PERGAMON

Phytochemistry 51 (1999) 719–720

PHYTOCHEMISTRY

Book reviews

***Drug Discovery from Nature*, edited by S. Grabley and R. Thiericke. Springer-Verlag, Berlin, 1999. 347 pp. £76. ISBN 3-540-64844-5.**

Ever since the discovery of the therapeutic value of penicillin in 1942, micro-organisms have provided drug companies with many of their most effective cures for human ailments. It is not surprising, therefore, in this new book on drug discovery that microbial sources are given some prominence. There are chapters on myxobacteria as producers of secondary metabolites and on strobilurins and oudemansins. Again, there are accounts of combinatorial biosynthesis of antibiotics and of molecular biological aspects of antibiotic biosynthesis. Then there are reports of novel antibacterial drugs from micro-organisms and of new antibiotics with novel modes of action. Finally, there is a chapter on marine biotechnology which concentrates on marine micro-organisms.

Higher plants as sources of new drugs figure in the opening historical chapter by S. Grabley and R. Thiericke. They are also considered in one or two later chapters, e.g., the synergistic use of combinatorial and natural product chemistry. They are also discussed in an interesting chapter on a central natural product pool—a new approach in drugs discovery strategies.

There have been a number of similar books produced in recent years, discussing the possibility of new leads for plant drug discovery. Most of these have emphasised higher plant sources, so that this new book can be regarded as providing fresh insight into drug design from microbial origins. The authors are largely from German laboratories, with one or two from Japan and the USA. Curiously, there are no English contributors. It is well produced and reasonably priced. I suspect that it will be more popular in industrial rather than in academic laboratories.

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PII: S0031-9422(99)00138-7

***Sold on Plants, Plant Physiology and University Life in Retrospect*, by Alfred M. Mayer, Balaban Publishers, Rehovot, Israel, 1999. 235 pp. $25. ISBN 0-86689-052-1.**

Unless you are invited by the organisers of the 'Annual Reviews of Plant Physiology' to write your memoirs, plant scientists rarely have the opportunity to reminisce about their work. Professor Alfred Mayer of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in the absence of such an invitation, decided to write and publish his own story, and that is what we have here. It is certainly a remarkable account of modern plant biochemistry, carried out during the period when the new state of Israel became established. The story of this life is carried forward in an attractive style, at a considerable pace but with occasional reflections and asides.

Professor Mayer had the misfortune to be born as a Jew in the early thirties in Hitler's Germany and so was forced to leave his homeland as a young schoolboy. He eventually settled in England and studied at University College, London under the guidance of Professor Pearsall. However, although happily living in England, he decided to join the young state of Israel. As a botanist, he taught at the Hebrew University for all his career, taking on a number of arduous administrative posts by the way. And yet, in spite of such teaching and administrative burdens, he was able to establish a whole series of important lines of plant