BOOK REVIEWS


To one who looks upon the study of epilepsy as the clinical via regia to an understanding of cerebral function, this book is especially welcome. Its author is a practising neurosurgeon, who has done a wide range of experimental work on the electrophysiological and biochemical aspects of convulsions, and is especially well qualified to write on this subject. As its title suggests the book deals with the abnormal physiology that forms the background to epilepsy. It will not supplant the larger works, which deal with this subject more especially in its clinical aspects. But it contains so much relevant and up-to-date information that it will undoubtedly be valuable as a source of reference to Dr. Obrador’s own work, and as an introduction to the work of others.

After brief introductory chapters on the history of epilepsy and the contributions of Hughlings Jackson and his school, Dr. Obrador gives an outline of modern views on the mechanisms of normal nerve cell behaviour; for, as he says, this knowledge is an essential preliminary to a study of abnormal activity. The electrical activity of the cortex as shown by electroencephalograms and electrocorticograms, and its modification by various experimental lesions and in epileptics is next considered. In another chapter the clinical manifestations of epilepsy are correlated with recent additions to our knowledge of cortical physiology, especially the suppressor areas. A useful outline of the biochemical changes associated with epilepsy is also given, and the various factors are discussed which may play a part in the production of convulsions in a given instance. In one of the last chapters the origin and general significance of epileptic attacks is considered, and here it is apparent that although neurophysiology has much to say on the possible mechanisms for convulsions, the ultimate “why” of idiopathic epilepsy is still unanswered.

Knowledge of cerebral function is advancing so rapidly that at present it appears somewhat disjointed. Dr. Obrador’s book, with its lucid synthesis of anatomical, physiological, and biochemical facts, is therefore a valuable source of information, and a contribution worthy of the Madrid school of neurology. It is to be hoped that an English translation will soon be available, so that clinicians over here can have ready access to it. In that case the opportunity might be taken to add an index—a sad lack at present in a book so useful.


The third edition of this book within 10 years of its first publication suggests that it successfully fills a gap in the literature of this subject. As the work is a symposium it is able to bring together the views of a wide selection of people with special experience in the different aspects of trauma to the central nervous system. That this has been done effectively in the space of some 800 pages is no small achievement for the editor and his 28 contributors. During the recent war there was a considerable increase in experience and knowledge in this field. With few exceptions the authors have made use of this. It is something of a tribute to the various British neurosurgical units which functioned both at home and abroad at that time that frequent reference is made to the British Journal of Surgery: War Supplement on Head Injuries, which gave a preliminary summary of their work. The contributions inevitably vary in value. Some subjects, such as injuries to cranial nerves, lend themselves to short, clear treatment. Others, such as gunshot wounds of the brain and their complications, can hardly be adequately encompassed in the space available. It may be doubted whether the allotment of 120 pages to neuroses, psychoses, and malingering is not too generous. Nevertheless each of the writers has something of value to say, based on personal experience. The chapter on concussion and contusion of the brain deals admirably with the general aspects of closed head injuries, and the discussion in Chapter 7 on subdural haematomas brings out well their diagnostic difficulties. In the spinal section a long chapter is devoted to the herniated intervertebral disc. This is probably justified by the increasing frequency with which this diagnosis is made. The book is likely to remain an accepted reference work to this subject.


This study represents a great deal of painstaking work: Dr. Wittkower interviewed 785 tuberculous patients, and each interview lasted at least two hours. In the first chapter he describes the patients’ reaction to their symptoms, to their diagnosis, and to the whole illness. In the second chapter the factors which determine how tuberculous patients behave are further analysed, and in chapter three emotional factors are reviewed, chiefly in respect of the general characteristics of personality which are found typically in patients with pulmonary tuberculosis. In a sample of 300 patients seen at sanatoria and dispensaries, all but 22 fell into four classes denoted as insecure, rebellious, self-drivers and “self-frustrators”, and “conflict-harassed”. This sort of typology, familiar from Dr. Wittkower’s previous studies, is not very satisfying, and must be regarded as more a literary than a medical or psychological description of the personality of his subjects: it reflects the
technical defects of the single-interview method of exploration. The effect of these features of personality on the course of the disease, and the relationship between the course and the patient's reaction to his illness are also examined in detail. There are many illustrative excerpts from Dr. Wittkower's data. The book is an interesting addition to the literature on the psychological aspects of tuberculosis.


This psychoanalytical account of the pathology and treatment of mental illness differs little from other such books, except in its numerous records of what was said in interviews between the author and his patients. Although the lengthy section on treatment contains two chapters on physical methods, these serve only to emphasize Dr. Berg's fervent belief in psychological methods, reiterated throughout the book. Only those who repudiate scientific modes of thought when dealing with mental phenomena will find the argument here presented satisfying.


Books on hypnosis are as numerous as books on war neuroses, and as unlikely to contain anything new. This work details the familiar characteristics of "military neuroses," the familiar history of "hypnotherapeutic techniques," and the varieties of neurotic illness which the author (who is not medically qualified) treated at a military hospital with the good results also familiar in such accounts. The therapeutic successes commonly occurred in men who were to be discharged from the army and are not in themselves impressive.


The first edition of this book appeared ten years ago. The author has revised it, but in essentials it remains unchanged. He distinguishes sharply between neurotics and "degenerates," evidently meaning by the latter persons with an inherited psychopathic constitution. He recognizes that obsessional disorders are a crux for his argument; his effort to resolve the difficulty is not very happy. The book is mainly an exposition of neurotic disorder from the standpoint of a psychotherapist averse from psychopathological subtleties.


This is a sensibly written handbook for nurses, in which attention is rightly focused on a nurse's function and duties rather than on medicine and psychiatry. Each chapter is arranged on the same pattern, ending with a summary in headlines and a list of questions. Most of the things a nurse should know are covered, and the advice given on the handling of the patient is practical and sympathetic. Where different forms of illness are described, there is an excessive use of tables and an insufficient attempt to convey the clinical essentials in a word picture. No nurse, for instance, could come to recognize a schizophrenic from the list of common signs and the table of characteristics of different types, which is practically all that is here provided, nor from the single case report in the next chapter. The nursing requirements of special methods of treatment, general care and special aspects of handling the patient, feeding, hygiene, etc., are however dealt with very well. The psychiatric nurse will find the book pleasant to read and useful for reference; it should find a welcome place on hospital shelves.

BOOKS RECEIVED

(Review in a later issue is not precluded by notice here of books recently received)


