

## Book Reviews

**R S Bray**, *Armies of pestilence: the effects of pandemics on history*, Cambridge, Lutterworth Press, 1996, pp. xiii, 258, £19.50 (0-7188-2949-2).

In this volume Dr Bray—a former vice-president of the Royal Society for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene—seeks to show “that the course of history has been and can be affected by the major pandemics of infectious disease”. “Practitioner history” generally enjoys low esteem in the eyes of medical historians, and—with some very distinguished exceptions—this is all too often justified by an anecdotal, “presentist” approach allied to a readiness to impose current bio-medical paradigms on inadequate or contradictory historical evidence. For their part practitioners often condescend to professional historians, being keen to “set them right” not only on matters epidemiological but on such points as the fall of the Roman Empire (all that lead in the drinking water) or the origins of capitalism (obviously bubonic plague).

Historians may thus approach *Armies of pestilence* with some foreboding—probably deepened by the dust-jacket’s promise of a “vigorous style and timely injections of humour”—but if they persist and actually read it they will have a very pleasant surprise. Bray is both judicious and modest in his approach (the book, as he acknowledges, is based on secondary or tertiary sources) and displays a genuine historical sense when it comes to weighing theory against evidence. The humour is largely directed at the claims of colleagues willing to diagnose conditions centuries, or millennia, in the past, on the basis of poorly defined symptoms in fragmentary sources—Shrewsbury’s strangely neglected account of sodomy and haemorrhoids in Philistine population dynamics is a gem in this respect.

In substance the book is a fairly conventional round-up and examination of the usual suspects—from the Great Plague of Athens to the Great Influenza Débâcle of 1970s America—but what distinguishes it from many other offerings is the author’s willingness to acknowledge how difficult it is to diagnose

diseases in the past, and how constrained is the contribution that bio-medical theory can make to our understanding of their epidemiology, given the inadequacy of the sources, and the possibility that pathogens may have altered so as to change their behaviour significantly. The discussion of plague is particularly interesting in the latter respect and could be read to advantage by anyone interested in the question of its dramatic appearance and equally mysterious disappearance.

The question of what impact disease had on politics and society in the past is notoriously beset with traps for the unwary, and here too Bray displays a commendable caution—taking a defensibly “strong” view of plague but acknowledging current views that nineteenth-century cholera played a very minor role in this respect. The generally cautious tone makes the book longer on narrative than analysis, and Bray’s apparent ignorance of the demographic literature leads him to misinterpret the role of birth rates—which more often rose than fell in the aftermath of epidemics—but in most respects *Armies of pestilence* can be recommended to the “interested layman” and,—with its useful bibliography—to first year undergraduates. Unfortunately the author has been let down by his editors—the text is marred by too many typographical errors including missing words and mis-datings of both the Franco-Prussian and American Civil Wars.

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**Franz Graf-Stuhlhofer**, *Humanismus zwischen Hof und Universität: Georg Tannstetter (Collimitius) und sein wissenschaftliches Umfeld im Wien des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, Schriftenreihe des Universitätsarchivs Universität Wien Bd 8, Vienna, WUV-Universitätsverlag, 1996, pp. 212, illus., öS 168.00, DM 37.00 (3-85224-256-X).

One of the major difficulties facing the historian who wishes to understand the changes brought about in medicine by the Renaissance is the lack of studies of Latin humanist physicians.