
BOOK REVIEW

I. W. Sherman **The Power of Plagues**

ASM Press, American Society for Microbiology: Washington, DC, 2006. IX + 431 pages. Format 175 × 257 mm. Binding: hardcover. Price USD 39.95, ISBN 1-55581-356-9

The editor is affiliated with the Department of Biology, University of California, Riverside, Ca. It is stated in the preface by the author, that plagues are a dramatic unfolding of events; they are stories of discovery, reaction, conflict, illness and resolution. This book was written to make the science of epidemic diseases – plagues – accessible and understandable. It is a guide through the maze of contagious diseases, their past importance, the means by which we came to understand them, and how they may affect our future. We can ask, why did historians neglect the significance of epidemic diseases. The answer may be, that it was overlooked because the older records of deaths from disease were so imperfect that the scale and importance were lost. These views were to change rather quickly: drug-resistant tuberculosis emerged as a worldwide threat, and there were outbreaks of Ebola, hantavirus pulmonary syndrome, and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome). In the summer of 1999, an outbreak of West Nile virus (WNV) caused illness in 62 people and 7 died. This took place in New York City, not in Africa. By 2003 spread by infected birds, was present throughout the United States. Clearly, in a very short time, all of us began to appreciate that epidemic diseases was not a thing of our past. Learning about how infectious diseases have shaped our past has proven to be an exciting and enlightening experience for the author, he hopes that readers of this book also find that to be true.

The volume is arranged into 17 chapters presenting individual, independent plague stories. Special attention is given to the nature of plagues, the plagues in antiquity, a modern plague: AIDS, malaria, king cholera, smallpox, the great pox syphilis, tuberculosis, leprosy, plagues in Africa (sleeping sickness, river blindness, Guinea worm, schistosomiasis), plagues outside of

Africa (yellow fever, hookworm). Further on, examined are plagues without germs (pellagra, the white rice plague, beriberi, scurvy) and others.

In addition, the appendix gives a survey of cells and viruses. In the living world the fundamental unit is the cell. A cell may be defined as a standard of biological activity, bounded by a membrane, and able to reproduce independently of any living systems. Viruses, smaller than bacteria, but all have the basic structure: an outer coat and a central core of double-stranded nucleic acid, either RNA or DNA. All viruses are parasitic; however, in some cases, there is not evidence of injury to the host. Following chapter comprises an overview of general works on disease and history. A list of relevant primary and secondary literature sources is presented here in separated notes. The volume is extensively illustrated by black-and-white figures depicting unique historical events or clinical and pathological conditions, pathogenic agents, line-drawings and schematic diagrams.

The Power of Plagues presents a fascinating examination of epidemic diseases within a historical context. It provides insight into the struggle to attain diseases control and eradication and explores the challenge of forecasting emerging plagues. Despite of advancements in the development of antimicrobials and vaccines and securing clean water and food supplies, modern civilizations are not immune to epidemic diseases.

This volume offers readers a deeper understanding of modern public health issues and the role of infectious diseases. Among other topics, professor Sherman is known as editor of a remarkable and rather unique monograph *Molecular Approaches to Malaria*. For review see CEJPH No. 4/Vol. 16, December 2008, p. 160.

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