FOLKLORE, FACT AND LEGEND.*

By JOHN B. FLEMING.

IN 1951, Munro Kerr,' in his peroration to a paper on the use of radiography in determining the placental site, wrote:

"I can hear some critics muttering that radiography of the pelvis is too great a refinement. Don't listen to them. Look upon it as an example of the struggle which has gone on down through the ages to attain perfection. Emulate rather the anesthetists who seem never to be satisfied with their drugs, equipment and contraptions, but are always striving after something better. And I admire their keenness, and that they are not afraid of showing it. Possibly this is because they have the exuberance of youth on their side, for their speciality is of yesterday, whilst ours had its beginnings in the primeval forests, jungles and swamps, millions of years ago, and we may have grown weary in the long struggle."

That last sentence prompted me to investigate some of the recorded facts concerning the folklore of our specialty and associated subjects in Ireland, and the results of my search form the basis of this address. I hope that you will find this symposium of interest, and that possibly some of you may further the knowledge of this subject by recording any folk tale or superstition which you may have heard.

From these "primeval forests, jungles and swamps of millions of years ago" to the middle of the twentieth century is indeed a long time, and, at the outset, an attempt should be made to establish some sort of calendar by which man's progress may be measured. What, then, is known of the antiquity of man? Before the evolutionary theory of man's genealogy from the anthropoids was generally accepted, it was believed, relying on Scriptural authority, that man had come into the world as a special creation about 6,000 years ago, and that he owed no kinship to other living things. Gradually, biologists such as Darwin, Haeckel and Dubois advanced the theory of evolution from the anthropoids to the point where the theory became accepted by the majority. Sir Arthur Keith's conclusions on this subject are that man has been evolved from a lower form, and that the human races are the products of evolutionary processes. His opinion is that man's departure from the anthropoid state possibly took place a million years ago or more, and that gradually the brain reached full human status as the outward appearances of the ape were shed.

* President's Address to Section of Obstetrics, delivered Oct. 24th, 1952.
Concerned as we are with the culture of these islands and the development of midwifery from the earliest times, it must be stated at once that man probably appeared in Europe for the first time during the final stage of the Ice Age, and that his territory was determined by the extent of the glaciation. Dr. Joseph Raftery reminds us that as far as our present knowledge allows us to judge, Ireland was uninhabited in the vast period from 50,000 B.C. to somewhere about 6000 B.C. At first the rest of the continental land mass and south-east England was peopled by the bearers of the flourishing flake and core cultures of early palaeolithic times. He goes on to explain that at this time Ireland and England were joined to the Continent of Europe, and that the divisions of the Irish Sea and the English Channel did not then exist, though the Pennine chain and the mountains of Wales prohibited easy access to Ireland. Later, Western Europe was inhabited by groups who possessed a high flint and bone-working technique, with some aesthetic sense and a definite magico-religious code. Though they had fixed winter centres, to which they returned after a summer of hunting and movement, they were only in the food-gathering stage, hunting the game from one place to another. Some of the groups did break away to move north-westward, and to implant their late palaeolithic culture on the lowlands of England. This culture is known by the name of Cresswellian, the title being derived from a typical English site. Moving onwards, they established themselves in Ireland after a probable overland journey, undertaken presumably not for economic or political reasons, but because they were compelled to follow the reindeer, which were moving northward as warmer conditions developed. It may be of interest to note briefly the estimated number of the population of the British Isles during the closing phases of the last Ice Age. The authorities whom I have consulted maintain that the population was very sparse and far from prosperous, living for the most part in caves or in camp on the open plains. Childe states: "The population must have been very small; Clark's estimate for the winter months of a total of 250 is not extravagantly low." Dealing with the population of Ireland in the period about 2500 B.C., Raftery states: "The population was undoubtedly very small, numbering no more than two or three thousand souls in all, and in all likelihood lived in isolated communities." The tremendous increase in the population of these islands in the interval is apparent when it is known that the present number in the bigger island is 49,000,000.

Irrespective of the antiquity of man in the various situations, we should like to trace, no matter how faint the outline, the development of the art of midwifery from the earliest times. During the first phase it is probable that primitive woman had her baby unattended, helping herself as best she could. Instinct would lead her to sever the cord by biting through it, while her labour was likely to be easy as the open-air life prevented rachitic distortion of the pelvis, and because she was fit, due no doubt, to the hard work and exercise of the nomadic life. Puerperal infection probably occurred but seldom, and lacerations, if sustained, would heal in good time. In other words, the act of reproduction was natural and simple, and not beset by the fears and stresses of life which are present today, and which we are led to believe make labour a longer and a more painful process. Fatalities were probably extremely