BOOK REVIEWS

Rudolf Virchow : Doctor, Statesman, Anthropologist.
By Erwin H. Ackerknecht. (Pp. 304 ; illustrated.
\$5.00.) The University of Wisconsin Press. 1953.

It is surprising that 50 years should elapse since the death of Virchow, the most distinguished pathologist and one of the most famous men of the nineteenth century, before the publication of the first full-length study of his career. Its author is Chairman of the Department of History of Medicine at the University of Wisconsin, and one of the few professional medical historians in the United States. He is particularly well qualified for the task for he was born and brought up in the same part of Germany as Virchow, has a medical degree from Leipzig, where he studied under Sigerist, and is an anthropologist. He gives a fascinating account of Virchow's life as a brilliant pathologist and founder of the study of cellular pathology ; as an eminent physical anthropologist ; and as an outstanding political figure and opponent of Von Bismarck, who once challenged Virchow to a duel which was fortunately never fought.

Dr. Ackerknecht makes it clear that this book is primarily an analysis of Virchow's work and not a description of his life, but there is enough information about the man himself to explain a little of his extraordinary ability. Of modest origin, Virchow had from the beginning complete self-confidence, tremendous industry, and an abnormally low need for sleep. He had the capacity to do outstanding work in many fields simultaneously, and, although single-minded and ascetic, he was also approachable, hospitable, and sympathetic to patients. He was a popular teacher but a ferocious examiner, and had very personal opinions on the rights of his assistants to marry, teach, or leave him !

Virchow's diversity of interests in medicine are well illustrated by his discoveries of leukaemia, amyloid disease, and embolism ; his study of sewerage systems ; and his suggestion that the construction of school benches should be based on anatomical measurements. His views on medicine were well in advance of his time, and at a period when there was an overwhelming interest in bacteriology he believed that disease might be overcome by social change and that social factors were the most significant in the complex origin of epidemics. His early training as a military surgeon probably had much influence in the emphasis he put on public health and preventive medicine. He believed that medicine should enter political life, and because of his own political influence he was able to accomplish more in the field of public health than the public health experts of his day. The account of discussions on medical

reform in Germany in 1848 has many recent parallels, and it is interesting to find that Virchow advocated free medical education, a year of internship, and better instructional methods to replace lecture courses.

There is only passing reference to Virchow's mistaken views on the origin of black pigmentation in the lungs of coal-miners which retarded research into this problem in Germany for nearly 20 years. Virchow gave his authority to the view that the so-called pathological pigmentation was due not to the inhalation of coal dust, but to the extravasation of blood as a result of hyper-ventilation in bad air, or perhaps to soot from miners' lamps. Later he changed his mind and differentiated pigmentation of the lung due to coal from other causes of pigmentation. A full account of this controversy is given by Rosen in his " History of Miners' Diseases " (New York, 1943).

In spite of the almost unlimited scope given by its subject this book is a very readable and concise account of Virchow's many activities in just over 240 pages, and there is a useful biographical glossary. It is a book likely to have a wide appeal especially to those concerned with preventive medicine in its widest sense, and with the place of medicine in relation to society.

R. I. MCCALLUM

The Eczemas : A Symposium by Ten Authors. Edited by L. J. A. Loewenthal. (Pp. 267 ; 77 figures, 10 coloured plates. 35s.) Edinburgh : E. & S. Livingstone. 1954.

The industrial medical officer wants to know what the dermatologist is thinking about dermatitis. How, for example, does he set about distinguishing dermatitis caused by dust, liquids, and vapour from psychosomatic eczema produced by frustration, fear of incapacity, and resentment ? If " dermatitis " is really caused by sensitization to oil, chemicals, dust, etc., then why does it not get better when the relevant contacts are avoided ? What does the dermatologist know about the reaction of the skin under experimental conditions to substances alleged to damage it ? What is the latest news about the physiology of allergy ? The answers to these questions and to many others are to be found in this beautifully produced and thoroughly readable little book.

Haxthausen's chapter on " allergic eczema " (what most of us would call sensitization dermatitis) is a comprehensive and aesthetically satisfying résumé of recent work which includes his own ingenious skin grafting experiments in identical twins. Ray Bettley's chapter on " contact eczema ", the clinical aspect of the same subject, provides valuable practical guidance in the diagnosis of dermatitis. Otherwise the general tendency is reactionary and it may be thought that the