BOOK REVIEW

A Short History of the Gout. By W. S. C. COPEMAN. 1964. 236 pp., 22 illus. University of California Press; Cambridge University Press, London. (£2 8s.).

This masterly account of the history of the rheumatic diseases can be read with advantage not only by rheumatologists and historians, by those interested in the development of scientific ideas and those who are fascinated by the foibles and weaknesses of human nature, but also by the man-in-the-street, the doctor-in-the-train, and perhaps most enjoyably of all by the man- and/or woman-in-the-bed. It is an admirable bedside book fulfilling all the criteria for this exacting location as well as for many other habitats. The major portion is taken up by the Gout. This is only proper as it was the first recognized of the rheumatic diseases, the first to be effectively treated, and the first also for which preventive measures have been scientifically developed. It has also for long enjoyed the reputation of the Top disease for Top people. For centuries, rheumatism was gout, and our recognition and knowledge of the other rheumatic diseases dealt with here—acute rheumatism and chorea, rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, osteo-arthritis, tuberculous arthritis, Reiter's syndrome, and "fibrositis"—are of very recent origin. Their effective differentiation is a development of our own lifetime which is still going on, and one of the great values of this study is that it takes history through the past into the present, right up to the present day, and is written with one eye on the future. As Carr (1964) remarks: "Good historians . . . whether they think about it or not, have the future in their bones." Not all medical

historians are fortunate enough to be practising physicians with a finger on the pulse of the present, and also to have the other hand (as President of the Arthritis and Rheumatism Council) in the development of the future. The third hand, as members of the Heberden Society will recognize, is that of the Honorary Librarian of that Society and its main support. A select bibliography of some ninety items is given in addition to works quoted in the text: the latter however are often insufficiently identified for easy reference and some of them have no reference at all. Perhaps this is just as well, since a bibliography adequate to the allusions would have greatly increased the bulk and price of the book, which at 48s. with sixteen plates is very reasonable. And, moreover, a reference you hunt down is worth twice as much as one handed you on a plate.

This is the first full historical account of gout and the rheumatic diseases: the author and his sponsors, the University of California and Dr. O'Malley, deserve the success they will undoubtedly receive. In many branches of science, historical studies have recently become popular, perhaps in the naïve belief that only those who are unaware of the errors of history are condemned to repeat them. This is one field where controlled trials are fortunately not possible, for it might well emerge that to err is human: however well versed we are in the lessons of the past, the one major conclusion that can be drawn is that man does not learn from history. But he will surely be enthralled by this one.

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Carr, E. H. (1964). "What is History?" Pelican Books, London.