

Book Reviews

The focus of the volume then shifts fully to the disease environments of the New World. Thorough and persuasive articles examine the previously unexplained ailment of dry belly ache, interpreted here as the result of lead poisoning; consider the effect of improved nutrition on a normally malnourished West Indian slave population; and Donald Cooper confirms that the susceptibility to cholera previously identified in American Blacks extended to Brazilian Blacks. Richard Steckel contributes an enterprising interdisciplinary study of slave childhood, reminding us that the common perception of good material treatment did not necessarily extend to the most vulnerable in slave societies. Finally, Thomas Wilson turns to a current medical problem, hypertension, and presents a convincing historical hypothesis for its continued high prevalence amongst Blacks.

In a concluding chapter on future avenues of research, Kiple argues that with the boundaries between the physical and social sciences now broken down, black biological history has an exciting future. This volume is evidence of both the vitality and the quality of the work presently being undertaken, and of the enormous opportunities an interdisciplinary approach offers historians in this field.

Adrian P. Mercer
London

ALFRED JAY BOLLET, *Plagues & poxes: the rise and fall of epidemic disease*, New York, Demos Publications, 1987, 8vo, pp. xii, 196, \$29.95.

One of the things that evidently irritate professional historians is the delight laymen take in parlour games—the effects on history if Cleopatra's nose had been a different shape, say, or if a later Greek king had not died from a monkey bite. But such pastimes are harmless and players will rejoice that Dr Alfred Jay Bollet's book gives them a new hand. His collection of essays, originally published in *Resident and Staff Physician* and *Medical Times*, deals elegantly and excitingly with a wide range of topics. In fact, his title *Plagues and poxes* does less than justice to the much wider scope of the book; to be sure, Bollet discusses syphilis and smallpox, malaria and yellow fever, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and the Spanish influenza, but he also spends much of the book on such other topics as the discovery of the vitamin deficiencies, advances in surgical care, and the rise of myocardial infarction. There are also excellent accounts of the illnesses of various presidents of the USA, including the secret operation on Cleveland, done on a yacht to remove a cancer of the hard palate.

As is often the case these days, however, Dr Bollet has not been well served by his publishers: some illustrations would have been an attractive feature, there is no index, and irritating errors such as Lemelian for Lumleian, Keil for Kiel, and Ronald Hart for Hare should have been put right. A more cogent criticism of the book is that the strait-jacket of the essay does not always make for a rounded discussion of a difficult subject: you would never guess, for instance, at the serious difficulties encountered by Sir Morell Mackenzie in treating the German Crown Prince or by Howard Florey in developing penicillin. And Bollet has a tendency to swallow one side of the story. On the basis of one article (admittedly by the President's physician) he seems to refute the orthodoxy that Roosevelt was a sick man at Yalta and hence failed to stand up to Stalin. In Bollet's view, Roosevelt's appearance was due to dieting and excessive digitalis and there was little evidence of cardiovascular disease. Yet such shrewd observers as Sir Alexander Cadogan had little doubt that Roosevelt's lack of interest and torpor at the conference reflected serious illness, a view they thought confirmed when he died of a sudden stroke two months after Yalta. Nevertheless, these are not major criticisms and it is good to have such readable and adequate documentation of so many important medical advances in a single book.

Stephen Lock
British Medical Journal

F. FENNER and A. GIBBS (editors), *Portraits of viruses: a history of virology*, Basle, Karger, 1988, 8vo, pp. viii, 344, illus., S.Fr. 147.00/DM 176.00/\$98.00/£66.90.