

BOOK REVIEW

Maladies of Empire: How Colonialism, Slavery, and War Transformed Medicine

by Jim Downs

Hardback, 272 pages

Harvard University Press, ISBN 9780674971721

September 2021

In this well researched and referenced work, Dr Downs examines the relationship between the early development of epidemiology, colonialism, the institution of enslavement and the bureaucracy of Empire. In a clear narrative, supported by wide-ranging primary sources, Downs shows that the early observation of infectious disease often arose from the study of armed forces, enslaved people, and imperial colonists. The book mainly focuses on the period 1755 to 1866, within a global framework.

The narrative describes how the contained environments of prisons, slave ships, plantations, and military camps, enabled physicians to observe infected and non-infected patients. These epidemiological studies, undertaken in the peripheries of Empire, informed and contributed to wider public health measures.

In discussing the American Civil war and the Antebellum era, Downs causes the reader to reconsider the role of enslavement in informing the concepts of racialisation in the approach of the US Sanitary Commission. He identifies the role of medicine in racial attitudes, including segregation and eugenics in the United States.

Downs explains that the epidemiology was not predominately altruistic, but part of bureaucracies facilitating Imperial projects and enhancing the commercial exploitation of enslaved labour. The development of epidemiology was driven by the sharing of global experience by increasing publication of clinical experience.

I would have liked to see a greater emphasis on the development of scientific method arising from the observation and classification of the natural world during the Enlightenment. The paradox of scientists and social improvers of the late and post-Enlightenment accepting racial stereotyping and suppression of poorer classes would have been a useful addition to the narrative.

By highlighting the connection between enslavement, colonialism and war with the progress of epidemiology informing public health, this book is relevant reading for historians in a wide variety of fields but especially healthcare historians. By recognising the experience of the enslaved poor and military in the evolution of medicine, it gives in part a voice to those who usually appear as a statistic while the clinicians are lauded.

Michael Davidson

April 2022

Published online at www.bshh.org.uk