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Nostalgia and scurvy

Jonathan Lamb SCURVY The disease of discovery 305pp. Princeton University Press. £24.95 (US \$35). 978 0 691 14782 6



"Alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide wide sea!", 1923, by Samuel V. Lindoe

Jonathan Lamb begins with splendid lines from Camões, comparing the "rude Mariner / (Who hath no Mistress but Experience)" with the "Academicks" who rely on theory. This is a good prelude to the "discontinuous history" of scurvy, for empirical remedies were widely known from the mid-eighteenth century, but often not used as preventives. Lamb succinctly outlines the reasons for this. Naval surgeons like James Lind and Thomas Trotter encountered the fearful signs of scurvy – lassitude and stiffness, rotting gums, black sores on the legs, haemorrhages, vile breath and stinking urine, together with complex psychological symptoms. They knew that lemon or lime juice could cure scurvy, but could not prove that it was also a preventive, given the difficulty of preserving it on long voyages. Both surgeons listed it among several recommended practices, including greater cleanliness below decks. The Academicks continued to muddy the waters because new scientific discoveries were successively offered as an explanation for scurvy. Trotter and Thomas Beddoes were practical men, but, with the late eighteenth century preoccupation with oxygen, came to believe that lack of oxygen in the blood was a likely cause. A growing interest in toxicology in the nineteenth century produced the theory that ptomaine poison was the culprit; while in the early twentieth century, medical opinion misled Captain Scott by convincing him that scurvy was due to bacteria in decomposing food. Scott's party was forbidden to eat frozen seal meat if it had accidentally thawed. This was a sensible precaution, but not for the prevention of scurvy. Meanwhile, the rude mariners made their own decisions. Captains like James Cook, Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin always sent the crew to hunt for fresh greens when they made landfall, and the navy was persuaded to issue lime juice to its crews from the 1790s. The policy was sporadic, the quality of the juice questionable, but scurvy did recede on well-run ships.

Scurvy allows Lamb to expand arguments from his earlier book *Preserving the Self in the South*

Seas (2001). His focus is still on the southern hemisphere, where longer voyages brought the disease into sharp relief, though he cites a wide range of cases of sea and land scurvy. The word "discovery" acquired a double edge when explorers discovered new lands, but also found that a feared illness had colonized their own bodies, altering their appearance and their mental state. The hunt for ways of preventing scurvy is a familiar story, but the most original sections of Lamb's book deal with "scorbutic nostalgia", Trotter's term for the neurological effects of the disease, where sufferers, sleeping or waking, fixated on "green fields, and streams of pure water". Their nostalgia, Lamb argues, was not a dream of home, but an overwhelming desire for any land that would satisfy their instinctive desire for fresh food. He devotes two interesting chapters to the intense emotionalism and heightened perceptions of the scorbutic, and compares them with the pursuit of sensory enhancement by poets and scientists of the period. A further chapter gives a grim description of life in the convict settlements of Australia, where land scurvy added to the general misery of its involuntary population until colonial agriculture became productive. Lamb argues that punitive measures that reduced convicts' rations also prolonged the disease at home and in the colonies. Indeed, as Katherine Foxhall has shown, scorbutic convicts were arriving in Australia well into the nineteenth century.

Among the amusements of medical historians is the game of "retrospective diagnosis", where contemporary descriptions of a patient's symptoms are subjected to modern clinical analysis. George III's diagnosis of porphyria seems to have stuck in the popular imagination, despite contrary arguments. Even more fun is possible with "fictional diagnosis", the same approach applied to artistic creations. Madame Bovary's death is no mystery, but what did Little Nell die of? Endless debates ensue; and Lamb is not afraid to participate. Polar exploration, with scurvy as a constant threat, is a particularly fertile area for retrospective diagnosis, and the medical journals run regular argumentative articles on it. Nevertheless, Lamb has no doubts on scurvy's role in Scott's last march: Edgar Evans died of it, Lawrence Oates's old war wound reopened because of it, and the others probably had it too, as evidenced by Scott's tearful and fraught "scorbutic" behaviour. Yet in the ever-contentious literature of polar exploration, multiple explanations are always possible. Evans fell and concussed himself badly, Oates had severe frostbite, and the whole party, as Apsley Cherry-Garrard argued, and physiologists have since confirmed, suffered not only from the wrong food, but from not having enough of it to support the laborious trekking that Scott's plan required. Even Vitamin C pills might not have seen them through. But Scott and his men are entombed in the ice, secure from autopsy, unlike the human remains of Sir John Franklin's expedition. The Canadian government has allowed scientists to access the well-preserved cadavers buried in the permafrost, and the bones of their comrades. The most recent report from osteo-archaeologists seems to discount both scurvy and lead poisoning as substantial factors, which leaves the field open for further speculation. Even when there are bones to analyse, there is no certainty.

For explorers in the South Seas, who take up the larger part of Lamb's book, the evidence is also hard to interpret. In many cases, scurvy was undoubtedly present; its symptoms well known and recorded. It's another matter to claim, as Lamb does, that the neurological effects of incipient scurvy account for much of the behaviour and reactions of its possible victims. The excitable behaviour and reports of Joseph Banks and François Péron, the scientists who sailed with Cook and Baudin, may have been partly due to scurvy, but, as Lamb himself notes, any explorer was likely to become overexcited when faced with an entire continent full of unfamiliar plants and animals. The journals of Matthew Flinders display similar degrees of excitement or boredom during his first voyage round South Australia, when he didn't have scurvy, as in the Gulf of Carpentaria, when he did. Nor is it easy to accept that his

Investigator was rotting in sympathy with its scorbutic crew. It was a leaky ship which gave Flinders endless trouble well before scurvy appeared. Lamb is, in effect, using "scorbutic" to describe minds dazzled by the incommunicable strangeness of new lands, rather than a clinical condition.

Lamb is also happy in the field of fictional diagnosis. Captain Ahab's erratic temper is akin to scorbutic frenzy, while Odysseus' crew, in the grip of scorbutic nostalgia, refuse to leave the succulent vegetation of the lotus eaters. The most quoted work is *The Rime of*

the Ancient Mariner, which also featured in Lamb's previous writings as showing all the manifestations of scurvy. In Coleridge's first version, Death is a skeletal figure whose bones are "black, with many a crack", the sea itself rots beneath the ship, and the Mariner's emotional vision of the sea snakes conforms to the scorbutic trance described by Coleridge's medical friend Beddoes.

By this point, it's clear that Lamb's work is a virtuoso set of variations around his theme. His ability to spot scurvy in both obvious and unlikely places will provoke fits of pedantry among some readers. While black bones have also been previously visited by Lamb, I could find no trace of them among the medical descriptions of scurvy available to Coleridge: Beddoes and Trotter don't mention them, nor does Lind, who had dissected several victims of scurvy. Blackness is a regular motif in Trotter (Beddoes prefers "livid"), but it's applied to black gums, blotches and blood, and never to bones. In an alternative diagnosis, Debbie Lee has claimed that yellow fever was at the bottom of it all, and another commentator maintains that the black bones were a Gothic touch to contrast with Life-in-Death's leprous whiteness. Coleridge erased the bones in later editions. Why? An ordinary pathologist might decide that the immediate cause of the crew's deaths was not having any drop to drink, while the "exciting cause" (to use the contemporary terminology) was a dreadful crime against the local ecology.

The final chapter develops the theme of scorbutic imagination, as Lamb moves comprehensively into worlds of fiction, from Malory to George Orwell. If readers take Lamb on his own terms, and appreciate his wide-ranging approach, they will find much of interest, though his publishers do not always serve him well. The illustrations are excellent, but Princeton's embedding of references in the text is unhelpful. For example, Cherry-Garrard, Jean de Léry, Captain Cheap, William Bligh, Richard Willis, John Davis, John Byron, Primo Levi and several others appear on a single page. Lamb cites first publication dates in some cases, modern editions in others, all within a series of scholarly hiccups that make it hard for the reader to fix the references in their original period, or to read about them with much pleasure. The scientific coda by James May and Fiona Harrison reverts to end-chapter references, a much more agreeable practice.

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