

From dock to doc

Len Goodwin

From the Greenwich Hulks to Old St Pancras: A History of Tropical Disease in London. By G. C. Cook. *Athlone*: 1992. Pp. 338. £35.

WHENEVER a nation undergoes a radical change in its technology or its political and military strategy, there are redundancies, often on a massive scale. So it was in Britain at the end of the Napoleonic wars, when the streets of London were crowded with desperate, homeless, workless sailors. Many had

patients had sailed in tropical waters and had diseases such as malaria, cholera, typhoid and dysentery, rarely seen in Britain now that the marshes had been drained and sanitation improved.

The British have been accused of inventing 'tropical medicine' as a speciality — but it was really inevitable in the age of imperialism, when explorers, the military, colonial administrators, industry and finally settlers came face to face with new and unfamiliar diseases in tropical countries. Medical officers in the army and the colonial service (many of them Scots who had difficulty in finding employment at home) occupied their spare time by studying the diseases and the life cycles of the parasites that caused them.

The most famous was Patrick Manson,

bined in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, which opened in Bloomsbury in 1929.

Emphasis was on research and public health; the Seamen's Hospital Society backed out and the hospital was left high and dry. This marked a sad day for clinical tropical medicine in London, because basic research needs a strong clinical input. The hospital continued to move, ending up in its present home in St Pancras Hospital in 1951.

Gordon Cook is a clinician who has served in the Nigerian Army, has been a professor of medicine in Zambia, Riyadh and Papua New Guinea, and is now a consultant at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in London. He has burrowed deeply into the contemporary documents and his story of triumphs and disasters,



Keeping illness at bay — Greenwich Hospital and the *Dreadnought*, 1841. (From *From the Greenwich Hulks to Old St Pancras*.)

been at sea since boyhood and were quite unable to cope with life ashore. They mistrusted everything, including the hospitals, which they refused to enter when they fell ill.

Wilberforce and other philanthropists drew attention to the problem and in 1823 the Seamen's Hospital Society was founded. The Navy lent the society the *Grampus*, an old 48-gun stores ship; it was moored at Greenwich and refitted as a hospital, and it accepted, without paperwork or bureaucracy, sick seamen of all nationalities from ships entering the Port of London. It was an immediate success and before long was replaced by the *Dreadnought* and other, larger vessels. The Greenwich hospital ships served for half a century and admitted more than 100,000 sailors.

But the ships were draughty, unhygienic and inconvenient, and in 1870, after some argument, the Navy leased part of the Greenwich Hospital to the Seamen's Hospital Society. That part was still called the *Dreadnought* and its activities were soon greatly expanded, with a branch hospital opening at the Victoria and Albert Dock. Many of the

who discovered the role of the mosquito as the intermediate host of the filarial worm that causes elephantiasis, and whose advice and support later helped Ronald Ross to elucidate the mosquito transmission of malaria. In 1890 Manson was back from the Far East, lecturing in London and arguing that Britain, as the hub of a great tropical empire, needed to teach tropical medicine as a new discipline, and needed schools to teach it in. The idea was supported by Joseph Chamberlain, the colourful Secretary of State for the Colonies, and a new wing was built, with government support, at the Victoria and Albert Dock Hospital to house a new London School of Tropical Medicine. Controversy broke out — the physicians at the *Dreadnought* were jealous and there was a long and acrimonious correspondence in the medical press — but the school was founded in 1899 and remained there until disrupted by war in 1914. It gained a high reputation, and by 1920 had moved to central London, where the Rockefeller Foundation was already offering assistance to build a School of Hygiene. The institutions were com-

achievements, rivalries and missed opportunities is allowed to speak for itself through the inclusion of letters, official reports and commentaries of the time, enlivened by *Punch* cartoons and photographs of the places and people concerned. This is a longer and more detailed account, and the style more restrained, than that of the ebullient Sir Philip Manson Bahr (Manson's son-in-law) who wrote a history of the school, full of biographical detail and personal reminiscences, in 1956. Cook resents the present neglect of clinical tropical medicine in Britain and the continued failure to renew an effective link between the school and the hospital. With the present uncertainty over the fate of teaching hospitals in London, the flagship of tropical medicine could be sunk and lost for ever and "Manson's achievement (like that of the British Empire) will become a mere memory of a bygone era". □

Len Goodwin, Shepperlands Farm, Park Lane, Finchampstead, Berkshire RG11 4QF, UK, was formerly Director of Science at the Zoological Society of London.