

Tekst 9

No case for laying blame on the dead

1 **H**istorians are supposed to be clinically detached, but Sheldon Watts's exploration of the pestilences of the past seethes with passion. Successive chapters vividly recreate the suffering and devastation brought about over the centuries by bubonic plague, leprosy, smallpox, cholera, yellow fever and malaria.

2 Imagine going down with cholera in 1830. You grew nauseous and dizzy. Stomach cramps, vomiting and diarrhoea rapidly followed, and your stools turned to a grey liquid known as rice water. You passed up to 10 litres in 24 hours before dehydration set in. You could wake up hale and hearty but be a corpse tomorrow. There was no cure. It was a terrible way to die — indeed, it can be still, and the current cholera pandemic, starting in 1961 in Indonesia and rampant in Asia and South America, is the longest pandemic ever.

3 The real scandal, in Watts's view, is that such catastrophes, far from being inevitable accidents of nature, were, and remain, the avoidable products of human agency or neglect. To be precise, it is the triumph of the West which has aggravated these killer diseases. Capitalism has wrecked stable ecological and social systems, and imperialist greed has created the ideal environments for malaria, TB and Aids.

4 For those who, like myself, were brought up at school on heroic stories of medical missionaries, Watts's message may seem mean. Yet no one can deny his book is well-documented: ample evidence is adduced to show that, be it in medieval Europe or modernising Ethiopia, the measures jointly taken by civil and medical authorities to prevent pestilence or counter plague commonly did sufferers precious little good, and often made bad worse.

5 Indeed, Watts argues, such policies were often actually intended to be punitive, as priests and physicians would hold natives or paupers responsible for bringing disease about in the first place. The authorities often regarded the diseased as more threatening than the diseases, and epidemics frequently triggered victim-blaming and oppression.

6 Thus Europe's first pogroms against the Jews were launched to assuage God's wrath at the height of the Black Death. Later on, doling out smallpox-infected blankets to native Indians, North American colonists turned pathogens into weapons of war, while crediting the outcome to "the good hand of God". Based in Cairo and hence immune from automatic Eurocentrism, Watts is as sceptical of the medical profession as of the governments and business interests they

ultimately served. His case carries much conviction.

7 Yet *Epidemics and History* also suffers from overkill, because Watts cannot resist the itch to pass sentence upon the dead. Physicians are scolded if they intervened ineptly — for example by setting up leper colonies, when they had no effective treatments. But they are equally censured for inaction.

8 Thus the Victorian John Snow, the first to demonstrate how cholera is communicated via contaminated water, gets a rap over the knuckles, since he neglected to peer down a microscope and so failed to discover the cholera bacillus. The verdict is anachronistic and preachy.

Roy Porter

EPIDEMICS AND HISTORY

Disease, Power and Imperialism
By Sheldon Watts

9 The upshot is a kind of history-by-hindsight which ironically echoes the moral superiority of the imperialists here so scathingly denounced. Nevertheless, Watts's urge to affix blame springs from a generous rage on behalf of humanity, and this trenchant book provides a salutary antidote to world health complacency, past and present.

'The Times'

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- 1p **38** ■ What is the writer's intention in paragraph 2?
- A To contrast past and present epidemics.
 - B To get the reader to show compassion.
 - C To illustrate the unpredictability of epidemic outbreaks.
 - D To picture the horror of epidemics.
- 1p **39** ■ Which of the following could be added at the end of paragraph 3?
- A As always, nature proves to be the stronger force.
 - B In other words, international aid comes too late.
 - C In short, development spreads disease.
- ”Indeed” aan het begin van alinea 5 versterkt een voorafgaande bewering.
- 1p **40** □ Geef deze bewering in je eigen woorden weer.
- ”Indeed, Watts argues, such policies were often actually intended to be punitive” (alinea 5).
- 1p **41** □ Citeer uit alinea 5 de twee woorden die aangeven waartoe deze ”policies” leiden.
- 1p **42** ■ What does the sentence ‘Later on ... of God’.’ (paragraph 6) focus on?
- A Disease as a means to gain dominance.
 - B Religion as a refuge in times of disease.
 - C The dangers of Western diseases for native populations.
 - D The deadliness of epidemics when neglected.
- Roy Porter geeft in alinea 7 en 8 twee voorbeelden van het begrip ”history-by-hindsight” (eerste zin alinea 9).
- 1p **43** □ Geef één van deze voorbeelden in je eigen woorden weer.

Lees bij de volgende vragen steeds eerst de opgave voordat je de bijbehorende tekst raadpleegt.