

Book Reviews

THOMAS McKEOWN, *The origins of human disease*, Oxford and New York, Basil Blackwell, 1988, 8vo, pp. vi, 233, £22.50.

We have been blessed in the past dozen years or so with several fine books on the history of humanity not as a collection of institutions or a tangle of economic trends, but as a species trying over the last few 100,000 years to survive and propagate in the midst of other species, macro and micro, trying to do the same. Recently (that is to say, since the advent of agriculture several thousand years ago and the invention of industrialism just a few generations back) we have been carrying on this effort in a world drastically altered by our runaway success at survival and propagation. Such books as William McNeill's *Plagues and peoples* (1976) and, just last year, Stephen Boyden's *Western civilization in biological perspective* have called to our attention the ironic truth that we are not well adapted to the world we have created since we stopped being hunters and gatherers and started being farmers and industrialists. Infectious disease has plagued us ever since we first collected in dense populations, and the so-called degenerative diseases, cardiovascular, respiratory, and neoplastic, have dogged us ever since we built factories, sat down behind desks to manage them, and began to swallow, inhale, and ingest in various ways their often noxious products. Professor McKeown's *Origins of human disease* is another of these books on the biological history of humanity, but with a number of original twists in the now familiar tale of how we descended from the trees, built the Concorde, and now are living with the irony that we are better adapted physically and emotionally for tree-swinging than for supersonic travel.

McKeown, though one of the finer historians, was in a way ahistorical, even "presentistic"; and, though deeply scientific in habits of thought, was in a way ascientific, too. He doubted the value of ancient parish records and such for demographic history, and looked askance at research, however sophisticated, based on them. He was more comfortable with twentieth-century data, and when he wanted to know something about the health of eighteenth-century Britons, he was inclined to look to our pre-industrial Third World, where true scientists have collected data which are much more accurate and complete than anything we have from the past. He had deep doubts about the beneficial influence of medical advances until very recent times, and credited the population explosion that began in the eighteenth century more to improvement in nutrition rather than to scientific advance. Thus *The origins of human disease* is less historical narrative and more topical and contemporary than the title suggests. There are, however, many ways to skin a cat, and this book will prove a treasure to anyone who seeks a shrewd, sceptical, and—why not use the word?—wise analysis of the history of human disease and health.

Another important difference between this book and those cited above is in the number of pages devoted to prenatal disease and its postnatal consequences. Historians have paid little attention to this subject because they think that the numbers of its victims are small compared to the masses who have fallen to, for instance, dysenteric diseases in early childhood. There is also the matter of volition: we are all more interested in things about which we or other members of our species actually *do* something, even if it is bad, and we have done little, positive or negative, about prenatal disease. Man-made chemicals like thalidomide have caused awful damage, premarital counselling for people with the sickle cell gene has forestalled misery, but the truth remains that most prenatal disease is almost as beyond our power to cause or prevent as plague was for our medieval ancestors. Be that as it may, McKeown did not share the common habit of overlooking this variety of disease, and his book has about as many pages on it as on infectious or on degenerative diseases, and a good deal of information and discussion about its origins, causes, and our efforts to deal with it. His conclusion—again shrewd and sceptical—is that the medical profession is at present a long way from being able to intervene helpfully in most prenatal disorders, and early detection of these followed by abortion is the best course to follow in most cases.

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Perhaps the best tribute I am in a position to make to Professor McKeown, who died in June of 1988, is simply to praise this, presumably his final book. I find that easy to do because it is obviously the product of deep reading and years of pondering, but I would like to take one step more. Thomas McKeown was a philosopher and a moralist, as well as a historian, of medicine. In an age when medical "miracles" are commonplace, he did not kneel before technology, but maintained and taught the ancient wisdom that the practice of medicine is as much ethical and philosophical as scientific. For instance, he repeated again and again that the "cure" for the maladies of poverty today is the same one that began to work in Great Britain 200 years ago, i.e., decent diet. A few magical clinics, an investment of a few millions in tomography X-ray machines, will not provide humanity a sufficiency of good food. For that you have to change society. Professor McKeown knew that; and I wish I had known him.

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MIRKO D. GRMEK, *Diseases in the ancient Greek world*, trans. Mireille Muellner and Leonard Muellner, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. xii, 458, £29.00.

In this scholarly work, first published in Paris, 1983, the diseases once endemic in the European communities are examined in the setting of ancient Greece, using the concept of "pathocoenosis" and "pathocoenotic dynamism", i.e., an ensemble of the maladies simultaneously present in a specific population, the inter-dependence of each disease in frequency and overall distribution to all the rest, and their evolution and development. Difficulties of interpretation inherent in the process of discovering the "pathological reality" underlying the ancient Greek case histories, are shown to be not only problems of textual authenticity or precise translation, but of a differently based theory of disease and diagnosis, allied to a nosological terminology changed in its application over the centuries. To supplement consequent deficiencies of information obtained from textual sources, researches by medical men and scholars of many disciplines and nations, both ancient and modern, are combined with evidence from medical ex-votos, bas-reliefs, etc., to make this a book of great detail and authority.

Given the extreme care taken to ensure the accuracy of the numerous technical terms in the English translation, the occasional printing error, e.g., "public" for "pubic" and turn of phrase, such as, "binges of slaughter" or "slob", in otherwise conventional passages, are unfortunate. The transliteration of Greek terms when accompanied by translation appears an unnecessary aid, but some kind of visual representation, especially of the ex-votos described, as well as a listed bibliography would have proved invaluable for further research, as Brothwell commented in his review of the French edition (*Med. Hist.*, 1986, 30: 97).

Although the author disclaims exhaustive coverage of his theme, it is extensive, even including the allergic properties of broad beans. This is a work which undoubtedly deserves and rewards detailed study.

G. M. Longfield-Jones

RALPH JACKSON, *Doctors and diseases in the Roman Empire*, London, British Museum Publications, 1988, 8vo, pp. 208, illus., £17.50.

This is an attractively presented and entertaining discussion of medicine in its social context in the period of the Roman Empire. The reader will find, after a brief treatment of the background in Classical and Hellenistic medicine, chapter-length treatments of the health regime prescribed by doctors (for their predominantly upper-class patients), women's disorders, birth and post-natal care (and, on the other hand, contraception and infanticide or exposure), medicine as practised in the Roman army (with special reference to surgical equipment and techniques), the role of "irrational beliefs" as distinct from "scientific medicine", and diseases (degenerative and infectious) and death.