

## Book Reviews

**Frank M Snowden**, *Naples in the time of cholera, 1884–1911*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. xvi, 478, £40.00, \$59.95 (0–521–48310–7).

During September 1884, Naples was afflicted by its worst outbreak of cholera since 1837. “The immediate impression” Frank Snowden remarks, “was that all of Naples was dying” (p. 106). The sheer number of cases and the speed with which the epidemic struck spread fear and hysteria among those inhabitants, mostly the poorest, who were unable to flee the city. This experience of cholera set Naples apart. It was the only major European city to be so affected—by 1884, efforts to combat the spread of the disease in Berlin, Paris and London were proving largely successful—and it was the only one to be gripped by a “cholera phobia”. Fear of *untori* (poisoners) led to acts of violence and to collective protest against the prophylactic measures introduced by the authorities. The Neapolitan cholera of 1884 was thus a striking indicator of the popular ignorance still prevailing in Italy’s largest city and of its “hygienic neglect” by a regime “that claimed to be a Liberal modern state” (p. 178).

After the tragedy of 1884, the municipal government was determined to prevent any recurrence of the disease. Influenced by Pettenkofer’s miasmo-contagionist theory, it drew up an elaborate project to demolish the labyrinths and *fondaci* of Naples’ Lower City and to construct a central boulevard with intersecting avenues. These would act as a “great urban lung”, dispersing the “foul miasmas” which caused cholera (p. 186). Unfortunately, Pettenkofer’s theory of cholera was discredited shortly afterwards. The project itself was exposed to a different kind of southern disease, that of corruption. Funds were given to a single monopolistic contractor, interested only in maximizing profits. The building work was shoddy, little attempt was made to rehouse the tenants of demolished

buildings, and a rise in rents led to new problems of overcrowding. The logic of speculation overshadowed that of public health and, in the end, the worst slums of Naples, with the highest mortality rates in 1884, were excluded from the process of *risanamento*.

Much of *Naples in the time of cholera* is given over to a meticulous reconstruction of the 1884 epidemic in the city and of the appalling sanitary conditions which facilitated its spread. However, Snowden also argues that the case of Naples adds weight to Asa Briggs’s claims about the wider social, political and medical significance of cholera (‘Cholera and society in the nineteenth century’, *Past and Present*, 1961, 19: 76–96). Snowden argues that cholera in Naples defined the conduct and aims of municipal policy after 1884 and profoundly influenced the social geography of the city. He maintains, in fact, that cholera in Naples reflected Italy’s “Southern Question” and the institutionalized corruption of Italian political life.

Cholera became, in Snowden’s words, “a metaphor for all of the discontents of southerners under a political order dominated by Piedmont” (p. 361). The recurrence of cholera became so identified with the failure of government policy that when another outbreak threatened Naples, in 1910, it brought down the Italian government. Snowden has uncovered a mass of evidence to suggest that a conspiracy was then organized by the new prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti, to conceal the 1911 epidemic from the public. Even in the twentieth century, Snowden concludes, when the causes and treatment of the disease were relatively well-established, cholera had lost none of its power to disturb. What was referred to in parliament as “the disease we aren’t allowed to mention” (p. 358) still retained “its capacity to sharpen social and political tensions, disrupt public order and undermine trade and commerce” (p. 296).

Snowden’s analysis of the relationship between cholera, national politics and the

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Southern Question is perhaps the weakest aspect of this book. In the conclusion, he not only condemns Giolitti's strategy during the epidemic but also links it to the persistent failure of government policy in the South throughout the Liberal period (1860 to 1922). However, this analysis of Southern politics is rooted firmly in a Gramscian-Marxist account of the Liberal state and treats southern "backwardness" and "corruption" as unproblematic concepts. It is a great pity that Snowden does not have more to say about recent revisionist approaches to the Southern Question, which have challenged such conceptual certainties.

The originality of *Naples in the time of cholera* lies in its documenting and comparing later epidemics (1884 with 1911). Yet the impression remains that the author could have done more with what he has found. Snowden's new evidence from Naples is used to add to, and occasionally chip away at, an established narrative. Although he discusses the international impact of the Naples epidemic, he fails to compare the ways different countries responded to the disease. It is also surprising to find so little exploration of popular images of the disease, particularly in a book which devotes so much space to urban poverty and protest. As a result, Snowden's study of Naples does not actually add a great deal to our general understanding of cholera epidemics. The capacity of cholera "to provide a revealing shaft of light by means of which to explore the structure and workings of European society" (p. 3) has already been conclusively demonstrated by Richard Evans for Hamburg (*Death in Hamburg*, Oxford, 1987). Snowden is simply able to confirm, in a colourful and often compelling narrative, that this is the case for Naples too.

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A C Crombie, *Science, art and nature in medieval and modern thought*, London and Rio Grande, Hambledon Press, 1996, pp. xvi, 516, £40.00 (1-85285-067-1).

This collection of twenty-three articles and reviews first published between 1956 and 1993 is a companion to *Science, optics and music in medieval and early modern thought*, which was published by Hambledon six years ago.

Appearing in the last year of his life, it is a fitting monument to Alistair Crombie's vision of Western science as an enduring tradition of rational argument and controlled experimental practice that is unique within the history of human civilization. Like a succession of geological strata exposed in a quarry, the articles presented here offer a means of reconstructing the principal lines of development in Crombie's *oeuvre* during his lifetime. It also includes a 'Further Bibliography' of his writings intended to supplement that already provided in his 1990 collection. Framing the work are six historiographical pieces—including Chapter 21 on 'Some historiographical questions about disease'—all of which reiterate his claim for an essentially Western scientific form of life. Among its attributes, for those unfamiliar with Crombie's thesis, are "specific commitments to conceptions of nature and of science with its intellectual and moral assumptions, accompanied by a recurrent critique" (p. xi). Between these speculative articles are examples of his more historically grounded work that address aspects of science from the twelfth to the nineteenth century. Typically these focus on the writings of (mostly Catholic) "great scientists" that have appeared in Crombie's pantheon from the outset: his medieval heroes include Robert Grosseteste, Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham) and Roger Bacon, while the seventeenth century is represented chiefly by Galileo Galilei, to whom five articles are devoted (two of them jointly authored with Adriano Carugo), Johannes Kepler, Marin Mersenne and René Descartes. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are represented by papers on Moreau de Maupertuis (1698–1759) and Charles Darwin respectively. Three articles that have most obvious relevance to medical historians are those which address the study of the senses: Chapter 14 on Mersenne and the origins of