

Review/Reseña

Cook, Noble David. *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

This well conceptualized book is focused less on presenting new research than it is interpreting and understanding the growing historiography of the Colombian exchange. As Noble David Cook clearly indicates: "My purpose is to bring together in a succinct volume what is currently known of epidemic disease, especially as it relates to the conquest of native America" (p. 12). In general the author is quite successful in accomplishing this task. In the Introduction and Conclusion the author also returns to the issue of the Black Legend to dismiss the blame placed on Spanish *conquistadores* for their role in the New World population collapse.

The systematic presentation of the diseases that aided in the conquest of the New World allows Cook to cover an immense amount of material. The greatest detail is found in the opening chapter where he discusses the Spanish conquest of the Greater Antilles between 1492 and 1518. Central to the second goal mentioned above, Cook briefly reviews the work of Bartolomé de las Casas and its description of the Spanish conquest in order to refute its argument. The initial attack on de las Casas and the Black Legend is accomplished by a detailed review of Columbus's four voyages. Noble goes to great lengths to show how germs, rather than Spanish cruelty, was central to the demise of the Amerindian/Taíno population of the Greater Antilles. Another issue tackled in this initial chapter is the question of Amerindian mestizos among contemporary Caribbean peoples. Cook argues that these can be traced to the later importation of workers into the Caribbean from the mainland, an interpretation I also adhere to. This first chapter sets the stage for the later conquests by showing how diseases from European cities, especially Seville, were transmitted to the New World and were central in the demise of the Amerindian populations.

The second chapter addresses the demise of the Aztecs and Incas by the first pandemics brought to the New World. The diseases reaching the islands of the Caribbean and later the shores of the Americas proved to be far more devastating than the superior technology utilized by the Spanish. Smallpox and later measles were not just introduced by the invaders but spread by the extensive

trade networks that linked different Amerindian societies. The author downplays the importance of direct European/ African contact because "foreign sickness leaped ahead of the Spanish, being spread by face-to-face contact between one ethnic entity and another" (page 83). Epidemics were not constrained by artificial political boundaries and their spread among virgin populations resulted in high levels of virulence. One of a number of useful maps is found on pages 74-75, which illustrates the route for the spread of smallpox between 1518 and 1528. The Spanish conquest of the great empires of the New World was therefore less about military victories than the spread of unknown killers among the Amerindian populations.

In the third chapter, the author deals with the impact of disease a half century after the European arrival (1542) to the end of the sixteenth century. It is no longer simply a question of new pandemic diseases arriving, but additional horrors brought from the Old World. The commercial centrality of Seville, which became a large city by early modern European standards, explains the origins of many of these new horrors. Seville not only had a larger population, its population was large enough for many communicable diseases to remain endemic, a literal source of a continual onslaught of diseases moving across the ocean to devastate the Amerindian populations. The traditional Amerindian medicinal plants proved to be ineffective against these diseases.

Deaths and illness also resulted in labor shortages and, as was the case in Mexico in 1578, disease could also lead to corn shortages and starvation, furthering the devastation on the Amerindian populations. Labor shortages also affected the Spanish in their goals to find more precious metals, which sometimes led to what appeared to be logical solutions. In the Andes in the 1570s, Viceroy Francisco de Toledo, citing a shortage of laborers, implemented a "successful" urban planning effort. The result proved contrary to his intentions as "the higher the population density, the more rapid the spread of infectious community diseases" (page 123). Instead of attaining more laborers, this Viceroy further devastated the Amerindian population which he hoped to exploit. The period of compound epidemics, 1576 to 1591, proved especially devastating as more diseases reached the shores of the New World in deadly combinations.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, the author looks at disease as it affected the Amerindian populations at the regional level over a longer span of time, indicating that there are various factors which influence the spread of disease. For example, Europeans left their sick on the shores of the New World while the ship sailed on. This was done in the hope of having their fellow crewman cured, but proved detrimental to the local populations. Other factors also affected the transmission of diseases. For instance, coastal and tropical regions generally were struck harder than the highlands. Also epidemics were not egalitarian. As the author points out, "all too common during the passage of the great killer epi-

demics, the weakest economically suffered most" (p. 176). The argument is that diseases is not the only killer, but that the lack of agricultural workers furthered the devastation of the epidemics. Therefore just because the epidemic had passed did not necessarily mean that suffering and death had come to an end.

The fifth chapter is devoted to a comparative study of the practices and devastation wrought by the different European intruders. The Church and its representatives often found themselves in the midst of the epidemics caring for the native populations. However, for the Amerindians (whether in Brazil, the Upper Mississippi Valley, or New England) there was an association made between baptism and death; as the same clergy who came to save their souls often carried the pathogens that would cost them their lives. In perhaps his strongest argument against the Black Legend, the author compares the attitude of the English and Spanish in their respective areas of conquest. The Spanish bemoaned the demise of the Amerindian population, since they were a significant part of the workforce which they hoped to exploit. The English celebrated the demise of the Amerindian populations as God's providence giving them their land. This comparison was more forceful than the author's argument over smallpox blankets found in the conclusion. Perhaps the strongest aspect of this chapter is its demonstration that there were few substantial differences among the native European conquerors regarding their attitudes towards Amerindians except where it suited the goals of the individual regions which they conquered.

The conclusion is well written and synthetical. Cook points out that conquest occurred due to several factors. Death of leaders and the internal conflicts which followed played a role in the success of the outnumbered Europeans. In the author's words:

The sword, important as it was in the destruction of native American political units and in the creation of colonial empires, paled as the real killer that made European victory possible. It was the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse, invisible germs and vermin, the viruses and bacteria, that killed Amerindians by the hundreds of thousands and millions.

The Amerindians were not conquered solely, or even mainly, by the cruelty of the Spanish *conquistadores* described in the Black Legend. European conquests and Amerindian demise were mainly a result of pandemic, epidemic, and endemic diseases.

This book could prove useful to both experts and those with a more general interest. The experts can find a solid interpretation, as well as theoretical discussions of a number of the issues surrounding the details of the Columbian ex-

change. Those with a passing interest in the topic will find an explicit and readable explanation of the major issues being discussed in the debate of the Columbian exchange. Whether one is an expert or not in the role of diseases in the conquest of the New World, this book will prove an enlightening addition to your collection.

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