

Book Reviews

twentieth century, as new disciplines were being continually created, expunged and replaced, greater effort should have been made in this section to formulate more cohesion and unity of thought. With the encyclopaedic format in which this increasing specialization is presented, it is more useful as a reference book than as a monograph.

Michèle Stokes,
The Wellcome Trust Centre for the
History of Medicine at UCL

Frederick F Cartwright and Michael Biddiss, *Disease and history*, 2nd ed., Thrupp, Sutton Publishing, 2000, pp. viii, 230, illus., £20.00 (hardback 0-7509-2315).

Aimed at the lay reader, *Disease and history* traces the effect of disease on history through the ages. This “enlarged and fully revised version” of the 1972 edition covers more fully the impact of smallpox, influenza and tuberculosis. The concluding chapter is also an attempt to bring the book up to date with contemporary concerns.

The first chapter deals with disease in the ancient world, and focuses almost entirely on Western civilization and Graeco-Roman antiquity. The account is seriously flawed in that, despite the importance of eastern civilizations at that time, the references made to the non-European world are in the following vein: “To north and west [of the Roman Empire] lay the oceans, to south and east wide unknown continents in which dwelt less civilized peoples: Africans, Arabs and the savage tribes of Asia. Beyond, in the dim shadows, lay the ancient civilizations of India and China” (p. 9). This is especially striking given that today, in the face of dissatisfaction with Western medicine, people are increasingly turning to alternative medicine from these “dim shadow” civilizations. In the second chapter the authors study the Black Death and the

horror it inspired in medieval times. While the part dealing with the medical analysis and the spread of the disease is well written, that which seeks to establish causal sequences with major historical developments of the time is often farfetched. This is even more evident in the chapter on syphilis. The extremely laboured connection between the affliction of Ivan the Terrible with syphilis (in itself by no means a certain fact) and the development of Tsarist absolutism in Russia completely ignores the structural aspects of Russian society that social historians have painfully reconstructed to understand better the unique developments there.

The next chapter, one of the best, studies smallpox. The authors provide an engrossing account of the way the disease works and how epidemics develop. The attempts to find a cure and the identification of how the disease is transmitted, as well as a historical treatment of the techniques of variolation and vaccination make engaging reading. To the extent that this approach is maintained in the chapters on cholera, flu, tuberculosis, and malaria and other tropical diseases such as sleeping sickness, the book attains its object of illustrating the way disease has played an important role in history, influencing such major developments as industrialization and colonialism. While the account here is still somewhat conservative and at times highly problematic (for example, references to the “*infidel* Tartar horde”, p. 51, emphasis mine), it may not be greatly contested by other historians. However, the same cannot be said about the chapters on Napoleon and the Russian Revolution, where the authors go to exaggerated lengths to link disease with important historical events.

The book is also very Britain-centred. Most of the illnesses discussed are illustrated by examples from Britain. While this is understandable in that the authors draw mainly upon their own research, it still does not justify the extremely laboured

Book Reviews

link of Queen Victoria's haemophilic gene with the cause of the Russian Revolution. The sin is not so much one of commission as of omission. By ignoring the hardships suffered by the Russian people under an autocratic rule as a major cause of the Revolution, and by focusing on this one gene and its effects on the Tsar's family, the authors convey the impression that it played an unduly important role and that other causes were merely incidental. In the chapter on Napoleon, the tone verges on the jingoistic as the authors ridicule his ambitions of conquering India. Filled with arbitrary statements about the intentions of the various parties involved, and tedious, unnecessary accounts of battles and warfare strategies, the relevance of this chapter to the "history of disease" is questionable. The attempted diagnoses of Napoleon's various diseases and the explanation of contemporary events in terms of these illnesses do not commend themselves to an objective reader. The chapter on mob hysteria and mass-suggestion, which deals with witch hunts and Adolf Hitler, is similarly of patchy interest.

While the book largely praises modern Western medicine and its progress, the conclusion takes salutary note of its iatrogenic effects and looks at the difficulties

presented by a uni-linear view of medicine. It also tries to situate history in the context of some of the current health problems of the world. The discussion about AIDS, cancer and the questions of disease and health facing poorer countries is a well written and commendable attempt to shed light on the problems of today by drawing on experiences of the past.

One serious omission in a book of this scope is the lack of discussion of women's health. This subject is touched on only once, in the conclusion, with relation to "the pill". While clearly the diseases discussed are often ones that affected both men and women, by failing to talk about the openly misogynist basis of medicine in earlier times, the authors miss a significant twist in the history of disease, especially in view of feminist scholars' contention that modern medicine has not entirely overcome this dubious legacy.

With its informal, engaging style, few references, and lack of engagement with current historical debates, this is a book more suited to the layperson than the medical historian but should not be taken as an authoritative account.

Samiksha Sehrawat,
Wellcome Unit for the History
of Medicine, Oxford