The bran man

VERNA WRIGHT

For those who look enviously at the sumptuous accommodation of American research institutes, or bewail the savage cuts in university expenditure by the present government, this book is salutary. With research grants of £10 and £15 Denis Burkitt embarked on a trail of detection that defined the condition now known as Burkitt's lymphoma, uncovered its causes, and pioneered its cure. This he did from a busy job as a surgeon with the colonial service in Uganda. Clinicians in district general hospitals should take heart. Even at a more advanced stage of his investigations the cost of his 10 000 mile research safari was £678. Later he turned his attention to dietary factors as a contributory cause to Western diseases, at the prompting of Richard Doll and Peter Cleave. Using the same epidemiological techniques that had stood him in good stead during the investigation of lymphoma, he verified the link between several diseases of the Western world and lack of fibre in the diet, earning for himself the nickname "the bran man."

Brian Kellock documents these feats of medical detection with great sympathy. He traces the virtues of this perspicacious Irishman from whom we can all learn:

(1) An unabounded enthusiasm and native frugality which made important medical advances on a shoe string budget.

(2) An openness to correction—"No progress is made in medical research—or in happy marriage—unless mistakes are openly admitted."

(3) An ability to cooperate with fundamental scientists—for example, Tony Epstein, who first isolated the virus responsible for Burkitt's lymphoma.

(4) A resilience if work is ignored. His first paper on lymphoma, published in the *British Journal of Surgery*, aroused no interest, and his lecture on the subject in the main hall of the Royal College of Surgeons in London attracted an audience of 12, including the splendidly robed chairman, Sir Cecil Wakeley, and the mace bearer.

This book is more, however, than an account of unflagging medical detection, it is the story of unashamedly Christian dedication. On his long safari he could echo Livingstone's words with complete honesty, "I am a missionary, heart and soul. God had an only Son and he was a missionary and a physician. A poor imitation of Him I am, or wish to be. In His service I hope to live; in it I wish to die." Dr Michael O'Donnell writing in the *British Medical Journal* gave a high earthly accolade, "Burkitt meets my criteria for greatness." For the heavenly secret that earned that tribute this book is well worth reading.

The Fibre Man: the Life Story of Dr Denis Burkitt. B Kellock. (Pp 208; £1.95 paperback.) Lion Publishing. 1985. ISBN 0-85648-583-7.

History, slavery, and ill health

L J BRUCE-CHWATT

Although the medical and demographic aspects of slavery have attracted some scholars, notably Sir Harold Scott, who devoted a substantial chapter to the subject in his *History of Tropical Medicine* (1939), few comprehensive studies of this aspect of the conquest of the New World have been undertaken. True enough, in 1968 Philip Curtin published a thoughtful and well researched paper on the epidemiology of the slave trade, but Sheridan's remarkable book is a major recent investigation. The author's approach to slave medicine and demography has been influenced by the environmental and ecological trends of historical analysis, such as used by McNeill in his *Plagues and Peoples*.

The introductory chapter surveys the physical, social, and health environments of the West Indies with special emphasis on the spread of infectious diseases through movement of populations, related to the extension of sugar plantations and the growth of what the author calls "the South Atlantic system"—a complex pattern of production and trade. Attention is focused on the two main endemic diseases of the area—malaria and yellow fever. The early study of the Army Medical Board on the diseases of the West Indies was followed by the reports of medical practitioners such as Trapham, Sloane, Grainger, and others, who underlined the need for better housing, food, and sanitation to lower morbidity and mortality of both white colonists and their slaves. The strengths and weaknesses of the white medical profession employed on the sugar plantations are described in detail, as are the indigenous medical customs and beliefs that were carried to the West Indian colonies by slaves from West Africa; and the role of women in the Afro-West Indian population is emphasised. Attention is then switched to the economic and demographic aspects of the West Indian system of slavery,

as a result of which countless millions of Africans died from malnutrition and disease between the time of their capture and their arrival after crossing the Atlantic ocean in appalling conditions.

Much of the study is an analysis of the physical and social environment on the sugar plantations, which represented a combination of European technology and management, African labour, American soil and climate, and Asian or American crops or plants. The book gives a wealth of information on housing, clothing, labour, diet, and punishment of slaves, and the relation between

Sectional view of slaver, used by Wilberforce in his campaign. In Wilberforce House, Hull, birthplace of William Wilberforce.

malnutrition and disease of infants, children, and adult slaves is given in great detail. In spite of the slave owners' desire to increase the size of their black population by pronatal policies, the birth rate did not increase sufficiently to overtake the death rate. The slave hospitals on sugar plantations played an important part in the health care system; some of them were reasonably satisfactory but many more were only temporary refuges from hard labour and punishment. Despite the obstacles, some of the dedicated plantation doctors provided much needed assistance: they vaccinated against smallpox, performed surgical interventions, treated intestinal and respiratory ailments, and saved lives.

In conclusion, obviously the health of the slave population was related largely to their living conditions and the author of this well documented and fascinating study confirms that any benefits that may have resulted from medical assistance were largely negated by the harsh conditions and "vicious circle of disease and racism, whereby the debility of blacks was often misconstrued—by planters and doctors alike—as racial characteristics of laziness and shamming of illness."

Sheridan's book, which is fluent, lucid, and free of the irritating verbiage that is often met with in similar medicosocial academic theses from across the Atlantic, is one of the best studies of medical problems of slavery in the British West Indies. It is based on a wide range of historical, demographic, social, and economic sources and referenced with well over 900 notes and a copious bibliography. His transparent indictment of that period of colonisation is justified. As a historian, however, he seems to ignore the cultural environment of times past and applies present day standards and values to a period when different modes of thought and behaviour prevailed. Some of his quotations and remarks on the cruelty of racism will appear simplistic to readers who are aware that during the British industrial revolution with its "dark, satanic mills" children in Britain suffered in mines and factories from a slavery no less cruel than that on the Caribbean sugar plantations.

Doctors and Slaves. A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834. R B Sheridan. (Pp 442; figs; £25.) Cambridge University Press. 1985. ISBN 0-521-259657.

Magic, myths, madams—and medicine

ALEX PATON

"Doctors who are good raconteurs make wonderful reading," wrote Cyril Connolly about this fascinating book on its first appearance in 1955. For reasons that he prefers not to make too clear but connected with the displeasure of King Emmanuel Victor III of Italy, Alberto Denti (later the Duke of Pirajno) was posted together with the Tall Young Man (a cousin of the king and later Duke of Aosta) and two others to a remote colonial station on the coast of north Africa. He spent 18 years of "inestimable satisfaction" practising medicine and carrying out cloak and dagger intelligence operations among the tribes who inhabited the vast spaces of Tripolitania, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. His love affair with the region and its people ended ignominiously when, as governor of Tripoli, he was forced to hand over the city to Montgomery.

The duke's patients were a motley collection of tribesmen, sailors, merchants, prostitutes, criminals, and others. They were superstitious and believed in spells and evil spirits; he recounts some of the delightful myths associated with these. Strangely they had a great respect for medicines, which they believed had magical powers, and particularly for scalpels and syringes. The doctor soon gained their confidence with his seemingly miraculous cures, especially among the tribal chiefs and their families, where diseases such as typhoid and syphilis were rife. Many are the memorable characters described with affection and a great deal of humour; Bughesa *el keddāb* (the liar); the boy who chased shadows; the importunate Abyssinian *ras* (prince), who admired the doctor's appetite; the filthy louse ridden Tuaregs who were so graceful and aristocratic, and above all the women, who are portrayed in loving detail that shocked some people when the book was first published.

And the stories—they might have come out of the Arabian Nights. Haj Ahmed es-Sed, the wealthy merchant who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, complained that a serpent in his stomach was causing such pain that he could not go on living; it would be unfair to give away the secret of the cure which gives the book its title. The elderly Tuareg woman Damesa suddenly startled the doctor when he was examining her in a desert tent by speaking perfect French, and then told him the story of her extraordinary life in Algeria. Rebecca Buaron, the madam of the Misurata brothel, and her girls provided sumptuous dinners for the duke that he not only enjoyed eating—the more highly spiced the food the better—but describing. But undoubtedly the most exciting tale is the tracking of *el wāhido* (the solitary one), a wounded elephant with a party of armed men looking for rebels for what seems to have been at least three weeks during which they came near to death from floods

Woman from the Ogaden.

and starvation. And the most extraordinary is that of the lion cub, Neghesti, which adopted him after he had set its broken leg and became so attached that his servants were convinced she was the incarnation of his mother.

The audience for travel books is said to be at an all time high; Century Travellers and Eland, publishers of the present volume, produce some of the best of the genre in elegant, inexpensive paperbacks. The Duke of Pirajno is a story teller in the classic mould, and Dervla Murphy, another of my favourite travel writers, provides an additional bonus with her sympathetic preface.

A Cure for Serpents. An Italian doctor in North Africa. The Duke of Pirajno. (Pp 264; figs; £4.95 paperback.) Eland Books. 1985. ISBN 0-907871-16-X.