

BOOK REVIEW

The Ague: A History of Indigenous Malaria in Cumbria and the North by Ian D Hodkinson

Softback, 84 pages

Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society

December 2016

This fascinating book deserves the attention of both the specialist and the general reader. It focuses on Cumbria and the North, as the title clearly indicates, but the wealth of more general information included makes it more widely relevant. I found myself captivated after reading the first few pages as, I believe, would anyone curious to know more about an ailment which has severely troubled mankind for millennia and is likely to do so for many years to come.

Whilst the history of malaria probably begins as a disease of primates in Africa about 12,000 years ago, Hodkinson's story starts with the Anglo-Saxons. He tells us that the disease most probably came to England with mosquitoes blown across The Channel and then spread north, carried by both the mosquito and people infected by it. The incidence of the disease was high then and continued to be so into the 19th century.

Accounts of sickness due to malaria – what came to be known as “the Ague” – are numerous, but most usually relate to infections in the South and East of the country. It is the relative dearth of readily available information about regions further north which prompted the author to compile a detailed record of infections in this region going back to the 17th century. He also provides accounts of speculation at the time as to what might have been causing the condition as well as to how it might be treated. Amongst the latter was the consumption of spiders, a therapy which, although cheap, I suspect many would have found to be more unpleasant than the great variety of very expensive and possibly foul-tasting patent medicines available in Cumbria at the time.

The last section of the book covers the recognition of quinine from tree bark as a remedy, but at least as importantly, the changes in agricultural practice which played a major role in causing the disease to decline in the UK as the 19th century progressed. Finally, there is a thoroughly objective assessment of how current practices and changing climate might affect the incidence of the disease both in the UK and further afield.

The Ague may be a short book, but the task of gathering the necessary information to write it will have been considerable, a fact borne out by the extensive referencing both to primary sources as well as to published material, making it a thoroughly recommended contribution on the subject.

Tim Mason
May 2017

Published online at www.bshh.org.uk.