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The waves of plague epidemics which afflicted Europe over four centuries had a profound effect on culture and society, none more so than the second plague pandemic of 1347, known as the Black Death, which has fascinated historians and novelists like Daniel Defoe, Edgar Allan Poe and Albert Camus alike. William Naphy and Andrew Spicer provide a concise and most readable history of plagues in a book notable for its numerous and excellent illustrations.

The Black Death originated in Mongolia at the beginning of the 1320s when China suffered a 65% population loss. The disease was brought to Europe by a Genoese fleet in 1347 and spread rapidly across Europe and the Mediterranean basin, killing between 30–40% of its population. Never before or since has a disease devastated so much of the world's population. Both urban and rural populations were afflicted; whole communities were destroyed and to this day the eerie, poignant ruins of deserted hamlets can be visited in southern England.

The Islamic and Christian societies responded differently to the pestilence. Muslims believed that God's punishment was targeted to the individual, while Christians saw the plague as a general punishment of society's sins. The problem was that God's purpose was unclear to the survivors. Priests, physicians and lawyers fled the plague and the burden of coping with the dying and the dead was overwhelming. Society was left bewildered, damaged, pessimistic and disillusioned with the Church. A cult of death in art emerged, characterised by the grinning skeleton with an hourglass and scythe.

Between 1500 and 1700 the plague was to return on a 15–20 year cycle, the onslaught being as fierce as it was unpredictable. The response on the continent, and particularly in Italy, was for the authorities to develop plague regulations which effectively increased the power and control of government over its citizens. The

regulations were unpopular and were resisted or circumvented. The authors also discuss why the English were slow to adopt the Italian-style regulations.

The last major plague epidemic in England was in 1665 when London lost 20% of its population. Pestilence in Western Europe ended in 1720 when the plague struck Marseilles. The account of this epidemic by the contemporary physician, Dr Bertrand, is of particular interest. Thereafter, the disease disappeared from Europe for reasons which to this day are unclear. To the end, the plague remained highly virulent, while herd immunity failed to develop.

The Black Death can be highly recommended. It makes a good beginning for those unfamiliar with the fascinating history of the plague. The more knowledgeable will also find many interesting new facts and opinions.

IAD BOUCHIER

NEW TITLES



Jonathan Cape, 2000
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What makes individual humans ready to go to war and seek to kill other human beings with whom they have no personal grievance remains imperfectly understood. It has happened since the beginning of time; some people make a profession of it. This impressively annotated book, extending to nearly 500 pages, covers the matter of soldiers and psychiatrists during the 80 years following the state of 'the Great War' – that is, the First World War. Ben Shephard approaches the business systematically and with manifest concern for even-handedness, even though – as one authority quoted puts it – 'Military psychiatry is to psychiatry as military music is to music.'

The reader is bound to wonder, again, about the morality of not only war itself but more specifically of soldiers being 'treated' by doctors who often regarded themselves as the machine gun *behind* the lines. Is it really the work of medical people to try and convince a psychologically injured soldier that his cure must include returning to the business of killing the enemy's soldiers, nonplussed about it all though he – and they – may be?

That said, there's no doubt that some painstaking work was done with very disturbed servicemen by dedicated doctors striving to get unbalanced minds back on track. Being a soldier nowadays marches to the beat of a different drum than it did up to the middle of the 20th century. The culture is now one where counselling and compensation figure boldly, the latter being exploited by some lawyers who make one cringe at the thought that the Law is so often cited as a sister profession to Medicine. Whether the soldiery perform better or more poorly now in the light of this evolution of attitude is not clear.

Not a comfortable read, then, nor one likely to be embraced by those who ordain that wars shall happen.

AK ZEALLEY



Wellcome Trust, 1999
ISBN 1-841290-08-4

This book is a transcript of a most interesting and illuminating meeting held to review the history of haemophilia treatment from 1950 to 1990. Today we take it for granted that haemophilia can be efficiently treated, but before factor VIII therapy 70% of individuals died from bleeding before the age of 15. The contributors are all well known experts whose pioneering endeavours lead to the elucidation of the coagulation cascade, the fractionation of plasma to produce factor VIII and IX concentrates and their use in patients. Graphic descriptions and photographs describe the initial attempts at plasma fractionation in Oxford. The description of the pioneering work of Ethel Bidwell includes how she would collect bovine blood from the local slaughter house in large glass containers perched on the back of her Vespa motor scooter. In 1950 she could not afford a plastic bottle for the blood, because each one would have cost her a week's wages.

As the text is a verbatim record of the individual speakers' recollections, it makes fascinating reading because the descriptions bring to light the trials, tribulations and outstanding success of attempts to develop safe and effective therapy. The events come further to light with the vigorous discussion that occurred during the meeting. There is good coverage of issues relating to hepatitis, HIV and discussions with the government over self sufficiency of factor VIII supplies in the UK. For anyone wanting to glimpse some of the exciting discoveries and how they were made in blood coagulation, particularly at Oxford under Professor Gwyn Macfarlane and Dr Rosemary Biggs, then this is an essential and good read.

CA LUDLAM