

BOOK REVIEWS

The Mentally Retarded Child. Essays based on a study of the higher nervous functioning of child-oligophrenics. Edited by A. R. LURIA. Translated from the Russian by W. P. Robinson. English translation edited by Brian Kirman. (Pp. viii + 207; 31 figures + 1 table. 50s.) Oxford: Pergamon Press. 1963.

This is a most interesting and stimulating book, and no one must be put off by the grossly misleading statements at the start as to how mentally retarded children are appraised and selected for special education in this country. A glance at the authors' index suggests little or no access to what is being written here on this topic, and will confirm that the author reports what he has been told. His erroneous impressions do not affect the substance of his own book.

This describes what he does, and is put down simply and clearly. Perhaps in places it is more than a little pedantic, savouring of lectures to students. Seeing most of us know so very little about mental retardation this is all to the good. Only occasionally does the translation really limp . . . for example ' . . . she was distinguished by superfluous ability and motor restlessness'; this account of a retarded and brain-injured girl, goes on to describe her proneness to distraction. (After all, superfluous means running over, and it is only by long usage that we translate it as excess—more than is needed.) As with all translations, however, there is a certain dogged woodenness in style; but by and large the book is quickly and easily read.

The central thesis concerns the assessment of the real nature of mental retardation by means of a study of conditioned reflexes, linked with neurophysiology and the electroencephalogram. The concept of emotional instability, and the idea that there is a phase during the preschool age of natural negativism and difficulty, emotionally rather than physically determined, obviously does not enter the author's concept. In the field of mental retardation, he may be nearer the truth than we are, and at least he produces experimental evidence (not as well documented as one would like) to uphold his view that mental retardation is not a state of 'inferior ability by nature', but is due to 'a residual condition following diffuse damage to the central nervous system in the early stages of intra-uterine development, or in the early period of life'.

He excludes from this definition the deaf, the blind and the grossly cerebrally palsied, but rather oddly includes

the hydrocephalic child, as if he saw more minimal cases of this disorder producing oligophrenia than we do in this country.

He distinguishes, on the basis of response to conditioned reflex experiments, and on the electroencephalogram, between the three basic clinical groups of oligophrenics. There are those in whom there exists a reasonable balance between excitatory and inhibitory processes and in whom learning follows a normal pattern but does so more slowly than in normal children of the same age. There are also those in whom excitatory processes predominate, with the spill-over of activity and lack of concentration; and those inert and inhibited children who fail to learn and retreat into inhibition as tasks create their demand.

He brings evidence to bear on this problem, which suggests that this differentiation can be accounted for on a basis of neurophysiology. The role of speech has a very interesting chapter to itself, and the author sees language and communication (in either direction) as the means whereby learning is established. 'Language is not only a means of communication; it is an instrument for thinking.' Not only does the mentally retarded child fail in discrimination, and in conceptual thinking, but his whole education needs to be geared to a recognition of these dynamic factors.

He found (as did the Clarkes) that such children can learn, but they need longer and they need greater reinforcement—in the conditioned reflex sense—for the learning patterns to become securely established. Even then they will be less readily available for adaptation as need may arise. He speaks of this book as dedicated to this task of clarification of the problem: most of us will agree that this is a much-needed task and that the book makes a real contribution.

Mentally Retarded Children and Their Education. By ELMER W. WEBER. (Pp. xiii + 338; 1 figure. \$10.75.) Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas. 1963.

This attractively presented book is comprehensive in its scope and is designed to be easily understood by anyone interested in retarded children.

Reminiscent of the Christmas Annuals of our youth, there is something in it for everybody and more in it than most readers would want at one time. It is difficult to