THUCYDIDES ON THE PLAGUE AT ATHENS.

To the Editor of The Lancet.

Sir,—In your review of Dr. Raymond Crawfurd's book, Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art in The Lancet of July 4th I note with interest that he holds the view that the disease described by Thucydidest as "plague" was really typhus fever. I think that a few extracts from the Greek historian's lurid description should be sufficient to prove the soundness of Dr. Crawfurd's conclusion.

It matters little whether so obscure an individual as myself agrees with or differs from so eminent a classical scholar as Dr. Crawfurd, but it may interest him to know that even in isolated South Africa may be found some who appreciate his services to the historical side of medicine. I came to the conclusion many years ago that the disease described by Thucydidest was really typhus fever; but I refrained from raising the question in your columns—though I many years, from good libraries, it might have seemed presumptuous on my part to offer an opinion one way or other on a subject which I assumed had been decided by scholars long ago. It should seem, however, from your review that this is not the case; and it is certainly matter for astonishment to me that any medical reader of Thucydidest should be in doubt as to the nature of the disease he describes under the name of "plague." As a record of disease emanating from remote antiquity, and written by one who suffered from it himself—the greatest historian that ever lived,—as Macaulay styles him—it must always possess an abiding interest, at least for those to whom the large memories of the Hellenic past make any appeal. Nor will the interpretations of modern science—beyond changing the name of the disease—do particular violence to the historian's reputation for accuracy as to statements of fact. In setting forth my reasons for supporting Dr. Crawfurd's view I may also state the circumstances under which this subject first aroused my special interest.

Some 13 years ago, whilst attached to the South African Field Force, I often found myself compelled to extract what comfort I could from a very limited library. Amongst my books was a copy of Thucydidest. The monotony of veld life forced me into communion with this ancient friend, as "something craggy to break my mind against"—to use Byron's metaphor.

I need not pretend that I found the text which alienated Porson, perplexed Arnold, and evoked Macaulay's admiring despair, a source of unmingled happiness. Too often I had to leave the great Athenian alone with his peculiar glory of self-repression and obscurity of phrase. Enough, however, remained to come within the scope of my powers, and of that the description of the plague at Athens claimed my particular attention. In an article written by me then and published in your columns2 made a passing reference to the subject, but there I left it, as it was foreign to the matter under discussion.

Now, taking a few of the symptoms of typhus fever as described in a modern text-book of medicine—such as, for instance, pyrexia, headache, injected conjunctive, vomiting, bronchial catarrh, thirst, mottled rash, and sleeplessness—let us see what is to be found in Thucydidest that each and all of them. It will, in fact, be seen that each of these symptoms is discussed by him almost in the order in which I have given them: 1. "Violent heats in the head." ("τ' χειρόθεν θρήμα ἵππορον.") 2. "Redness and inflammation of the eyes." ("τίν' ὀφθαλμών ἐρυθρά καὶ φλόγωσα") 3. "Sneezing and hoarseness came on, and in a short time the pain descended into the chest with a violent cough." ("δυός καὶ οὐκ ἦν ἐν τοῖς στρωμάσιν ἀνάστρωμα το τέλευτον")—i.e., "when it settled in the stomach, it upset it." 5. A rash of a "reddish" (ἐρυθρότροφο) "lived" (πετάλεως). 6. Thirst. This was so great that not even the lightest clothing could be borne. The stricken ones lay stark naked, and many threw themselves into the cisterns, "being in the grasp of an unquenchable thirst" ("ὁ δὺς ἀδιαφόρος καὶ ἐφυμένος τοῦ" κεραίαν). 7. Sleeplessness ("&kappa; ἐνθύμησις τοῦ" "διάθεσιν" "τρελή")—i.e., "and the misery of restlessness and wakefulness weighed upon all." This is a fairly good description of the "coma-vigil" of modern clinicians.

The other symptoms described correspond to our sequelae. They are: gangrene of the genitalia, fingers, and toes, loss of eyes, and sometimes complete loss of memory (probably dementia):—"καταγερνεῖς το γαρ ἐδίσκη καὶ ἐκτοιχοχύρον καὶ ἐπονι") &c., &ct.

So far, then, and no farther does it seem to me necessary to quote from Thucydidest to establish the view that he is in reality describing typhus fever.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

DUNCAN MACKENZIE MACRAE, M.A., M.B.,
Ch.B. Glasg.


Central Midwives Board.—A meeting of the Central Midwives Board was held at Caxton House, Westminster, on Oct. 8th, with Sir Francis H. Champneys in the chair. A letter was considered from Miss Llewellyn Davies, general secretary of the Women's Cooperative Guild, asking the Board to appoint a representative to join a deputation to the President of the Local Government Board, in his capacity as such and as chairman of the Government Committee for the Relief of Distress, to consider the care of maternity in time of war. It was directed that Miss Llewellyn Davies be informed that the Central Midwives Board, while sympathising with any scheme which had for its object the care of maternity in time of war, did not see its way to join the deputation. A letter was considered from the secretary of the County Councils Association transmitting a copy of a resolution passed by the executive council at its meeting on July 29th with regard to the registration and inspection of lying-in homes, institutions, and houses where women are habitually taken in for their confinement for pay. The secretary to the Board reported that the executive council of the County Councils Association had resolved that in the opinion of the council it is desirable that all lying-in homes should be registered and inspected by the inspectors of the local supervising authorities under the Midwives Act. Further correspondence was considered with regard to a com- mutation of the local supervising authority. The Board decided that the correspondence be referred to the County Councils Association. A letter was considered from a certified midwife approved by the Board for the purpose of undertaking the practical training of pupils at her nursing home, asking that her approval may be extended to cover a second training home not in the immediate vicinity of the first. The Board decided that the application be refused.

1 Hist., Bk. 2, chap. 47-55.