Book Review

British Botanical Literature Before 1800. Miss Blanche Henrey's immense work,* running to three large volumes, is clearly a labour of love and almost (for Miss Henrey has been writing it since 1945), a life's work. Its size at once gives the impression that, for this field at least, no more need be added. It is indeed a vast mine of information. There is a biographical section on almost every author, famous or obscure; generally a summary as well as a history of each of his works and their editions, even information on printers, bookbinders and papermakers. There are long essays on the history of botany and gardening, others on obscure aspects of publishing (such as the early 19th century vogue for botanical colouring books), and there is even a short chapter on women authors. The volumes are lavishly illustrated by an indulgent publisher, and the illustrations are of high quality and great interest. Nevertheless, even with so much of value, one reader at least was left with the feeling that Miss Henrey has tried to do too much.

The author clearly has a great love of books as things in themselves. For important works, each edition is described, sometimes in minute detail. This often extends to the iconography of the frontispiece, irritatingly even where this forms one of the illustrations. While of interest to the bibliophile, few botanists will have time to spare for such things, or for details of the original, and subsequent changes in, price (now mostly out of date). Only the historian will find much of the biographical information useful, but here Miss Henrey has added considerably to our knowledge, especially of some of the lesser figures. However, the present work has been so long in the writing that in some cases she has been overtaken by other researchers (for instance, on James Justice, and on the Dickson family of nurserymen). For more famous men, she summarises, often extensively, from sources generally well known to anyone familiar with the period. A simple reference to these works would have made her own somewhat lighter. The summaries of each work are, of course, of great value. They show the scope of each book and, in some cases, its quality. They show, too, the place each work occupies in the growth of botany and horticulture, although as Miss Henrey's interpretation of this growth is entirely orthodox, these summarisations may conceal the seeds of alternative hypotheses.

Of course, the very heart of Miss Henrey's work is the bibliography. It is this that will be used by future researchers in the history of botany and horticulture. While it does seem fairly complete (I have only come across three items that she does not include), she says in her preface that the books are included 'together with the names of libraries in Britain and Ireland where copies may be seen'. This is simply not the case. Although the libraries listed include the Royal Botanic Garden and the National Library in Edinburgh, and the University Library in Glasgow (she makes no mention of the Mitchell), the bibliography leads the reader to assume that each contains only a few books of relevance, indeed that research may only be carried out in London. But all these libraries have very major collections, and together have a coverage that is only slightly less than the sum total of their counterparts in England. While private libraries pose all the problems of impermanence, she does include two, but there must be many other important collections, indeed even the holdings of the National Trust must be extensive.

In short, one must admire Miss Henrey's dedication to what one suspects is an almost superhuman task. A very great deal of what she has done is of great value, and, taken as a whole, her work will both help and stimulate further researches into the history of a major Science and a minor Art.

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* Henrey, Blanche. British botanical and horticultural literature before 1800. 3 vols [1, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, history and bibliography—xxvi, 290pp.; 2, eighteenth century, history—xvi, 748pp.; 3, bibliography for eighteenth century—xvii, 142pp.] London. O.U.P. 1975. £70.