

constituents named, often for the first time, and has an ingenious explanation of the weights of some of the minor constituents mentioned, which is much in excess of the amounts that could actually be used.

The interest of this work for the early history of science will be obvious to those who realize how little there is left, for example, about what the Greeks knew of stones and earths and their uses. Dr. Thompson is able to bring evidence to show that the practical science of the classical period was, in certain matters, derived from the ancient East, and even that in certain cases names known to the Assyrians continued in use and were known to Pliny. In fact the book puts the study of these ancient texts on a new basis. Stones and pastes used as prescriptions in the medicine of quite early times were not always included for magical reasons; the chemical properties were known and also their physical effects. Some earths and stones were used for making paints. The commercial employment of vitriol and gall-nuts

was understood. All who are interested in the development of man's use of matter will find this apparently unreadable book absorbing and indispensable.

Pioneer work of this kind must, of course, be subjected to criticism and correction as the years pass, as Dr. Thompson would himself desire. The identifications are admittedly in many cases only probabilities or possibilities, founded, as is the case of *aqua regis*, on slender evidence. There are many arguments and statements which will appear doubtful. It is surprising to read that Mesopotamian unburnt brick is generally yellow, or to find that the salt excretion on ground and brickwork can be thought to have borne a name meaning "smoke". Instances of this kind could be multiplied. But however much we may differ from individual statements and conclusions, the value of the book remains unimpaired. It is a storehouse of most interesting information on an abstruse subject.

The Call of the Orient

The Quest for Cathay

By Brig.-General Sir Percy Sykes. Pp. xii + 280 + 17 plates. (London: A. and C. Black, Ltd., 1936.) 15s. net.

SOMEONE once said that "The struggle between Europe and Asia is the binding thread of History; the trade between Europe and Asia is the foundation of commerce: the thought of Asia is the basis of all European religions". With this trenchant observation in our minds, we can read "The Quest for Cathay" with even greater attention than if it were a mere story of exploration, in the annals of which it creates a brilliant and vital chapter.

Except for the first pilgrim-explorers such as Hsuan-Tsang—"the greatest of early Asiatic travellers"—the quest centres principally around that period between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fourteenth centuries, an era of the greatest importance in world-history, for it was then that the West first discovered the East. Here is romance indeed, the principal figures being the Friars Carpini and Rubruquis, and the merchant-adventurers—the Polo family. Although Sir Percy Sykes traces the whole story from the earliest penetration of Asia by Alexander the Great down to the arrival of the Portuguese and the Jesuits in the Far East, no less than eight chapters out of eighteen are devoted to the exploits of these travellers, and rightly so, for they do indeed embrace the bulk of the knowledge that Europe gathered about the Orient at that date.

The direct results of the tales these pioneers brought back was that there arose a sudden and impulsive desire in the West for direct contact with the East. Venice and Genoa rose to fame and opulence, but it was not until the fifteenth century that the great quest was set in motion, and many serious attempts were made to reach India and Cathay by way of the North-West Passage, along the Arctic shores of Siberia and by the Caspian route. The great adventures of Dias, Covilhao, Columbus, Cabot, Vasco da Gama, Magellan, Jenkinson and Frobisher were all undertaken with the same object: all had the same prize in view—the untapped wealth of the Orient. Finally, Portugal discovered the sea-route to China, and the author considers the quest ended. But surely, if Jenkinson, ambassador to Bokhara and Persia, was in search of Cathay, those early ambassadors from Muscovy to the Manchu Court should be included in the roll of fame. Russia may have been a bit behindhand, but the story of her push towards the East could have added a chapter or two of surpassing interest, and could have introduced material, unlike that in the rest of the book, not easily come by.

The author adds a personal note to the oft-told tales of these early pioneers, having followed in the footsteps of many of them. The volume is well illustrated, and wisely includes nine copies of early maps.