

BOOK REVIEW

Scurvy: The Disease of Discovery *by Jonathan Lamb*

Hardback, 328 pages
Princeton University Press
December 2016

Scurvy is a fascinating yet deeply disturbing book which presents a rich and scholarly intellectual history of the disease.

Lamb's aim is to move beyond the heroic narrative of cure and situate more serious discussion of "the malign genius" of scurvy in its maritime context of discovery. Of course, the observations of Lind, Cook, Trotter, Beddoes and Blane appear. However, the author reminds us that tackling scurvy at sea was a matter of dispute and incoherent history. Cures were repeatedly lost or discredited by the Admiralty out of embarrassment, due to deliberate misdiagnosis, or for cost reasons.

The medical background is provided in a *coda* by neuroscientists Fiona Harrison & James May. Scurvy is known to be caused by deficiency of vitamin C which we can only obtain from our diet. The symptoms include putrid gums, loose teeth, re-opened wounds and loss of cartilage, but current research is revealing the complex action of vitamin C in the brain and how it affects behaviour.

The enigma of scurvy, which often caused an oscillation between very different feelings in the victim – "*a mind as loose from scurvy as the teeth*" – is displayed by the amazing breadth of Lamb's evidence, based on sea journals, and both theoretical and empirical enquiries, ranging from the Mediterranean, *via* Cook's Pacific voyages, to disastrous polar expeditions in the 20th Century.

Lamb vividly describes the phenomenon and experience of "scorbutic nostalgia", giving as an example Hodges' painting *Pickersgill Harbour*, which re-uses a canvas of icebergs seen from aboard Cook's ship *Resolution* – "*Everything forbidding was converted into its opposite*". In the most disturbing chapter, he argues that an insidious "culture of scurvy" arose in Botany Bay, the great experiment of a penal colony at the extremity of the globe, which proved a terrible failure.

The author shows how fiction, and in particular romance, supplied models to the scorbutic imagination. Voyage literature has tales of rape, sexual liberty, and bastardy. Scurvy itself is described as a "bastard of many parents". Horror is turned into beauty, and then into tragedy. Lamb argues powerfully that Homer's *Odyssey*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* sit at the centre of the literature of scurvy.

In conclusion, this is a compelling, but challenging, book of importance to a wide readership. We should not forget that scurvy remains a disease of poverty in the 21st Century. Even in the developed world, vitamin C deficiency poses a threat to healthy aging.

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