

BOOK REVIEW

War Against Smallpox: Edward Jenner and the Global Spread of Vaccination *by Michael Bennett*

Paperback, 434 pages (also available in hardback and e-book formats)
Cambridge University Press
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The title of this text might prompt prospective readers to dismiss it as yet one more recounting of the tale leading from the attractive complexions of smallpox immune milkmaids to Edward Jenner's establishment of the use of cowpox and the technique of vaccination, which would lead to the eventual elimination of smallpox as a disease of mankind. A cursory glance at this impressively researched volume dispels any such pejorative assessments, not least by its citation of some two thousand references, published in a variety of languages.

In the early chapters Bennett describes how smallpox, a disease that had been endemic in China, spread westward in the early centuries of the Christian era to become endemic globally by the 18th century. We learn that many communities far removed from Western Culture, independently of one another, had adopted the technique of "inoculation" whereby individuals were deliberately infected with virus derived from sufferers with a mild form of the disease and were thereby protected from more serious variants.

The author draws our attention to the unfortunate timing of Jenner's recognition of vaccination with the French Revolutionary Wars and then the Napoleonic Wars. The reader is given a fascinating account of how, despite the continent being in turmoil, there was wide dispersal not just of knowledge of vaccination but also of the material with which to carry it out.

In the following eight chapters we are given an account of the uptake of first inoculation and then vaccination in every region of the inhabited world. We are left in no doubt as to the global significance of Jenner's researches. The final chapter sees Jenner at home in Berkeley, where he reflects upon himself as "Vaccine clerk to the world". He died from a stroke in 1823.

This book gives fascinating insight into the challenges of disseminating scientific information at a time of international conflict and in the face of opposing campaigns of misinformation. It would be of particular interest to those desiring to know more than is to be found in the superfluity of books covering this topic; certainly, academics of the period but also lay readers with an interest in medical history.

Tim Mason
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