

The same disparity of historiographical themes can be seen in the second part. Is there a general lesson about science, *qua* science, to be learned from the pathological dishonesty of Charles Best, self-professed discoverer of insulin? Surely there is a world of difference between the simple storybook account of John Snow's role in the discovery of cholera germs, or Joseph Lister's role in antiseptics, and the much more scientifically significant myth-making around Gregor Mendel and the establishment of so-called Mendelian genetics? What is the link between these cases and the efforts of T H Huxley and others to promote their own professionalizing strategies by deliberately severing age-old links between science and religion? To be sure, these case studies can all be seen to include myth-making at the expense of sound history, but their real interest lies in the unique details of the historical contingencies which shaped them.

For those who do not know these famous cases, Waller's book will no doubt seem fascinating and revealing. But the cases are justifiably famous, being full of intrinsic interest, and all Waller has done is to string them together in an accessible way.

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Robert S Desowitz, *Federal bodysnatchers and the New Guinea virus: tales of parasites, people and politics*, New York and London, W W Norton, 2002, pp. x, 262, £19.95 (hardback 0-393-05185-4).

For more than half a century tropical epidemiologist Robert Desowitz has pleased his readership, professional as well as more general readers, with a variety of articles and books. The professional papers, ranging in main subjects from trypanosomes via kala-azar to malaria, have reported results obtained on expeditions to tropical locations: field research carried out over more than thirty years from the River Kwai and Burma, Gambia and Papua New Guinea, and WHO consultancy on kala-azar in India and Bangladesh; such reports were published in

peer-reviewed professional journals, and written to inform colleagues in the medical sciences. Then, from the late 1970s onwards, Desowitz wrote in addition a series of books aimed at informing—and warning—more general readers of what René Dubos in an early review said revealed how “the life complexities of the microbial agents of disease are more than matched by that of human behaviour”. From *New Guinea tapeworms and Jewish grandmothers* (1981), *The thorn in the starfish* (1987), and *The malaria capers* (1991), they have all included subtitles which are variations on the p-words: parasites and people. Still as concerned as ever with developments in Papua New Guinea, Desowitz now offers us *Federal bodysnatchers and the New Guinea virus* and this time adding, significantly, “politics” to the subtitle of the book which is aimed so thoroughly at the general reader that it dispenses with footnotes and “Further Reading” altogether. By now long into formal, if still very active, retirement, the author firmly, if disappointingly for his loyal readers, declares this to be his final volume.

More than fifty years ago, young Desowitz was in London, finishing graduate work at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and planning to make a career as an epidemiologist in malaria-ridden tropical countries with the support of his then mentor, H E Shortt. He was told firmly on arrival in Nigeria by the colonel in charge to concentrate instead on trypanosomiasis research, since malaria was about to be “totally eradicated, and you will never make a career, let alone a living, from it”. By the 1970s, malaria was more of a threat than ever, at the expense of interest in the trypanosomiasis. Undaunted, Desowitz continued his own interest in both.

The early chapters of the present volume are concerned with the spread and epidemiology of the West Nile virus. First making itself felt in northern Uganda in 1937, in the early days of virology, this virus later spread via Egypt to France's Rhone delta and on to the Danube delta, and from Montpellier to Bucharest, mainly killing birds and horses, before attacking humans there in 1996. Finally, in the summer of 1999, it appeared initially unrecognized, in birds and

humans in Flushing, New York, spreading panic in a community with supposedly highly developed Public Health Services, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), whose laboratories at the time were more concerned with thoughts of bioterrorism and biological weapons than with naturally occurring zoonoses, let alone those spread by unpopular crows. Criticizing the reactions of the CDC and other government infectious disease agencies, Desowitz pronounces the West Nile outbreak in North America and its treatment by the authorities as “a shambles . . . chaotic confusion . . . truly frightening. If the West Nile virus is a curtain-raiser to the arrival of a truly nasty alien pathogen, like the Ebola virus, then we are in big trouble [a favourite expression of his repeated elsewhere in this book] if we are to depend on governmental services to protect us”. We may be better protected in London, where as I write *The Times* carried a short paragraph in July 2003, announcing a “VIRUS ALERT: Climate change may bring a fatal disease to the UK, Sir Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer, says. The West Nile virus infected 4,000 people and killed 277 in the US last year”. At least Sir Liam is taking the threat here seriously.

The last third of this volume criticizes the growing exploitation of the patent system by commercial interests and by legal firms specializing in “intellectual property”. Desowitz, fuelled by personal experience, turns to aspects of the role of the innocent scientific “expert witness” confronted with the machinery of twentieth/twenty-first-century curiosities of legal powers. The patent discussions lead us to the explanation of Desowitz’s catchy title for this final volume. Today’s “federal bodysnatchers” have developed from the entrepreneurial bodysnatchers, resurrectionists and graverobbers, who from the early nineteenth century supplied anatomy teachers in reputable schools of anatomy with bodies of the newly dead, freshly disinterred under cover of darkness; or worse who, “when corpses were in short supply . . . would respond to market forces by creating merchandise

of their own manufacture”, like the murderers Hare and Burke.

From such grisly facts Desowitz moves forward to the late twentieth century, to a medical establishment now working in partnership with the burgeoning biotechnology business “to be accused again of being “in league with bodysnatchers”, the latter now working “on the micromolecular level”, i.e. supplying human genetic material to be exploited for commercial purposes. In the case under discussion here, the third world indigenous people used are the Hagahai tribe of Papua New Guinea, whose genetic material was patented by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for use in research on HTLV-1, the Papua New Guinea Human T-Lymphotropic Virus. The NIH soon lost interest in the patent when it showed no sign of being sufficiently profitable commercially, and after further struggles it was awarded to the Hagahai’s trustee, Dr Carol Jenkins, who had championed their cause throughout, but at a price—approximately \$6,000. It was end of the “Hagahai HTLV-1 affair”, now seen by the author as a curtain-raiser for an emerging issue—using life for commercial exploitation, and legitimizing the procedure with “patent–intellectual property laws”. And that seems to be the message Desowitz is eager to leave the public and his profession in this supposedly final volume.

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Mridula Ramanna, *Western medicine and public health in colonial Bombay 1845–1895*, New Perspectives in South Asian History, Delhi, Orient Longman, 2002, pp. xii, 270, Rs. 550.00 (hardback 81-250-2302-X).

Research into the medical history of colonial India has produced many fine studies of specific issues, a number of more general studies on Bengal and a few books on medical history at the all-India level. By