WE’RE ALL DOOMED!


By Susan Hardy

In our current climate of dire and daily media health scares, how could one not warm to a book in which the author states boldly in the Preface that he has “serious doubts about the validity” of claims about the importance of environmental and behavioural “risk factors” for health problems such as cancer and heart disease (p. ix)? How refreshing, if admittedly a little depressing, to read of the author’s belief that “we know very little about disease processes and mechanisms” (p. ix), and his implicit intuition that past and present epidemiological studies seem to target the factors which society thinks ‘ought’ to cause disease. How far we seem to have come from the ubiquitous accounts of modern western medicine, with triumphalist titles, in which both military and religious metaphors and similes abounded. A constant diet of dread does tend to provoke a deep desire for another perspective, and one is certainly taken by Professor Grob in this compact, concise, and (despite my overstated title for this review) measured account of disease in America.

However, it is possible to position this work in a proliferating genre that has gradually emerged in recent years from the ‘medical miracles’ and ‘battles against bacteria’ schools of thought; indeed, the work of Rene Dubos is frequently cited by Grob himself as a definitive influence. One cannot, of course, overlook William McNeill’s seminal Plagues and Peoples (Oxford, 1976), in which disease was firmly placed in its social, political and economic and environmental setting. Also, one might mention Andrew Nikiforuk’s slightly derivative and decidedly idiosyncratic The Four Horsemen: A Short History of Epidemics, Plagues and Other Scourges (Phoenix, 1992), which anticipated Grob’s emphasis on the etiological influence of the environment and struck one of the first blows for the recognition of the inevitability of human beings having to live in some sort of mutual accommodation with a myriad of microbes.
Grob’s book begins with an introductory section, followed by eight chronologically arranged narrative chapters concentrating on health and disease in America from the ‘pre-Columbians’ to the end of the 1900s, then concludes with a chapter entitled “No Final Victory”. In the introductory section Grob outlines his main theme, namely the recognition of the effects of the environment, both natural and constructed, on disease, while also recognising that, in spite of some heroic and sustained research and interventions in recent times, disease will always be with us in one form or another. Moreover he questions the likely success of the very recent epidemiological attempts to remove all risk from human existence and notes that this project, while it might afford some temporary comfort by way of returning to human beings a sense of control of their own destiny, is ultimately doomed to frustration. Furthermore, the effort itself is not necessarily a noble one; Grob rather daringly suggests that “certainty, safety and predictability may not enhance life”, and asks why we assume that they do (p. 6). Just that assumption has resulted in the failure of many a well intentioned public health campaign, the contemporary equivalent perhaps of nineteenth century citizens refusing to be bullied into health by Chadwick and his fellow sanitarians.

The middle section of the book concentrates, conscientiously but ploddingly, on the prevalent diseases associated with such historical events as invasions, colonisation, urbanisation and the formation of racial and economic under-classes (some of which were specific to America but many of which were universal). Grob explains that he has chosen to assume the biological ‘reality’ of diseases rather than explore the more subtle or subversive approach (depending on your historiographical stance) of the construction and interpretation of disease. Personally, I have no problem with this realist approach except when it leads, as it occasionally does here, into anachronistic discussions about what disease a particular collection of symptoms ‘really’ indicated. More usefully Grob notes the inevitability of the correlation of poor health with poverty and destitution together with the massive morbidity and mortality associated with diarrhoeal diseases, both of which issues tended to be ignored (except, ironically, by the under-appreciated Chadwick in Britain) as either too hard or too unattractive to attract attention or money. Both destitution and diarrhoea are still with us, quietly killing millions every year without even the benefit – as one commentator has noted rather grimly – of a ‘Brown Ribbon Day’.

In the final section of the book Grob addresses two of the main health problems evident not only in America but in most current western societies. First he notes the decline of the great waves of infectious disease (albeit possibly leaving long-term effects in the shape of auto-immune