

The Cancer Problem. Malignancy in Nineteenth-Century Britain **by Agnes Arnold-Foster**

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Cancer is often thought of as a disease of 20th century modernity. Arnold-Foster contends it was in the 19th century, within the context of hospitals newly dedicated to treat cancer patients, that it became conceptualised as a deadly disease and acquired the symbolic, emotional and politicised status it has today.

The first part of her book draws on archival material from the Middlesex Hospital, the medical literature and popular accounts to look at the ‘cancer problem’ from the view of both practitioners and patients and the dynamic between them. Hospitalisation and its practices gave the care and observation of cancer patients new legitimacy. Re-defining cancer as a local disease made surgery the ideal method of treatment, although one that was palliative rather curative.

Elite surgeons defined cancer as an incurable disease and tried to distance themselves from competitors by virtue of their humanitarian and benevolent actions in the face of this progressive and irreversible malady. Other practitioners and alternative healers sought to undermine this negative characterisation and offered ‘cancer cures’ to desperate patients otherwise destined to suffer without hope, in the face of inexorable decline.

The second part uses a broad range of source materials to document how cancer was viewed by relevant disciplines, including public health, histology, bacteriology and colonial medicine. A fascinating and well-illustrated chapter describes the mapping of cancer incidence by geographical location. Such work pointed to a link between the causation of cancer and the rural landscape, especially seasonally flooded districts, as distinct from the urban or industrial environment.

Laboratory studies of cells, bacteria and parasites brought new insights into the biological nature of cancer but had little immediate impact on treatment. Some thought that increasing deaths from cancer in richer nations were an unintended consequence of civilisation; others the price paid for the success of sanitation in reducing mortality from other causes. The very intractability of cancer challenged the medical optimism of this period.

The Cancer Problem is a work of scholarship and erudition. Its strengths include an extensive analysis of contemporary texts, the author’s evident academic and literary skills and the meticulous footnotes and comprehensive bibliography. This book is an important contribution and should be essential reading for anyone interested in the history of cancer, medicine and surgery in the 19th century and the social, cultural and emotional forces in play.

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