

## BOOK REVIEW

Marks, Geoffrey and Beatty, William K. *Epidemics*. New York, Scribner's, xii, 323, illus. 1976. \$9.95.  
McNeill, William H. *Plagues and Peoples*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday, viii, 369, 1976. \$10.00.

Epidemics, like the poor, are always with us; the rapid rise and the equally rapid fall of swine influenza attest this statement. The publication of two books with the common theme of epidemic disease, but with different approaches to it, is therefore welcome and timely, particularly as there are no authoritative books on this subject in print.

Both books rely on established secondary sources and especially on one nineteenth century monument of scholarship: August Hirsch's *Handbook of Geographical and Historical Pathology*<sup>1</sup>; both books describe the chronology of epidemic disease on a worldwide basis; both books are primarily written for the layman; and both books contain extensive reference notes. Where they differ is in their correlation of infectious disease and social history. This, of course, is not surprising as Messrs. Marks and Beatty are a medical journalist and medical bibliographer respectively, while Dr. McNeill is a social historian.

*Epidemics* presents a broad view of the worldwide pattern of infectious disease, ranging from biblical plagues to recent influenza pandemics. There is no acknowledgement of medical consultation in the preface, and this may account for some of the book's shortcomings, one of which is the absence of comment on the secular changes in the virulence of streptococcal infections. The most glaring omission is rubella, both as an infectious disease and as the cause of birth defects. Rubella would have been an ideal foundation on which to build the last chapter of the book, entitled "The Continuing Scene," which attempts to "provide bridges" between the old and the new epidemiology. One "bridge" used—"Dog Bites: An Unrecognized Epidemic"—is somewhat specious; another, lead poisoning, lacks bibliographical support, ignoring both the Baltimore epidemic of 1932 (probably the best example of a modern epidemic of plumbism<sup>2</sup>) and the possible role of lead poisoning in the fall of Rome.<sup>3</sup> There is also in this chapter a

misunderstanding of today's epidemiological approach to the chronic non-infectious diseases, for example, "The term epidemic is currently used loosely in such statements as 'we are faced with an epidemic of heart disease . . .'" As Morris has so frequently pointed out, there is indeed a modern epidemic of heart disease, to which may be added lung cancer and many more syndromes; in fact, modern epidemiological research into chronic disease control is a direct extension of the methods used in epidemic infectious disease investigations.<sup>4</sup>

Two points of historical interest are missed or confused. First, the Black Assizes in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were six in number, the most dramatic by far being at the old Bailey in London, where the Lord Mayor of London was infected with, and later died from, typhus.<sup>5</sup> Second, the account of John Snow's classic investigation of cholera in Soho is misrepresented, perhaps because it is based on a secondary source paper in *Scientific American* instead of the readily available original work by Snow.<sup>6</sup> The famous Broad Street Pump epidemic occurred in 1854, and not in 1849, the year in which Snow first published his theory of cholera propagation. Although Messrs. Marks's and Beatty's account does not categorically state that the epidemic occurred in 1849, neither does it make it clear that it occurred in 1854; surprisingly, this confusion has appeared several times in epidemiological papers during the past ten years, most notably in the first edition of MacMahon's *Epidemiology* (the date was corrected to 1854 in the second edition).<sup>7</sup> These are, however, minor omissions and the book on the whole is accurate and readable, as one would expect from its authors' credentials. There is a lingering impression that *Epidemics* was written from a previously compiled list of references rather than from primary observations which were verified and added to as the book was written. This must be a fairly common ploy of writing in these "publish or perish" days, the references being used as the point of departure rather than the text and context of the paper.

In summary, *Epidemics* serves its purpose as an interesting, mostly dependable, account of the evolution and ravages of epidemic infectious disease, with

the authors' comments liberally supported by quotations from contemporary documents. Its content is mainly descriptive, although it does not entirely ignore the social consequences of disease outbreaks.

*Plagues and Peoples* is a more scholarly work, which one would expect from Dr. McNeill, who won the National Book Award for History in 1964 with his book, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*.<sup>8</sup> Dr. McNeill's book documents and explains the effect of epidemic disease on the structure and evolution of civilization, both through the microcosm of microorganisms and the macrocosm of man's military machinations. The theme of war and disease has been dealt with before by Prinzling<sup>9</sup> and Major,<sup>10</sup> but neither of their works presents the correlation of epidemics and social change which is the basis of *Plagues and Peoples*. Unlike Messrs. Marks and Beatty, Dr. McNeill consulted physicians and medical historians in writing his book, and his accurate medical facts are supported by 55 pages of references and notes. Perhaps a brief description of Pavlovsky's work in landscape epidemiology<sup>11</sup> would have been welcome in the final pages of the book, particularly as it is the antithesis of the Australian experience with myxomatosis, a topic used several times to illustrate man's ecological blunders. As in all works of this type, speculation on early epidemics is replaced by the increasing certainty of documentation and diagnoses after the Black Death; this makes the later epidemics more vivid and interesting to the reader, and of more value to the interpreting social historian.

Neither book contains references to several classical epidemiological texts which should not be ignored in any survey of epidemic disease; the works of Murchison<sup>5</sup> and Drake<sup>12</sup> particularly come to mind. It is surprising, too, to see no reference to America's greatest work on cholera, usually ascribed, wrongly, to Woodworth.<sup>13</sup> The modern works of Ackerknecht<sup>14</sup> and Henschen<sup>15</sup> might have been mentioned, as might the specialized studies of Bell<sup>16</sup> and Ashburn.<sup>17</sup> The social aspects of disease summarized in Zinsser<sup>18</sup> could also have received more recognition, and Hare's *Pomp and Pestilence*<sup>19</sup> might have been noted as an introduction to the theme of *Plagues and Peoples*. Finally, any work describing the world picture of epidemics should contain maps to facilitate the reader's understanding of the geographical and temporal spread of disease; the only map in either volume is one on the Black Death in Dr. McNeill's book. The recent resurgence of interest in medical

geography might have been used and some of the many maps in existence copied or modified, if new maps were too costly to prepare.<sup>20</sup> A good example of the use of maps to supplement the text is Siegfried's *Germs and Ideas*,<sup>21</sup> in itself a pioneering precursor of *Plagues and Peoples*.

These two books complement each other; the descriptive content of *Epidemics* is expanded in *Plagues and Peoples* into a fascinating portrait of the interaction of civilization and disease, a subject already dealt with by Sigerist.<sup>22</sup> What McNeill has done for communities needs to be done for individuals, although a book by L'Étang<sup>23</sup> has taken the first step towards relating disease to the decisions affecting history made by a single man or woman. Should this study be made, one could not wish for a more scholarly work than *Plagues and Peoples*, presented perhaps in the familiar style of *Epidemics*.

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