

Book Reviews

NOBLE DAVID COOK and W. GEORGE LOVELL (eds), *"Secret judgments of God": Old World disease in colonial Spanish America*, Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, pp. xxiii, 285, £23.50 (0-8061-2372-9).

SUZANNE AUSTIN ALCHON, *Native society and disease in colonial Ecuador*, Cambridge Latin American Studies, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. x, 151, £25.00, \$39.50 (0-521-40186-0).

MÁRIO GOMES MARQUES and JOHN CULE (eds), *The great maritime discoveries and world health. Proceedings of the First International Congress on the great maritime discoveries and world health, 10-13 September 1990*, Lisbon, Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública, Ordem dos Médicos, Instituto de Sintra, 1991, pp. 380.

The five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landfall in the Americas has fittingly coincided with an upsurge of academic interest in transoceanic disease "exchanges" and the demographic impact of Old World epidemics on the inhabitants of the New. In the wake of pioneering studies by A. W. Crosby and W. H. McNeil, by Woodrow Borah and Sherburne F. Cook, a second generation of scholars has begun to investigate not just the "global" impact of Old World pathogens, but more precisely the timing and nature of the epidemics, local trends in mortality and morbidity, and how exotic diseases became endemic infections. The increasing sophistication of this scholarly enterprise is well represented by the collection of papers edited by Noble David Cook and W. George Lovell from a conference session held in Amsterdam in 1988. Using local archives in Latin America as well as the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, the ten contributors piece together a more complex picture of disease and demographic history than has hitherto emerged. Apart from the opening essay, the contributors direct attention away from the familiar and relatively well-documented case of Central Mexico, to remoter parts of central and southern America—Guatemala, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Chile—and across time, from the early years of Spanish intervention to the closing decades of colonial rule. Although there are few doubts that imported diseases were overwhelmingly the cause of the massive population decline, unleashing "sustained and unprecedented destruction" on native Americans (p. xv) and "the greatest loss of life known to history" (p. 216), caution is expressed about the identification of the particular diseases involved (though smallpox and measles appear to have been the greatest destroyers). If there is a criticism of this collection, it is that it focuses—despite its suggestive title—almost exclusively on disease as a demographic phenomenon and, the last two essays apart, does not locate disease and demography in a political and cultural context.

In her impressive monograph on disease and society in colonial Ecuador, Suzanne Austin Alchon (who also contributes substantial essays to the other works under review) goes some way towards redressing this imbalance. She constructs a detailed (but never factually overburdened) account of the evolving relationship—political, social and epidemiological—between imported diseases and indigenous peoples. Her interesting and well-substantiated argument is that the initial phase of epidemiological invasion in the highlands of north-central Ecuador was followed by a period of biological adaptation: Indian society survived largely intact and the population more than doubled during the seventeenth century. But accommodation and resilience ended with a fresh demographic crisis in the 1690s which had a far more crushing and enduring effect on the Indian population. Among the attractive features of this work are the way in which it departs from a purely Eurocentric understanding of disease and its impact by identifying native concepts of health and disease before the conquest and examining the role of local healers and shamans in sustaining Indian identity and opposition to Spanish rule. Resistance figures as a cultural as much as an immunological concept. This is matched by a discussion of European attempts to contain disease, especially through hospitals and public health measures. We are thus able to see, side by side, two sets of medical ideas and practices brought together within a single epidemiological order. While not losing sight of disease as the key determinant of demographic change, Alchon elaborates effectively on its wider consequences in a way which

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supports her claim that it is impossible to “separate the biological from the social and political” in the history of Ecuador’s Indians under colonial rule (p. 3.) Although the study focuses on a small area and there is little attempt to relate it to work elsewhere, this is a study that deserves to be read as a model of its kind and offers an inviting basis for comparative discussion within the New World and beyond.

Despite some interesting and important individual contributions, the general standard of scholarship in *The great maritime discoveries and world health*, based on a conference held in Lisbon in 1990, is markedly inferior to that of the two previous works. The twenty-seven papers vary from wide-ranging studies of medicine in fifteenth-century Europe and inter-oceanic disease exchanges to more detailed accounts of specific diseases or the activities of individual medical practitioners and observers. One or two papers are of doubtful relevance to any theme the volume might lay claim to; others tediously cover the same ground as other contributions. The superficiality of many of the essays and the want of detailed, archive-based research—of the kind Alchon’s work keenly exemplifies—is the more to be regretted in that there is a great and urgent need for serious and in-depth research into the medical aspects of the “great maritime discoveries”. The approach of the Portuguese participants in particular is more celebratory than cerebral: there is little serious discussion of the epidemiological effects of Iberian conquests and the slave trade (or awareness of recent English-language scholarship). But some interesting facts do emerge and a way is at least opened for the more scholarly exploitation of the evidently rich Portuguese source materials. But as a commentary on disease and discovery fit for 1992 this is a disappointingly complacent contribution.

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ROY PORTER (ed.), *The Faber book of madness*, London and Boston, Faber & Faber, 1991, pp. xix, 572, illus., £14.99 (0-571-14387-3).

Roy Porter has collected here a wide-ranging anthology of writings dealing with madness in its various manifestations. Quite deliberately, he has chosen to focus his attention on anything *but* the history of psychiatry—the profession, that is, and its particular and peculiar views of madness. He does, it is true, draw some of his extracts from texts written by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, but only when the focus of their attention is the existential condition of their patients, or the state of mind of the psychiatrist her- or himself. For the most part, however, Porter has concentrated on more personal, often autobiographical sources: the writings of patients themselves in memoirs, polemics, or thin fictional disguise; the experiences of family members, friends, nurses, who have had to cope with and care for the insane; the speculations of theologians and philosophers about those who have taken leave of their senses; and the imaginative attempts of novelists, poets, and dramatists to comprehend and convey the existential reality of unreason.

Deliberately, too, Porter has cast his net widely, both geographically and temporally. While most of his selections are from British sources, he also includes many European and North American examples, as well as the occasional Antipodean case; and he resolutely avoids confining his attention to the age of the asylum and its aftermath, reaching back to the Renaissance and beyond for examples. Excerpts, which are mostly quite brief, are organized under a series of major headings—symptoms, treatments, types of disorder, the experiences of those entering and confined in asylums and madhouses, the psychoanalytic couch—and each of these is introduced by a few paragraphs of commentary by the editor.

The result is a rather curious volume. Individual extracts and authors are not placed in any larger context (generally being “introduced” with one or two lines that convey little of substance); and paragraphs from very different time periods are juxtaposed without any apparent rationale, save for their common focus on, for instance, patients suffering from delusions or the purported relationship between madness and genius. Moreover, the general introductions to each section are rather casually put together, contain little that is particularly novel or insightful, and are written in a breezy, almost chatty style. There is no attempt here at