

## Book Reviews

**Olaf Briese**, *Angst in den Zeiten der Cholera*; vol. 1, *Über kulturelle Ursprünge des Bakteriums*; vol. 2, *Panik-Kurve. Berlins Cholerajahr 1831/32*; vol. 3, *Auf Leben und Tod. Briefwelt als Gegenwelt*; vol. 4, *Das schlechte Gedicht. Strategien literarischer Immunisierung*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 2003, pp. 1341 (total), €74.80 (hardback 3-05-003779-2).

The title of Olaf Briese's extraordinary, vast, and many-faceted *Habilitationsschrift* is derived from Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Love in the time of cholera*. This is not the first time this has been done. Briese has missed my own appropriation of García Márquez's phrase in my article 'Angst in den Zeiten der Cholera', published in issue 94 of the German periodical *Kursbuch* in 1988. In that article, I gave a resumé of popular reactions to cholera in nineteenth-century Germany, ranging from flight to prayer, self-isolation to changes in personal behaviour patterns.

Briese's very different approach reflects in large measure the shift from social to cultural history that has taken place in the intervening fifteen years. He is not interested so much in social reactions to the disease, as in its linguistic and cultural mediation, which he studies kaleidoscopically, from a whole variety of different perspectives. The result is a rich, if somewhat leisurely and discursive study that—unlike so many other recent accounts of cholera in one country or another, one region or one town or another, which merely repeat the standard history of presentiment, transmission and impact, narrate the story of state action or inaction and popular reaction, tot up the death-toll and subject it to social analysis, and recount the impact, or lack of impact, of the cholera epidemic on sanitary policy, housing, social reform and political change—makes a conceptually novel contribution to the study of cholera's history, and has a great deal to say that can be taken up with profit by students of other diseases, other times, and other places.

The first volume, 'On the Cultural Origins of the Bacterium', amounting to some 450 pages of text, concentrates on the well-worn topic of the dispute between miasmatisms and contagionists over the aetiology and mode of transmission of Asiatic cholera in nineteenth-century Germany. The enormous variety of medical theories in this dispute could not conceal the fact that in the end, writers, physicians, practical politicians and civil servants had to commit themselves to one side or the other when it came to deciding how the disease should actually be prevented. As Briese shows in considerable detail, these decisions were conditioned by a whole range of positions that people took on other issues.

Cholera raised crucial issues of social order, from the threat posed by the lower classes in an age of revolution to the competition for power and influence between the élites at a time of professionalization and economic growth. Medical science failed to prevent the initial spread of cholera to Western Europe in the early 1830s or even to agree on how it was transmitted. The idea of contagion as the principal means of infection was discredited in the eyes of many by the initial failure of *cordons sanitaires* and quarantines to prevent the disease's continuing westward march. Complex and in part highly traditional attitudes to the elements of nature came into play amidst arguments over whether the disease could be spread by air or water, what the role of pollution of the earth was in all this, and whether the disease could be banished by lighting bonfires or letting off explosives. Briese explores the metaphorical and cultural resonances of many of these arguments in all their ramifications, but his comprehensive trawling of the published and archival sources leads to the conclusion that after the early 1830s, miasmaticism in all its varieties held sway over the medical profession, while contagionism remained the preferred if unproven assumption on which the actions of police, army and state authorities in most of the German states continued to rest. If medicine insisted on the

natural causes of disease, administration emphasized its social and human origins. Liberals and conservatives battled for supremacy as they drew out the implications of these doctrines for state action and individual freedom. Disputes amongst the medical men threatened to play into the hands of civil and military administrators, who saw in quarantines and other authoritarian interventions in everyday life the most obvious and practical means of stopping the disease.

So the dispute continued for much of the nineteenth century. What changed the situation, Briese argues, was the synthesis of the two doctrines achieved by Robert Koch in the 1880s. Koch showed on the one hand how the disease was spread by natural means including water, but on the other hand he also demonstrated that it was a social phenomenon, with some classes of people suffering its impact, and some kinds of human behaviour favouring its transmission, more than others. The bacterium could be identified as an enemy whose combating called forth from Koch and his allies a whole range of martial metaphors. An unseen threat, a hidden hand, a numinous object, a potent and invisible agent of decomposition and destruction, it became a social and cultural metaphor of unprecedented power, soon to be applied with terrible effect by racial extremists such as the Nazis to minorities such as the Jews.

Briese's wandering and discursive style, and his determination to explore every byway of his topic, from the cultural significance of women's hair to the reasons why some people were suspicious of microscopes, makes this volume sometimes rather difficult to follow, but my impression at least is that he overestimates the influence of military and administrative approaches to the disease when he claims that it was continually increasing from the 1830s onwards. The 1860s and 1870s, at the apogee of liberal politics in nineteenth-century Germany, saw these approaches relegated to the sidelines, though far from banished altogether. Moreover, as Briese in places seems to admit, Koch's triumph was not achieved simply or perhaps even primarily because he achieved a practical and theoretical synthesis of the natural and social

understandings of cholera, but more because he had already become, through other discoveries, the champion of German scientific and medical nationalism in its competition for the prestige of discovery with the French, represented by Pasteur. Nevertheless, Briese's arguments are never less than interesting, and frequently cause one to think again on issues that had long seemed to have been settled in the historiography of this subject, no mean achievement.

Briese's second volume, also around 400 pages long, is entitled 'Panic-Curve: Berlin's Cholera Year 1831/32'. This is a collection of a large number of documents and extracts from contemporary publications relating to the first arrival and subsequent progress of the epidemic in the Prussian capital. Volume three, a little shorter at 328 pages, reprints extracts from letters relating to the same epidemic, under the title, roughly translated, 'A Matter of Life and Death: Correspondence as Counter-world'. Letter-writers both familiar and unknown are revealed trying to cope with their fear of the disease, and a variety of attitudes can be observed in the letters of figures as varied as Goethe, Rahel Varnhagen, Schelling, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Heinrich Heine, Ernst Moritz Arndt and many others, all helpfully and illuminatingly printed in chronological order; some letters of cholera victims even appear, which is particularly interesting, though by the nature of the disease there are not very many of these, and we do not discover the views on cholera of the epidemic's most famous victims, the philosopher Hegel and the military theorist Clausewitz, except indirectly, through the letters of their relations.

The final volume, a mere 169 pages long, is entitled 'The Bad Poem. Strategies of Literary Immunization' and prints a hundred mostly truly awful pieces of doggerel on cholera from the same period, the early 1830s. This is much the most fun part of the book to read, and could form a useful basis for an extended literary analysis; it is a pity Briese himself did not undertake it, but after over a thousand pages of the book already, it would probably have been asking too much. In his introduction to this

volume, Briese merely contents himself with justifying his selection. “How can one decide which poems are bad ones, to be included in the collection, and which are good, to be excluded?”—he asks. There is no decision to take, is his conclusion: “poems about cholera from that era are bad in principle”, even those few written by poets who produced better work elsewhere.

A huge, sprawling work like this, consisting of 450 pages of text and 900 pages of documents, is a testimony to Germany’s subsidized academic publishing industry, splendidly printed and bound by the Akademie-Verlag, and selling at a price that is far from unreasonable given its enormous size and strictly academic appeal. But I wonder whether the disciplines of commercial book publishing might not have been beneficial in this instance at least. Useful though they are as quarries for future researchers and literary analysts, the second, third and fourth volumes do not really add very much to the first, and the rambling and discursive account in the first volume, fascinating though it often is, contains a great deal of information and analysis that is not really central to the main argument. Nevertheless, the whole ensemble is an undeniable achievement, and Briese’s approach succeeds in contributing something genuinely new to a subject where it had long seemed there was nothing very new to be said.

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**James C Riley,** *Rising life expectancy: a global history*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. xii, 243, £30.00, US\$49.95 (0-521-80245-8), £11.95, US\$16.95 (paperback 0-521-00281-8).

Human mortality decline has resulted in massive improvements to life chances in all parts of the globe. In the two centuries preceding the end of the second millennium, average life expectancy more than doubled, from below thirty years in 1800 to nearly sixty-seven years in 2000. Further increases are anticipated. The essence of this highly readable book is to lay down the

probable reasons for this remarkable transformation. As such, James Riley demarcates six broad areas for the reader’s consideration: public health; medicine; wealth, income and economic development; nutrition and diet; household and individual behaviour; and literacy and education. The lucidity and clarity that Riley has brought to bear on a topic—namely the routes to low mortality—that continues to excite intense debate in both historical and medical literatures, is commendable. The footnotes and guides to further reading that appear at the end of each chapter are pleasingly eclectic. It is perhaps unavoidable, however, that writing a history of synthesis sometimes involves summarizing complex issues in an overly simplistic way. On the one hand, the section on the ambiguous and still-contentious role of maternal education in child survival is frustratingly brief. On the other, the influence of germ theory in public health intervention, in the development of biomedicine, and on individual behaviours is dissipated sketchily through as many as four separate chapters of the book. The demands of brevity can, of course, work favourably in the hands of a capable author, since crucial points need to be more tellingly made. The pithy observations that Riley makes at the end of each chapter testify to his talent in this respect and underline that in absolutely no way should the criticisms outlined above prevent the book from becoming a standard introductory text in undergraduate history courses concerned with the evolution of human health.

It is also probable that Riley’s contribution will find for itself a profitable market in the field of global history. One of the book’s strengths is the way in which it pays far more than lip service to international comparisons. Riley’s thematic organization enables him to make some prescient contrasts, such as the divergent ways in which enteric ailments were largely brought under control in industrializing Britain in the nineteenth century and in Costa Rica and China during the later twentieth. Readers in some parts of the developing world may be struck by the close comparison of overcrowded domestic conditions in slum dwellings in Nigeria and India in the