

BOOK REVIEW

Outcast: A History of Leprosy, Humanity and the Modern World *by Oliver Basciano*

Hardback, 320 pages
Faber & Faber
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Leprosy is a neglected disease. It has a fascinating history, intertwined with religion, fear, stigma, ambivalence. Many think leprosy is eradicated but there are still hundreds of thousands of new cases each year in many countries, including India, Nepal and Brazil. It is hardly seen in Europe nowadays, except as imported cases. Fortunately, the forced isolation of 'lepers', now a derogatory term, in leper colonies is largely a thing of the past. Modern chemotherapy and active screening have greatly aided this change.

Basciano is a recognised journalist and editor. This debut book addresses leprosy, not so much the medical aspects of the disease, as the stigma, politics and human behaviour surrounding it. The book is not illustrated, something which I miss for this kind of visual disease. It is indexed and well referenced. The writing style is enquiring, flowing, informative and entertaining. The book is not written for experts but will appeal to the curious and also those with medical knowledge because it addresses social aspects more than scientific ones. Basciano draws on primary sources—archival records, patient testimonies, and artifacts like Hansen's microscope and wax casts, interweaving them with fieldwork interviews across five continents.

The author takes us on a personal and readable global journey to various places around the world, starting with St Albans. The biblical and mediaeval links between leprosy and Christianity are discussed.

He then moves to Bergen, Norway where the causative bacterium, *Mycobacterium leprae* was discovered in 1873. There is a discussion of leprosy there and Hansen's ethics. Debates around the rights of the individual versus the state and informed consent are addressed.

From there, the author takes us to places such as Molokai in Hawaii, where Saint Damien worked, finally contracting leprosy and the controversies surrounding that. On Robben Island, South Africa, leprosy is mixed with precursors to apartheid. Thence to Romania and Europe's last leprosarium with a discussion on links to national socialism and the ghettos. In Mozambique, we read of modern-day leprosy and wider politics, corruption and strife.

The journey continues to high prevalence Brazil, first Rio and the segregation of the leprosy afflicted and in a wider context, exclusion, control and fear. Then on to Juazeiro do Norte and a discussion of transmission. Finally, in Japan, a tale of change from oppression and forced abortion to release by patient activism.

The book is packed with information at a human level. It raises many social issues and is relevant to other infections and indeed societal conflicts where containment and isolation may be deemed necessary by authorities.

I would recommend it to those interested in the complex interplay between Infection, politics and power and, indeed, to the inquisitive general reader.

William Dobb
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