

family, and to what extent the knowledge of the human family during the Pleistocene informs us on current behaviour.

ALEX ALVERGNE

University College London, UK

**Cholera: The Biography.** By Christopher Hamlin. Pp. 344. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.) £12.99, ISBN 978-0-19-954624-4, hardback. doi: 10.1017/S0021932011000095.

Part of the 'Biographies of Disease' series, edited by William and Helen Bynum, Hamlin's book is, on one level, an illuminating account of the history of cholera. It is, however, much more than this. In highlighting the 'sheer multidimensional indefiniteness' of cholera, Hamlin forces us to consider the very meaning of this and other infectious diseases, past, present and future, and so places his book firmly within the realms of the new disease ecology.

In spite of the lack of footnotes and a prologue featuring the children's book *The Secret Garden*, this is a dense and intellectually stimulating book which presupposes considerable knowledge of the disease itself, and of the historical and cultural contexts in which it is discussed. It is a text that demands to be considered as a whole – almost, indeed, to be read in its entirety at a single sitting. Hamlin builds upon ideas and information in a chronological manner yet weaves strands of the main argument – the impossibility of actually defining something as complex as cholera – throughout the text.

The initial chapters consider the *idea* of cholera, the various meanings of the term itself, the gradual, and problematic, 'Asianisation' of its identity, and the rise of the cholera epidemics in the nineteenth century. Chapter III, 'Citizen Cholera', reviews the changing cultural, moral and political responses to cholera as it became entrenched across Europe and beyond. Community, national and later international cholera policies were demanded and instigated with vigour, yet the disease, notes Hamlin, 'was not inherently a medical or a scientific problem'. The rise of scientific thinking, the problematic dichotomy of contagionist and anticontagionist ideas, and the early epidemiological work of John Snow and others are discussed in the fourth chapter. As elsewhere in the book, Hamlin is keen to link historical with modern cholera science, pointing out that ideas dismissed or ridiculed in their time were often remarkably prescient. All of the questions and approaches raised in the mid-19th century and abandoned in the subsequent reductionist era, he notes, remain relevant to the more collaborative cholera research of the present day.

In the remaining chapters of the book Hamlin discusses the 1880s 'watershed' in cholera publications following Koch's isolation of the *Vibrio* and the consequences of this in regard to treatment and prevention. The pathway from initial scepticism, to over-simplistic confidence, and back to multi-faceted complexity – a familiar story in infectious disease history – is carefully dissected by Hamlin. Here he forces the reader to consider the cultural and environmental aspects of the disease alongside the microbiological and clinical ones, and leaves us with the thought-provoking idea that,

‘Cholera will not disappear nor cease to mean. A great challenge will be to respond to the meanings it is given.’

EMMA COLEMAN-JONES  
*Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology,  
University of Oxford, UK*