its development; he stood not for the new science but for the old learning. Apart from Robert Hooke, his friends in the scientific movement were drawn from those who had a lingering attachment to astrology and alchemy. The latter engaged him chiefly in earlier years (from a theoretical or literary rather than a manipulative point of view, it must be said), especially when Ashmole was under the spell of William Backhouse, his alchemical "father", from whom he received "the true Matter of the Philosophers Stone: which he bequeathed to me as a Legacy". Judicial astrology was the constant practice of Ashmole's everyday life, just as William Lilly remained his intimate friend until Lilly's death in 1681. Nothing was to be done or known without consulting the stars. It may seem strange enough that throughout his life Ashmole should have spent so much effort in preparing magical symbols to drive moles from his garden, rats from his house, or fits of vomiting from his wife; it is surely stranger that Sir Thomas Clifford, then Lord Treasurer, should have sought to learn astrologically through Ashmole the future reaction of Parliament to the Declaration of Indulgence of 1672. After this it is hardly surprising to find that Ashmole attached the greatest importance to his acquisition of magical manuscripts belonging to the mathematician John Dee, from which he hoped to discover "the Composition of the Names of the Angells". And like a true antiquary, he sought at Mortlake for recollections of Dee among the oldest inhabitants there.

Only devotees of the esoteric could hope to comprehend Ashmole and unravel the meaning of his labours. Science, the mechanical philosophy and the scepticism of Thomas Hobbes had not yet, in the first generation of the Royal Society, wholly dispelled the lure of mystery and superstition; yet even so it is hard to account for Ashmole's undoubted success and even authority. Obviously he enjoyed a great ability to please; he was a natural courtier, which brought him prestige and power. His second marriage brought him wealth, and his third, connexions. His efficiency may be presumed and his persistence towards a goal is certain: Oxford took in his "Knick-Knackatory" without a murmur. One must admire Ashmole's capacity to make a fine way in the world, and his genuine love for what was ancient or rare (even if it embraced a model of Windsor Castle in straw). But it must also be said that he seems exceptionally silly at times.

A. RUPERT HALL

REGENCY CHEMISTRY

Humphry Davy

By Sir Harold Hartley. (British Men of Science.) Pp. viii + 160 + 9 plates. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1966.) 35*s*. net.

HUMPHRY DAVY taught himself chemistry out of Lavoisier's *Traité*; discovered the astonishing physiological effects of nitrous oxide; made a brilliant success as a fashionable lecturer, and made many fundamental dis-