

Book Reviews

Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health. By Alison Bashford (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2004, ISBN 1-403-90488-X) 242 pp.

DURING THE PAST DECADE OR SO, AUSTRALIAN HISTORIANS HAVE BACKED away at the entwined histories of public health, racial hygiene, and nationalism with a critical energy unmatched elsewhere. Some might say that one cannot carve out a realistic history of medicine and public health in this country without paying attention to the invading tendrils and suckers of race, hygiene and nation. Others will dismissively point to the influence of fashion in the contemporary academic allotment. But, whatever the cause, it is clear that Australians are leading other historians of medicine in exploring the links between public health policies and estimates of civic virtue. *Imperial Hygiene*, while it covers some familiar ground, adds notably to this enterprise.

In a series of thematic chapters—many of them revisions of previously published articles—Bashford focuses on the relationship between public health and liberal governance in Australia from the late-nineteenth century until the 1940s. She is especially interested in quarantine, vaccination, segregation, and stipulations of personal hygiene; clinical medicine and mental health are absent from this story. The first four chapters are organised around specific disease threats—smallpox (twice), tuberculosis, and leprosy—while the subsequent three chapters concentrate on quarantine, hygiene and the White Australia Policy, as well as on sexual hygiene and population policy (including eugenics). What unites the book, Bashford argues, is the idea of hygiene. ‘By historicizing this medico-administrative knowledge and its effects, and interrogating particular problematisations determined by the geopolitics and race politics of Australian “settler” colonialism and nationalism, I am writing a history of the colonial biopolitics of health’ (p. 9). She explains how public health was allied with racism and population management. In particular, she views her book as a contribution to the emerging study of the ‘cultivation of the white self’ (p. 111) in Australia;

i.e., 'how "whiteness" was technically implemented as well as culturally imagined through, and in concert with, public health' (pp. 138–9).

Sensitive readers will detect more than a faint whiff of Michel Foucault, as well as many of his epigones, including Nikolas Rose, Ann L. Stoler, David Armstrong and Deborah Lupton. Bashford carefully tracks the complex distributions of sovereign force, disciplinary power and governmentality in Australian public health projects, avoiding the temptation of staging biopolitics as an evolutionary drama culminating in the modern biomedical citizen, or white bourgeois male. But as in the Foucauldian schema, there is little recognition of contestation of these discourses on hygiene, nor of public indifference to, or subversive appropriation of, the plans of the public health officer. (In other words, there could be as much on the actual crossing, or disregard, of boundaries as on their construction.) More, too, might have been made of the insecurities and anxieties that disturbed the authoritative gaze of the white male hygienist, sometimes making it no better than a nervous glance in the tropical north. It would have been helpful to locate more precisely the authors of these discourses, the agents of racial hygiene, in their various social, institutional and geographical settings. We do, however, learn more about ideas of race and hygiene in Sydney than in earlier accounts (including mine), though Western Australia and Tasmania are still omitted.

I found the chapters on the white tuberculosis sanatorium and the Aboriginal leper colony the most revealing and interesting. Victims of the 'white plague' received training in civic responsibility and decorum in the early-twentieth century sanatorium. This 'formation of the self-governing hygienic subject' (p. 59) was predicated on their whiteness, which implied eligibility or capacity for biomedical citizenship. In contrast, Aboriginal lepers were simply segregated in isolated, dreary colonies and left to die. Unlike leper treatment in the Philippines and Nauru, the Australian colonies did not represent the 'perfect grafting of medical and colonial governance' (p. 92). This contrast is especially striking to anyone who has studied the Culion leper colony in the Philippines. It seems as though the white tuberculosis sanatorium in Australia reproduced the disciplines that structured the lives and identities of Filipino lepers during the same period. But the opportunity here for a comparison of Australian internal colonialism with the race policies of the American colonial State is not taken. Nor does Bashford differentiate the treatment of white and Aboriginal inmates of sanatoria and leprosaria within Australia. Still, these chapters suggest the potential for further comparison of twentieth-century biopolitical projects.

The place of Aboriginal Australians in narratives of segregation and hygiene is ambiguous. In general, Bashford emphasises their exclusion from hygiene reform and re-training in the conventions of civic virtue—

that is, their position beyond the pale of biomedical citizenship. Yet it is hard, as she concedes, to square this with concomitant practices of biological absorption and cultural assimilation. A comparison of the leprosarium with the 'half-caste' children's home or reformatory would have been telling. Cecil Cook and Raphael Cilento both warned that Aboriginal Australia represented a reservoir of disease—leprosy in particular—that was spilling over into white communities. They urged isolation of Aboriginal carriers of infectious disease, yet Cook also presided over a program of Aboriginal absorption into white Australia. The intimate bonding of perceived health and purity of body with supposed capacity for improvement and citizenship deserves further scrutiny.

Another impressive feature of this book is the deft use of recent South-East Asian cultural history to frame Australian arguments. Bashford draws on the work of Ann L. Stoler, Benedict Anderson and Thongchai Winichakul, among others. (Indeed, she also uses some of my studies of the Philippines to illuminate her Australian material in unexpected ways.) When so much Australian historiography appears parochial and inward-looking, it is refreshing to find someone interpreting local developments with the aid of cosmopolitan approaches and insights, thus connecting the history of Australian public health with postcolonial studies.

But this openness to regional historiography might be taken further. Drawing on new approaches to understanding the formation of nearby nation-states is admirable, but we have yet to explore properly the many connections between Australian events and adjacent colonial developments. Practices of hygiene, and the careers of the advocates of hygiene, travelled through South-East Asia, Australia and the Pacific, but historians have rarely followed. Cilento, for example, moved between colonial Malaya, tropical Australia and Papua and New Guinea. Victor G. Heiser, the director of health in the Philippines, claimed to have influenced health policy throughout the region, including Australia, when he was later director for the East of the International Health Board of the Rockefeller Foundation. Lenore Manderson, Donald Denoon and I have begun to track some of these inter-colonial connections; and I understand that Bashford will complete the task in her next research project on 'international hygiene'.

In the meantime, we are awaiting a comparative history of such curious biomedical figures as the 'working white man in the tropics', invented *circa* 1910 in both Manila and Townsville. Perhaps there other examples of this positive, and indeed sadly assertive, science of white masculinity. Moreover, we still lack proper comparative histories of the role that hygiene plays in the liberal colonial (and national) State's strategies of exclusion and deferral, and the ways in which it defines population and civility. *Imperial Hygiene* joins other important *local*

studies of the development and differentiation of biomedical citizenship in the early twentieth century—now we just need to connect some of the dots.

Warwick Anderson
University of Wisconsin–Madison

While You're Away: New Zealand Nurses at War 1899–1948. By Anna Rogers (Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2003, \$42.95, ISBN 1-869-40301-0) 352 pp.

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ON THE EXPERIENCES OF NEW ZEALAND MEN who fought in the major wars of the twentieth century, but little on the women who served their country as nurses. Yet, as Anna Rogers notes, their stories were ‘every bit as remarkable, memorable and moving as those of the soldiers’ (p. 2). In this book she sets out to correct that imbalance and to tell the stories of the nurses—gauged through letters, diaries, accounts published in the *New Zealand Nursing Journal*, interviews, and memoirs such as those of the Matron-in-Chief of the New Zealand Army Nursing Services 1913–23, Hester Maclean (though her published memoirs are missing from the bibliography). In the introduction, Rogers states that ‘[m]ale attitudes are central to this story’ (p. 7), and yet the nature of the sources ensures that the story is seen through the eyes of the nurses themselves. The narrative revolves around the thirty or so nurses who served in the South African Boer War 1899–1902, about 550 nurses in World War I, six in the Spanish Civil War, and the more than 600 nurses and 250 voluntary aids in World War II, and in the Pacific and Japan immediately after the war.

Much of the literature on soldiers’ experiences of war has explored the rise of a national identity, as large groups of New Zealand men were thrust together on foreign soil for the first time. This gave them the opportunity to compare themselves with others, a comparison from which they emerged rather well. In particular, they seemed to be bigger, stronger, more manly, more egalitarian and more practical than their British counterparts. Rogers argues that the nurses also played their part in forging a new sense of nationhood. Concrete evidence of the nurses’ bravery and skill was found in the awards bestowed upon them, although she notes: ‘Sometimes the reaction to an award would be typically Kiwi in its abrupt modesty’ (p. 6). These nurses went overseas for the first time and, according to Rogers, discovered they were often more competent and flexible than their British counterparts. In World War I, ‘colonial superiority was soon assured’, with Maclean