The imperial slaughterhouse

Literature and the toll paid for the subjugation of the British Empire.

Romanticism and Colonial Disease

by Alan Bewell

Johns Hopkins University Press: 2000. 373 pp.
\$45, £35

Roy Porter

Living as we do in an era of the 'globalization of disease', threatened by new killer viruses jetting around the world, we have become more aware of the role of disease in shaping human history. And in no sphere is that more evident than in the blood-drenched chronicles of imperialism. Wherever Europeans went, they brought ghastly epidemics — smallpox, typhus, tuberculosis — to virgin populations entirely lacking resistance. The results were devastating. During the century following Christopher Columbus, in many zones of the New World up to 90 per cent of the indigenous population was wiped out — germs were far more lethal than guns in expediting the work of conquest. Over the course of the next three centuries, some 20 million slaves then had to be shipped to the Americas to fill the labour vacuum, and they in turn brought in their wake the characteristic African diseases of malaria and yellow fever.

It would be a mistake for us to assume that our post-colonial times are the first to appreciate the medical disasters wrought by empire-building. Compassionate contemporaries were under no illusions, as Alan Bewell stresses in his skilfully written, cross-disciplinary book. "Wherever the European has trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal," rued the sensitive young Charles Darwin in his *Beagle* journal, shortly before the Tasmanian aborigines were driven into extinction, largely by white men's diseases.

Particularly sensitive to this melancholy plight were the English Romantics, sympathizing with victims and siding with the people against the powerful. The artist and poet William Blake never ceased to expose the plague of empire, and he found worthy successors in Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, who himself fell victim to fever while fighting on the side of the Greeks against the curse of the Ottoman Empire; and even the increasingly reactionary Samuel Coleridge remained fervent in his hatred of the slave trade. Bewell brings out well the Romantics' dramatic vision of the toll taken by imperial conquest upon the health of all parties.

In poetry and prose alike, Romantic circles portrayed the hubris of the colonial slaughterhouse. The health of natives was undermined by settlers' diseases; slaves were brutalized, not least by syphilis passed on by masters' lusts; and Europeans fell like flies

Sickness from abroad: Father Thames presents his offspring, which includes the tropical disease cholera.

themselves, above all, those hard-living and hard-drinking soldiers sent to garrison the outposts of West Africa and the Caribbean. Out of 350 men sent to the Gold Coast in 1782, only seven were alive and on duty three years later. Despatched to quell a slave rebellion on St Domingue, 40,000 French soldiers died, allowing Haiti to come into existence, the first black state in the New World.

Like Coleridge in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, William Wordsworth, too, was particularly effective in conveying the plight of 'tropical invalids'. Returning from duty overseas, pallid and haggard, their constitutions wrecked, ex-soldiers were treated as pariahs, disowned by all for bearing the stigma of colonial dirty work. It is no accident that it was Mary Shelley who, with the first cholera pandemic approaching, produced in *The Last Man* (1826) a futuristic novel about the eradication of the entire human race by a new killer plague emerging out of the East, nature's punishment for human vainglory.

The tropics also did rhetorical service as a mirror held up to home at a time of industrialization. The living conditions of the masses in 'darkest England' were routinely likened to those of Indian or African natives. "The room of a fever patient, in a small and heated apartment in London, with no perflation of fresh air," opined the sanitary reformer Thomas Southwood Smith, "is perfectly analogous to a stagnant pool in Ethiopia, full of the bodies of dead locusts. The poison generated in both cases is the same." Cholera introduced a

terrifying tropical disease into the very homes of the English, the retribution of the Orient. As in the subjugated empire, the disease was widely read as symptomatic of the filth and disorder of the masses, indeed, a manifestation of the 'democracy fever' that arose with the Reform Bill of 1832.

Perhaps galvanized by putrefaction and pauperism at home, Romantic attitudes to colonial disease were complex. On the one hand there was a pervasive fatalism. With their steamy swamps and rotting vegetation, the tropics were inherently pathogenic, according to the dominant miasmatic theories of disease aetiology set out in James Lind's *Essay on the Diseases Incidental to Europeans in Hot Climates* (1768) and elsewhere. Sensible diet, lifestyle and 'seasoning' (acclimatization) might reduce the risks, but torrid climes were inevitably white men's graves.

Yet Romanticism also possessed a Promethean streak. Through the application of science, energy and will, progress could transform the environment, drain swamps, fell forests, introduce sweet air, and clean up settlements; humanitarianism could make the 'heart of darkness' as hygienic as temperate parts. The Romantic dream of environmental transformation thus expressed a noble ideal, not dissimilar to the imperialist 'white man's burden'. As Bewell insists, these facts require us to abandon any simplistic vision of the Romantics as pure nature-lovers.

Readers familiar with this field will find

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that *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* sometimes reploughs furrows recently turned by others. *Jane Eyre* is recycled as an imperial novel, and the ambiguous attitudes of Thomas De Quincey towards the East (it brought cholera and the bitter-sweet opium to which he was addicted) are again discussed. And, strangely for a professional literary critic, Bewell is at his weakest when practising textual criticism, some of his readings being forced or far-fetched. We are told, for instance, that "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies", the evocative final line of John Keats' ode "To Autumn", incorporates a reference to the sore throat from which the poet had been suffering as a result of his encroaching tuberculosis, making swallowing difficult. Readers will surely find that interpretation hard to swallow.

Overall, however, this is a confident addition to the growing study of the history of environmental protest. It used to be said that if there was any justification of imperialism, it was the medical benefits it had conferred. As early as the Romantics, that could have been dismissed as special pleading. ■

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A meteorologist's nightmare

Isaac's Storm

by Erik Larson

Fourth Estate/Crown: 1999. 366/384 pp.
£16.99/\$25

Howard B. Bluestein

My late paternal grandfather, Isaac Springer, described to me his experience of driving around fallen trees and downed power lines during the great New England hurricane of 1938. Although he did not know then that he was experiencing one of the most significant

Wave of destruction: a lithograph depicting the 20-foot storm surge that devastated Galveston.

North American storms of the century, he did realize that something different from the ordinary was occurring. Thirty-eight years earlier, on 8 September 1900, Isaac Cline, a meteorologist living in Galveston, Texas, faced a similar situation. This Isaac's storm, one of the greatest and most deadly hurricanes ever to strike the United States, was not forecast by the US Weather Bureau, largely because there were few observations over the ocean, and many forecasters incorrectly interpreted the data available. Consequently, thousands of people died in a storm whose winds reached perhaps as much as 150 miles an hour, and which produced a storm surge of some 20 feet, washing away houses and the people in them.

Cline, who survived, had not believed that a hurricane born in the Caribbean could strike the Texas Gulf coast; instead, he thought a Caribbean hurricane would curve

to the right as it progressed westward, so that it would make landfall along the east coast of the United States or along the Gulf coast east of Texas, or simply stay over the Atlantic.

Erik Larson's riveting *Isaac's Storm* is a fascinating account of the great Galveston hurricane, recreated around the central character of Cline. The book sets the historical stage for the hurricane and how the Weather Bureau mishandled its forecast. It is hard to conceive today, when we have excellent surveillance by satellites and aircraft both day and night, that even the existence or location of hurricanes over the ocean was not so long ago a matter of surprise at worst and of debate at best. We still have difficulty predicting the precise track of a hurricane, and whether or not it will intensify, because we do not have a map of the exact ocean temperatures under the storm, or details of the wind field throughout the troposphere in the vicinity of the storm. However, we do know that a hurricane is out there and therefore can try to guess what stretch of coastline it might strike by extrapolating its future track. As a result, watches and warnings alert citizens well in advance of hurricane landfall.

Why the hurricane was not forecast properly, however, was only in part a result of scientific uncertainty; the public was not warned mainly because of politics and personalities. The author carefully documents how government officials, possessed by vanity and intoxicated by power, could have allowed better forecasts despite the scientific uncertainties. The author makes a convincing case that the Galveston tragedy involved a mixture of scientific ignorance, managerial incompetence and bad luck.

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