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Review: Masterful History of Herbal Medicine

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## MASTERFUL HISTORY OF HERBAL MEDICINE

**Green Pharmacy: A History of Herbal Medicine**, by Barbara Griggs. Viking Press, New York, 1982, 379 p., illus., \$14.95 (81-51885).

Many books on medicinal botany and the popular use of plants as therapeutic agents are produced by amateurs whose deep love of and devotion to folk medicine is matched only by their lack of a critical capacity to write about the subject. Here we have a volume, nearly 400 fact-packed pages expertly organized and critically presented, by a writer whose hallmark is profound and extensive research. Although Griggs has authored books on a wide spectrum of topics—gardening, conservation, cooking, politics—her masterful handling of the diversity and complexity of the material in *Green Pharmacy*, including the historical, botanical, pharmaceutical, chemical, and sociological, clearly puts her in the forefront of writers on the neglected but prolific field of ethnopharmacology. As the noted pharmaceutical research scientist Farnsworth states in his foreword: "Barbara Griggs has written an account that most probably will become a modern classic that can be consulted by all those interested in gaining a deeper

insight into the trials and tribulations, pitfalls and rewards, and the history and future of drug therapy from nature."

One outstanding characteristic of the book lies in its direct, new, and matter-of-fact approach. There is not a single illustration in the volume, but pictorial aids are not missed because of the adequacy and absorbing style of the writing.

Organized into 27 chapters, the book considers herbal medicine and its vicissitudes from Neanderthal man over 60,000 years ago to "the green sweep," the notable upswing in interest on the part of the general public in "alternative therapies" and "disillusionment with modern chemotherapy." Perhaps one of the most cogent chapters is "The Price of Miracles," which analyzes the public's growing awareness of the potential toxicity of some of the synthetic agents that have been hailed as miracle drugs and points out that doctors often have no idea of how these drugs work or what undesirable side effects they might produce.

Many outstanding points in the history of plant medicines are detailed: the contributions of the Chinese from 2800 B.C. to the present; Egyptian records; medieval European practitioners of herbal medicines; various

historical epidemics and antiquated medical practices; the discovery of antibiotics; the positive results of the advent of synthetic drugs contrasted with adverse experiences from incomplete understanding of all of their effects; and many other pertinent aspects.

It has been stated that the World Health Organization predicts that the health needs of mankind cannot adequately be met by 2000 A.D. unless the knowledge of traditional medicines of many of the world's nations are called upon and partially incorporated into medical practices along with what our modern pharmacopoeias have to offer.

One of the most valuable, although certainly not the most obvious, threads running through *Green Pharmacy* emphasizes, without perhaps meaning to do so, the vast and virgin field offered by the plant kingdom as an almost untapped emporium of novel biodynamic chemical compounds, some of which certainly may be of direct or indirect use in medical practice or valuable as prolific tools in the hands of chemists for the production of new biologically active analogues.

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## MEAD AND SAMOA

**Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth**, by Derek Freeman. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1983, 379 p., illus., \$20.00 (82-15620).

Margaret Mead returned from fieldwork on the island of Ta'u in American Samoa, where she studied adolescent girls in 1925-1926, and wrote *Coming of Age in Samoa*. In her book she described adolescence in Samoa as an easy period of life characterized by free sexual expression, few demands, and absence of the tension and stress associated with adolescence in the United States. Derek Freeman, in this book, maintains that "Mead's account of Samoan culture and character is fundamentally in error" (p. xii), and his book "has the specific purpose of scientifically refuting" (p. xiii) Mead's Samoan research.

The first section of his book is a detailed discussion of the historical development of the nature-nurture controversy. As the discussion progresses, it becomes clear that Freeman is building a case, not only against Mead, but also against Franz Boas and American anthropology. According to Freeman, Boas was an absolute cultural determinist who denied the importance of biology (for an opposing view see Harris 1983). Mead, as Boas's student, was so influenced by him that she found evidence in Samoa that supported Boas's views and simply ignored contrary evidence.

The major portion of Freeman's book is devoted to his "refutation" of Mead's work. A few specific statements by Mead about Samoans are the basis for chapters on topics such as competition, warfare, religion, childrearing practices, punishment, sexual mores, etc. Freeman marshals all the negative evidence he can find to portray Samoans as a fiercely competitive, aggressive, vindictive people. They are puritanical to excess, punish children and adults severely, and are prone to suicide and rape. Such a culture is, in Freeman's view, hardly conducive to the kind of adolescence Mead described.

Mead was wrong, the author tells us, for many reasons: she was young, had no experience in doing fieldwork, did not understand the language adequately, lived with an American family rather than a Samoan family, and was "duped" by her informants. And, of course, there was the undue influence of Boas. At that time, field methods were not infrequently learned in the field, and there is still no guaranteed "best" living arrangement for a fieldworker in all situations. Mead is reported to have had excellent rapport with the Samoan girls she studied; her age was no doubt an asset in this case. There is always a chance that informants might respond in a way they think will please an investigator, but if Samoans are so prone to deceiving researchers, is Freeman somehow immune to this problem?

Freeman's "scientific" approach presents a few problems of its own. His research has been almost exclusively in Western Samoa,

and Mead's, in American Samoa. Although there is a fair degree of cultural homogeneity throughout the archipelago, the political and economic histories of the two areas have been quite different. Western Samoa is also a much larger, more populous country. Ta'u was in Mead's time and still is very isolated, and it is in an area historically known for being different. Freeman uses data from Western Samoa to back his claims about Ta'u. He also draws liberally on published sources from 1830 to 1981 as if nothing had changed in Samoa in all that time. Anything that favors his position seems to be selected, e.g., rape statistics for Western Samoa in 1960s imply that rape was a problem in Ta'u in 1925. A comparison of delinquency rates for England in 1925 and Western Samoa in 1967 also apparently tells us something about Ta'u in 1925. The documentation style in the book is at best confusing. Footnote numbers appear only at the end of paragraphs making it difficult to determine which comments and quotes should be attributed to which of several sources in a note.

Freeman stresses the high premium placed on virginity and the serious consequences attached to loss of virginal status. To prove his point that virginity and not the "free love" of Mead's Samoa is the rule, he conducted a survey of teenaged girls to determine the incidence of virginity. One cannot help but wonder about the reliability of such results on such an admittedly sensitive subject.

This is not an objective review, but this is not an objective book. In spite of Freeman's assertion that his concern is "not with Marga-