

MEDICAL HISTORY

Garcia da Orta: European Pioneer in Tropical Medicine

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THE first European writer on tropical medicine, Garcia da Orta, was born about 1490 in Elvas, Portugal, a city on the Spanish border that is famous for its fine plums and pure water. He studied medicine at Salamanca and for a time was a professor at the University of Coimbra. In 1534 he went to India, then a land of promise to the man of enterprise and ambition.

The remainder of his life was spent in the Orient engaged in medical practice and the study



The nutmeg tree and fruit; taken from da Orta's work published in 1563.

of the culture, the natural history, and the diseases of the Asiatic tropics. He seems to have visited Ceylon, and to have established a great botanic garden at Bombay. He was the physician of some of the Portuguese viceroys and many of the Indian princes of the Malabar coast who rewarded him with favors and fees.

He settled permanently in Goa in 1560 and there published his great book, *The Simples and Drugs of India* in 1563. It is the first work by a European to give a really scientific description of many Asiatic plants and drugs of importance in medicine and pharmacy. In it, da Orta gave accounts

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of the methods of growing the plants; the preparation of the drugs derived from them, adulteration and packing them for shipment; tests for purity; and their uses. Opium, cannabis indica, benzoin, cubeb, and nux vomica, from which strychnine is obtained, are a few among the numerous drugs described. He gave the first good botanical description with illustrations of pepper, cinnamon, and nutmeg, and such tropical fruits as the mango, mangosteen, durian, and the China or sweet orange. He also pictured the Asiatic and tropical life with descriptions of native markets, customs, and dress.

His accounts of tropical diseases included fevers, dysenteries, and many skin conditions. His description of cholera was the first by any European medical man; the clinical syndrome and his treatment of a typical case was set forth with considerable detail. He was also the first to describe the cobra, the effects and treatment of its bite, and the keeping by the East Indians of the mongoose as a domestic animal to detect and kill the cobra.

In the 1930's a copy of the *Simples and Drugs of India* sold for \$6250, and it would probably bring twice that sum now. It was not until 1578 that another work on tropical diseases was printed; this was by Christoval Acosta, also from Portugal, who based

part of his book on that of da Orta and used many of the latter's woodcuts as illustrations. Alpino's *Medicina Egyptorum* did not appear until 1591, and the first English work, *The Care of the Sick in Remote Regions* by George Wateson, was printed in 1598. The priority of da Orta in the field of tropical medicine is well established.

The great physician and botanist died at Goa about 1570. In 1934, the 400th anniversary of the sailing of da Orta for India was celebrated by scientific and medical societies, governmental agencies, and other groups, and special articles and a book length biography were published.

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The lady who donated this hospital was very fond of birds!