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# [Review of] Plagues & Poxes: The Impact of Human History on Epidemic Disease [by] Alfred Jay Bollet

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**Plagues & Poxes: The Impact of Human History on Epidemic Disease**

Alfred Jay Bollet

New York: Demos Medical, 2004, xii + 237p., illus., US\$29.95

Dr. Bollet has written a highly acclaimed, scholarly work on Civil War medicine (2002) but is perhaps better known as the author of short delightful essays on various medical topics published in the journal *Resident & Staff Physicians*. Many of these essays were collected in *Plagues & Poxes: The Rise and Fall of Epidemic Disease*, first published in 1987. The revised edition includes six of the earlier chapters on various infectious diseases (syphilis, smallpox, malaria, yellow fever, influenza, and polio), regrettably omits two on diphtheria and antibiotics but includes new chapters on bubonic plague, cholera, and SARS.

In a different section are gathered his earlier chapters on metabolic diseases (beriberi, pellagra, scurvy, rickets, and gout). This edition contains a separate section on "newly emerging diseases" and treats anthrax and botulism from the perspective of their potential use in terrorist attacks. Each chapter is rich in facts and anecdotal asides.

Most historical works on infectious diseases have viewed the latter's impact on political and social events. Dr. Bollet has looked at the reverse and examined how these events have influenced various diseases; hence the new subtitle, *The Impact of Human History on Epidemic Disease*. The common examples describe how travel, trade, and warfare have facilitated the spread of contagious agents. Cupidity and stupidity fostered yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793, bubonic plague in San Francisco in 1904, and the recent "mini-pandemic" of SARS. Dr. Bollet also discussed how technology (e.g., food processing) caused the emergence of vitamin deficiency diseases and how reciprocal trade (woollen clothes and port) between England and Portugal led to increased gout in the former.

The current edition of *Plagues & Poxes* is a treasury of intriguing comments about infectious diseases, e.g., "The ancient Greek word for physician, *iatros*, originally meant 'arrow remover'" (p. 90). In 1346, the Tartars dead of bubonic plague and tossed over the walls of Kaffa may not have infected anyone there, since fleas desert cold corpses. However, infected rats entering the city were more likely responsible (p. 21). Flowers offered at funerals may derive from the practice of carrying odiferous herbs to ward off the plague (p. 22). During the American Civil War soldiers resisted taking bitter quinine as a prophylaxis for malaria until this was overcome by mixing the drug in whiskey (p. 38). During this war the occupation of New Orleans by Union forces was jeopardized by any

outbreak of yellow fever in the city; thus the port physician was threatened with loss of his pay if the disease appeared (p. 51). The US Congress withheld the salaries of CDC employers "until they identified the cause of Legionnaire's disease" (p. 114).

The revised edition of *Plagues & Poxes* is more focused than the earlier one, but the latter is recommended particularly for its chapters on Vesalius and 19th-century German professors. There you would learn that Virchow alienated the Prussian government by his support of the revolutionary movement of 1848. He was not fired from his government position as prosecutor at the Charity Hospital in Berlin, but his salary was simply no longer paid.

Several of the historical points cited above invite further inquiry, but detailed references are not given in *Plagues & Poxes*. This raises the point that the literature of medical history can be grouped into two types: scholarly and popular. Both are important. William H. McNeill, Nancy G. Siraisi, and others have written heavily footnoted treatises which have an appreciative readership among active students of medical history. But I suspect that such works sit unopened on the bookshelves of many others and wait for those rare interludes in busy medical careers or for retirement when specific information on some historical matter is sought. Publishers favour works of more popular appeal, works which are not heavily documented but which survey their subject in an easy style appealing to a busy audience. *Pox & Plagues* fits that description. Over the past 30 years Dr. Bollet's many short articles have had an appreciative audience among young physicians and have promoted a taste for the history of medicine when its presence in recent medical education has waned. This edition of his book continues in that worthy vein.

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