BOOK REVIEW


Some of humanity’s worst nightmares have been, and continue to be, the plagues caused by bacterial, viral, and protozoan microbes. And yet, for all their horror, they evoke a mordant romance that science writers have told, and retold, in near-novel-like books. Some of these authors have been distinguished microbiologists and infectious disease specialists who turn at older age to contemplating the history of those maddening, minute, brainless creatures to which they have devoted so much of their life. I have long observed that when my colleagues begin to speak of the historical origins of their specialty the emeritus is not far behind.

Professor Emeritus Irwin W. Sherman has now joined that company of authors with an erudite work, The Power of Plagues. Using the broad dictionary definition of a plague as “an epidemic disease that causes high mortality” Sherman describes in separate chapters, the plague of plague (bubonic and pneumonic), AIDS, typhus, malaria, cholera, smallpox, syphilis, tuberculosis, and for good measure, nutritional diseases—the “Plagues without Germs.” Each chapter has a similar construction that begins with a thorough history of that plague—probably the strongest and most interesting aspect of the book. There follows descriptions of the biology and natural history of the causative organism including an epidemiological “catching . . .” a clinical description and current methods of treatment and prevention.

I am not certain as to the book’s intended audience. The publisher’s description, which states that it is written in an “understandable and accessible manner” to address the “public’s curiosity” would indicate a popular readership. As such it is probably too simple for our Society’s members. However, the depth and richness of the historical accounts make the book a worthwhile purchase. Mixed with the serious history are amusing trivia and more somber exotica. Did you know that eau de cologne was formulated to mask the smell of the decomposing bodies killed in the 15th–16th century bubonic plague epidemic in Cologne, Germany and that its commercial name “4711” is the street address of the house in which it was first made? In the AIDS chapter Sherman gives detailed instruction on how to don a condom. For the bench-bound microbiologist and patient-bound clinician the epidemiologist’s $R_o$ may finally be demystified.

Nevertheless, there are flaws and inaccuracies in the broad historical tapestry that Sherman has woven. Each specialist reader will discover their own “gotchas” where they exist. Examples for malaria: Malaria is not “worldwide,” not only is it absent in the temperate zones but also in Micronesia and Polynesia in the tropics (page 136). Hemoproteus is not mosquito borne; it is transmitted by hippoboscids and other ectoparasitic flies (page 137). Patrick Manson was not a medical missionary; he was employed as a physician to the Customs Service in Formosa (Taiwan) and Amoy (page 138). In “Catching malaria,” the transplacental route is not mentioned (page 147). While the text is accompanied by a treasure of carefully selected illustrations, many of which will be new to our members, most of them have been reproduced with a distracting uniform gray pallor.

I would recommend the book to those Society members with a special interest in the history of infectious diseases.

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