

Book reviews

Abortion in a changing world. Edited by ROBERT E. HALL, M.D. New York and London. Columbia University Press. 1970. Pp. xx+377. Price £4 10s. (£4.50p).

This book contains the proceedings of the first part of an international conference convened by the Association for the Study of Abortion at Hot Springs, Virginia, in November 1968. The areas covered are those concerning the ethical, medical, legal, social and global aspects of the subject, and a second volume will provide a report of ten panel sessions which dealt with abortion and animation, poverty, public health, psychiatry, obstetrics, mortality, constitutionality, progeny and woman-kind.

The editor admits that it has been necessary to compress all the formal papers rather severely and it would seem likely that this policy has also been applied to the reports on the discussions relating to the papers in each section. It is claimed that no attempt was made to write to equal numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics, men and women, whites and blacks, or foreigners and Americans, and the main consideration in selection was expertise in the field of abortion.

It comes, therefore, as no surprise to find that the great majority of speakers showed a strong leaning in favour of legalized abortion and the view of the traditional Catholic is something of a lone voice.

What does come as more of a surprise, if the evidence and statistics are to be believed, is the extent to which abortion under most adverse conditions, has been accepted by women (and men) throughout the world as a means of birth control and preferable to continuing with pregnancy. This in itself suggests, and our more limited experience in this country tends to support the view, that abortion is not liable to be followed by psychiatric illness. A psychiatrist, Dr Kummer, in Part II of the book concludes—"that abortion, far from being a precipitator of psychiatric illness, quite to the contrary is actually a defence against such an occurrence in women who are susceptible to mental illness".

Much time and space is taken up considering questions such as—"when do the products of human conception become human?" and "at what stage in the pregnancy does ensoulment occur?" Several speakers obviously saw in these points a possible chink in the Catholic armour of resistance to what others regard as progress.

Parts IV and V dealing with the social and global aspects of abortion respectively are of special interest and provide ample evidence of the

fact that birth control has failed to prevent the problem of the unwanted pregnancy.

Too little has been known of the extent to which illegal abortion is widespread and practised unofficially, not only in countries which are traditionally regarded as undeveloped, but also in those which are comparatively civilized. One would not expect statistics on a subject such as this to be either plentiful or reliable and most of the contributors felt obliged to make this point. Nevertheless, one could hardly fail to be impressed with the theme of speaker after speaker as to the distress caused universally by excess fertility and only now coming to be accepted as worthy of attention. There is evidence of a decline in criminal abortion in countries which have adopted a more liberal code of practice with a consequent fall in death and morbidity association with abortion, though the number of legal terminations which have to be performed to achieve these improvements is rather frightening.

The book gives an authoritative, forward looking report on the position of abortion in the world today and will be studied and referred to by many, not only in the medical profession, who have more than a passing interest in a subject which will, one suspects, be a great deal in the public eye in the years ahead.

Gorbals doctor. GEORGE GLADSTONE ROBERTSON, M.D. Jarrolds. London. 1970. Pp. 189. Price 35s. (£1.75)

The Gorbals district of Glasgow has for long held an unsavoury place in the history of the slums. Its saga was sung some 30 years ago in a novel entitled *No mean city*, a lurid yet touching tale based on truth and vouched for as such by at least one of the denizens of that area. Dr Robertson has worked all his professional life in this district, and has found time to study his patients 'in depth'—to use a fashionable cliché. Without leaving his practice he was able to acquire the MD of Glasgow University and to carry out original studies on vomiting in pregnancy and other conditions probably connected with stress.

In this book of reminiscences, in the authorship of which he has been helped by Roderick Grant, he recounts his experiences and theories. His parents were missionaries in China and he was born in Shanghai. To pass through his medical training he was obliged to assist his uncle as dispenser and clinical clerk; yet he obtained sufficient proficiency in swimming to be chosen to represent his country at the Olympic Games in Antwerp.

It is a pleasure to read a book by a general

practitioner which shows the writer as an understanding and sympathetic friend of the people with whom he worked. The seamy side of life is not unduly stressed and the Gorbals shows up as no worse than any other place where slum conditions prevail. We read little of the razor-slashing and gang warfare which at times undoubtedly occurred. These things hit the headlines and people reading the newspapers do not understand the depth of humanity and neighbourliness which exists where large numbers of people live close together with few of the luxuries of life. Dr Robertson deplors the effect of the new large units of flats which are replacing the Gorbals and remarks on the loss of neighbourliness which has occurred. This is a warning for planners in the future. Let us hope that the new architecture has not already gone too far. Where it has, more care should be taken, as Dr Robertson says, to provide proper halls of recreation, playgrounds, sports centres and so forth.

The child, his "illness", and the others. MAUD MANNONI. London. Tavistock Publications Limited. 1970. Pp. 286 x. Price 63s. 0d.

The psychoanalysts I know are amiable and kindly people. I play golf with them, drink with them, and engage them in conversation at a normal intelligent level. What terrible devil is it that possesses them when they get a pen in their hands? The author of this book is obviously an intelligent and friendly woman, and probably one whom it would be a pleasure to sit next to at dinner. For all I know, she is also an affectionate mother, a loving wife, and a good cook, and probably has no difficulty in making herself understood in the market-place. How, then, can she bring herself to write sentences like the following?

"He gave weight to the forgotten word, to what remained unsaid, he advanced relentlessly upon the themes that were important both for mother and for child; but, he leaves the clinic when he works out his theories, which never appear to be the natural extension of the text we have been reading". This, of a boy of three.

"Since each demand of the mother has a double in her desire to the contrary, the only choice left to the child is submission to the mother's wish that he not be born to desire".

"It was by making apparent in words what remained unrecognized in the mother's desire (namely, to know the desire of the other) that the dimension of a subject who speaks in the collective adventure was introduced in the child; *i.e.*, of someone governed by the law of language where the word breaks an effect of non-meaning. The subject, through the mediation of the word of the Other, may succeed in introducing the imaginary dimension, of which he has been deprived".

Is it that one has to be possessed by the same

daemon to know the steps of this esoteric *Danse Macabre*? If so, I am prepared to be for ever a wallflower. I hope that it is not sinful pride that makes me certain that no ordinary doctor, be he never so literate, will learn any more from this book than I can. I did manage to gather that the child's neurosis must be viewed in the light of the interplay between his own internal dialogue, and that between him and his family and surroundings; and that the Word, spoken or unspoken, is the basic factor in his illness. The author lost me soon after that.

The book is adequately translated into American from the French, but the title will give many people an uneasy sense of *déjà-vu*.

New editions

Current medical treatment. Third edition. Edited by C. N. H. HAVARD, M.A., D.M., F.R.C.P. London. Staples Press. 1970. Pp. xviii+822. Price £4 5s. (£4.25).

This textbook of medical treatment has now reached its third edition in five years. This is surely an effective answer to Dr Havard's statement in his preface to the first edition "... to keep abreast of current advances has become a major challenge." However it is still possible to be caught out as is well illustrated in the section on oral contraception. No mention is made of the recently recommended changes in dosage by the committee on the safety of drugs, and several of the listed preparations are no longer available.

This third edition retains the same style and layout as previously. Each chapter covers a separate subject and is written by a recognized expert, the finished book is collected together under the editorship of Dr Havard who is also a topic contributor. This system falls in line with the modern approach to the authorship of many medical textbooks—reflecting the broadening of medical knowledge, and the increasing specialization that is following in its wake. Two entirely new chapters have been added, 'bleeding diseases and thrombosis' and 'diseases of children'. Three of the original chapters have new authors, Dr J. E. Lennard-Jones on gastro-intestinal diseases, Dr Gerald Stern on nervous diseases, and Dr M. Graves on diseases of the skin. The remaining chapters have all been completely revised and several have been re-written.

The aim of the authors at the outset was to write a textbook of medical treatment intended primarily for the student and practitioner, to be of use also to the house officer and postgraduate. The scope of the book is therefore wide, with such a basis it must be, and so, to keep the book within a reasonable size, in places it is liable to be brief. A criticism of the book is that in places the balance is wrong. Is it really correct to devote 56 pages to diseases of the endocrine glands and then only 13 pages to diseases of children? On the other