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Review of: Health and Disease in Human History (Robert I. Rotberg ed.)

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Erratum
The book review on Health and Disease in Human History: A Journal of Interdisciplinary History Reader, 12 Risk-Health, Safety & Environment 143 (2001), incorrectly identified Frank McBride as the author of Angela’s Ashes, instead of Frank McCourt.

Health and Disease in Human History dispels the very notion that poor nutrition, disease and other forms of horrific interference prevent human advancement. Rather, Health concludes that many of the disastrous events to which humankind has been exposed represent mere speed bumps in the path of development. There is a common theme in example after devastating example asserted by each of the thirteen essayists: the tenacity of the human spirit is as all consuming as a football team inhaling a pizza after practice.

The essays’ titles accurately represent its morose content. For example, the contents include articles such as: “The Slave Trade and the Transmission of Smallpox to Brazil”; “Smallpox and Demographic Catastrophe in Mexico”; and, “Africa Mortality in the Suppression of the Slave Trade: The Case of the Bight of Biafra.” Fear not, however; the prose describing these sullen topics has been thoroughly pasteurized. The authors “clinically” speak to centuries of poverty, unsafe conditions, nutritional deprivation and disease experienced by diverse cultures. Although we wept over similar insults to the human spirit while reading Frank McBride’s Angela’s Ashes, the pages in Health will remain unstained by tears.

Yet, you will simultaneously cringe at the statistical horror of each hazard confronted and marvel at each survivor’s resolve. The graphic evidence of suffering in Health is incomprehensibly stark. The tedious results scream “human misery”: Scatter graphs of the relationship between Infant Mortality and Log Population Density; Mortality between the Bight of Biafra and Sierra Leone related to Length of Voyage and compared with Transatlantic Mortality; the Summary Chronology of Droughts and Epidemics in Africa; or, Infant Mortality in England and Wales.

In Health, we learn that early British bakers assisted in the mortality rates by offering up their inventive food additives to the locals (making the folks packaging lunchmeat in Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle look like...
a bunch of pikers). “Adulterated bread was certainly considered a cause of infant mortality in the late eighteenth century. With the addition of chalk, alum and bone-ashes to London bread, it would be surprising if vulnerable infants were not in one sense poisoned by being weaned on pap made with bread....”

Humans have been involuntarily placed in harm’s way long before Ebola’s exotic extremes were portrayed in Hot Zone and The Coming Plague. And death’s antidotes, while elementary and obvious to us now, were perhaps part of a simple equation that accounted for acceptable causalities. When the “slaver” Invincival was captured near Cameroon just before Christmas in 1826, “only 250 of 440 slaves on board ... survived the journey.... [T]he British captors reported that the ship carried food and water ‘in abundance and the best quality.’”

If Emeril Lagasse’s perfect recipe for life’s nutritional requirements allows the strong to enjoy and endure, lack one “insignificant” ingredient and disease will hunt the weak and young relentlessly. Infant beriberi caused by lack of thiamine accounted for 75%-85% of the 25,000 beriberi deaths reported in the Philippines as recently as the 1950s. The West Indian literature has frequent examples of “mothers who had produced fifteen children and lost all but two, or who ‘had borne ten children, and yet has now but one alive,’ or ‘... who have had four, five, six children, without succeeding in bringing up one.’”

While I doubt that the various contributors to Health intended to metaphorically question the “hunger” of coming generations, I believe these brilliant thinkers have underestimated the breadth and contemporary nature of their work. Since the poverty, hunger and disease presented in Health didn’t prevent human progression, I contend the fight to overcome these most depressing aspects of life actually promotes human advancement. The penultimate question is: “How do we keep our children and successor generations ‘hungry’ enough to advance humankind when they have so much to eat?”

Terry Cromwell†

1 Health and Disease in Human History 49 (Robert I. Rotberg ed. 2000).
2 Id. at 284.
3 Id. at 245-247.

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