

## Book Reviews

With the earlier accounts, a reader might perhaps question the feasibility of using mortality rates from partly theological narratives intended to illustrate the divine punishment of the Guanches for their sins of infanticide and killing Christian soldiers while resisting invasion, but Crosby is in general conservative when it comes to estimating mortality from disease in post-contact history and is careful to take account of other social and biological factors that favoured the emergence of neo-Europes. To take only one example, Lawson's 1709 description of Carolina is cited for the flourishing populations of imported cattle and peaches which Lawson himself observed, but not for the effects of smallpox, rum, and intertribal warfare which the same author inferred had "made such a destruction amongst them, that on good grounds I do believe there is not the sixth savage living within two hundred miles of all our settlements as there were fifty years ago." Recent studies of the archaeology of the southeastern United States do show massive depopulation of the region between the visit of De Soto and later periods of contact, as Crosby notes, but he reserves his closest analysis of post-contact epidemiology for the relatively well-documented New Zealand population. Within a few decades in the nineteenth century, as the European population increased by one order of magnitude from 2000 to 32,000, mortality of 30–50 per cent decreased the Maori from c. 100,000–120,000 to less than 60,000.

To sum up, this is not just a study of disease, but a vividly written account of ecological transition, and Crosby is careful not to overestimate the significance of any single component in upsetting pre-European adaptations of biota whose ecological niches were invaded by new weeds, crops, insects, and animals whose impacts are also documented.

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MIRA CROUCH and BERND HÜPPAUF (editors), *Essays on mortality*, Sydney, University of New South Wales (Faculty of Arts), 1985, 8vo, pp. xiii, 190, no price stated (paperback).

This volume consists of eleven essays written on the theme of mortality for an interdisciplinary workshop held at the University of New South Wales in November 1982. As with most such publications we do not see the final results of the "interdisciplinary interchange" as much as the preliminary submissions for the interchange itself. Despite the lack of cross-reference to each others' attitudes or findings, the essays do touch upon a variety of subjects—from David Rollison's 'Mortality and society in England 1450–1850', through studies of Australian attitudes to death, to philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and literary comments on the subject.

Preceding all of these is a prologue by Bernd Hüppauf entitled 'Death in the history of ideas in western civilization'. Like the essay by Ray Walters on 'Death and mortality in philosophy', this contains references to classical as well as to Renaissance thinkers. Perhaps because of its brief coverage, some confusion enters when these ideas are connected to those of more contemporary writers. Further problems occur with the telescoping of ideas from Nietzsche, Freud, and Marcuse. Nietzsche is introduced as an example of a critic of the "metaphysical" domination over life by the idea of death. No reference, however, is made to Nietzsche's targeting of Schopenhauer's pessimism in this criticism. When Nietzsche's "Lebensphilosophie", or "yes-saying" to life, is related both to Freud's comments on the concealment of death in Western culture and to Marcuse's on the reduction of death to a mechanical and institutionalized end to life, further confusion results. This is due not just to the fact that the different targets of each have not been adequately spelled out, but because the differences in meaning of the terms used to describe the forces of life and death have also to be analysed further.

In the end, the prologue appears to share the "Marcusean" view that the "instrumentalization" of death in modern society and its health-services may be related to a more sinister instrumentalization of life as a whole by forces which are themselves life-threatening:

Man appears to be thrown back into a situation of extreme vulnerability. His current situation equals that of early man who had no control over a hostile environment surrounding and

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constantly threatening him with death. The irony is that it is precisely that control over nature through scientific knowledge which he wanted to achieve so desperately in order to be able to lead a secured and civilised life, which is now threatening mankind with the very destruction with which it once felt threatened by nature.

Here we find an identification being made between the modern medical technology used to save or prolong life and the technology of modern warfare described elsewhere in the prologue as directed towards the “holocide” of the human race. But if the author’s aim is, as stated, to save us from the latter, then he should also base his claims on analytically convincing arguments. The need for a more consistent argument is also shown later when World War I and not World War II is taken as a turning-point in the modern perception of death. For if the “holocidal” technology spoken of earlier as the main concern of modern man is to be regarded as the most representative form of both modern technology and of our modern relationship to mortality, then some may ask why it is that World War II with its practices of mass genocide and civilian destruction is not chosen as the turning-point to our present condition.

Although some of the essays that follow the prologue touch on some of the points made in it, most reflect the individual interests and/or disciplines of their authors, and are, moreover, of varying quality. While none presents any wide-ranging analysis of all the issues relating to the Western attitude to death (save perhaps Clive S. Kessler’s account of the variety of approaches taken by anthropologists to the subject), they do at least raise some of the issues needed for such a study. Although there is very little in the essays on the medical dimensions of attitudes to mortality, those readers interested in a more general approach to that subject might find some things of interest in Ian Webster’s brief account of the mortality rate for tuberculosis in Australia in his essay on the ‘Youth determinants of ageing mortality’ and Duncan Waterson and Sandra Tweedie’s “work-in-progress” on the funeral industry in New South Wales.

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RONALD D. MANN, *William Withering and the foxglove*. A bicentennial selection of letters from the Osler bequest to the Royal Society of Medicine, together with a transcription of ‘An account of the foxglove’ and an introductory essay, Lancaster, MTP Press, 1985, 4to, pp.xi, 178, illus., £79.95.

The bicentenary of the appearance of Withering’s small pharmacological classic has been lavishly commemorated in two separate publishing initiatives. This is the grander and more expensive of them—intended just for the likes of a few specialist libraries and collectors, to judge from the price. The very handsome production, however, should not be allowed to deceive scholars into dismissing the volume as a mere confection for connoisseurs, for it certainly lives up to its description as in the main a source book and a preliminary to the still-needed full-scale scientific study.

In effect, it is three publications in one: a short account of Withering’s life and career (appropriately short because of the existence already of the 1950 Peck and Wilkinson biography, inadequate though that is); transcriptions—by Dr Helen Townsend—and in some cases facsimiles of seventy-six letters and other papers contained in the collection of Withering memorabilia acquired by Sir William Osler about a year before his death and bequeathed by him to the Royal Society of Medicine; and a transcript (in preference to a facsimile, for reasons that are explained) of the monograph on the foxglove and the uses and abuses of digitalis. There is also a valuable appendix listing the many other items in the Osler bequest which have not been included in the book, mostly because they are concerned with botany more or less exclusively.

The biographical section, which is marred by a certain repetitiousness, opens with an outline of Osler’s career and the circumstances in which he made this particular purchase. Withering’s steady rise to fame and fortune is then charted, from his birth to a well-to-do Wellington apothecary, through Edinburgh University, where he obtained an MD and was deeply