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## **Plague Among the Magnolias: The 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Mississippi**

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expressed through both science and art; the tragic loss of his beloved wife; his early encounter with Darwin's theory; his numerous scientific and artistic accomplishments, from the detailed studies of marine animals exemplified by such classics as *Die Radiolarien* (1862), *Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Siphonophoren* (1869), *Die Kalkschwämme* (1872), and *Das System der Medusen* (1879), which described and illustrated numerous new species, their morphology and development, and that are to this date rarely, if at all, surpassed hallmarks in comparative biology; his foundational theoretical work, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (1866), a book that contains many conceptual innovations, including the definition of the term ecology as it is still used today; and his immensely popular accounts, such as *Die Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1868), *Die Welträtsel* (1895), and *Die Kunstformen der Natur* (1904). The success and the wide availability of these latter works contributed to the notion of Haeckel as a "mere" popularizer, a myth with which Richards dispenses by analyzing in great detail the unifying themes behind all of Haeckel's many endeavors as well as the intricate and often symbiotic relationship between Haeckel the scientist and his cultural milieu. By explicating these connections, Richards shows what a true cultural history of science can be, one that places equal value on the cultural conditions and the intrinsic logic of science.

*The Tragic Sense of Life* is a monumental accomplishment. It transforms our understanding of Ernst Haeckel, the history of morphology, evolutionary biology, and the early history of developmental evolution—the integration of evolutionary and developmental biology that has lately risen to scientific prominence, as well the early history of evolutionism or *Evolutionäre Weltanschauung*. The latter also has seen a revival as evolutionary theory has been successfully applied to many areas from medicine to economics and from psychology to literature. This new evolutionary worldview has been greeted with much enthusiasm as well as criticism. One can't but help think about the words of Brecht, who, in the *Life of Galileo*, cautions: "Woe is the land that has no heroes, Nay, woe is the land that needs heroes." With Darwin solidly enshrined in the Olympus of untouchables, Ernst Haeckel, with all his passions and contradictions, with all his triumphs and tragedies, reminds us what the excitement of a scientific life lived to its full potential is all about.

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Deanne Stephens Nuwer. *Plague Among the Magnolias: The 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Mississippi*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009. xv + 188 pp. Ill. \$34.95 (978-0-8173-1653-2).

The 1878 yellow fever epidemic in the American South stands alongside the 1918 influenza epidemic among the most important disease events in United States

history. "The story of Mississippi during this pivotal epidemic," writes historian Deanne Stephens Nuwer, "is a tale of destruction, incompetence, and failing, as well as one of compassion, charity, and reaffirmation of values" (p. 136). Nuwer describes the terrible destruction of the 1878 epidemic in Mississippi, when at least four thousand people died within a few months, with the disease concentrated in the Mississippi river cities of Holly Springs, Grenada, Vicksburg and others, as well as railroad towns.

This epidemic has been well described and analyzed by other historians, but what Nuwer brings to the story is a detailed, thick description of events in one state, solidly based in archival sources and local newspaper accounts. The ways in which life was completely disrupted become clear in the revelations of letters and diaries. It was not only sickness and death that wrecked the commonplace, but a lack of normal commodities such as food and clothing as trading stopped, the pervasive fear of neighbor and stranger as potential carriers of disease, and the conflicting desires to serve others and save oneself. Few books have depicted this disruption and panic as clearly as Nuwer's account.

Nuwer asks how the newly "redeemed" Mississippi state government performed during the epidemic and finds it wanting. It acted, though, in concert with the supposed traditional values that it was to restore to the state house. The government had been elected on a platform of "self-reliance, [which] reinforced the sense that individuals and communities were on their own" (p. 48). Although the epidemic brought forth a myriad of local responses, including charity efforts and virulent quarantines, the failure of this hodgepodge approach to create an effective and efficient response to the crisis was evident to all observers. Mississippi had created a state board of health in 1877, but it was a weak body with only advisory powers that could do little during the epidemic but provide advice on disinfectants and other ways to protect against contagion.

Mississippi had crowed at the withdrawal of the hated federal troops in the 1870s, but they had to humble themselves to accept relief from that same army in 1878, when a federal relief boat brought supplies to Mississippi River docks for towns starving from lack of provisions and desperate for ice and medicine. The Mississippi State Board of Health signed on in support of the newly created National Board of Health in the summer of 1879, even as Dr. Joseph Jones in New Orleans was recalling his Confederate roots and resisting national power. Although Stephens Nuwer closes with the claim that the epidemic "provided a fertile field for the creation of an effective system of public health that would make such catastrophes rare in the future" (p. 136), she fails to demonstrate that such a transformation took place in Mississippi itself. The state public health response had not evolved far by 1910, when the Rockefeller Foundation took on hookworm in the state and spurred the creation of local boards of health to continue work against this disease.

One senses that Nuwer wants to tell a story of progress, to see some good come out of the horror that was the 1878 epidemic. But the story instead is one of stagnation and confusion. There were individuals and organizations that behaved heroically, to be sure. The outpouring of relief from the north, bringing more than

half a million dollars to the state less than two decades after Grant took Vicksburg, is impressive. One chapter is headed by a quotation from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, moaning that "It seemed as if hell had been moved up on earth," and Nuwer's volume amply justifies that assessment.

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Gayle Davis. *The Cruel Madness of Love: Sex, Syphilis and Psychiatry in Scotland, 1880–1930*. The Wellcome Series in the History of Medicine. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. 285 pp. Ill. \$58.00 (978-90-420-2463-2).

This is a meticulously researched and illuminating study of the history of general paralysis of the insane (GPI), which emerged as a new psychiatric disorder during the course of the nineteenth century, and of the epistemological relationship between syphilis and insanity which developed at this time. Drawing on historical and sociological work on the rise of the asylum and the complex history of madness in which it developed, notably the work of Andrew Scull in *Museums of Madness: The Social Organization of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England* (1979), Gayle Davis focuses on the day-to-day clinical and diagnostic activities of asylums and aims to bridge a gap between the social and clinical histories of psychiatry. She works with published medical writings and clinical case notes, comparing the published and unpublished, and considers patient populations in terms of specific diagnostic categories. Researchers have tended either to treat these populations collectively or focus on categories that remain prominent within modern medicine, such as posttraumatic stress disorder. Through her careful study, Davis is able to tell a new story about syphilis. In doing so, she cautions against the assumption that case notes provide a patient perspective; they rarely contained patient testimony—even letters were heavily policed by asylum authorities—and patients were rarely consulted within the general admissions process.

The research forms part of a larger story in which Davis considers forms of institutionalized provision for the insane in Scotland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following the Lunacy (Scotland) Act of 1857 which gave rise to a more comprehensive system of care for the insane poor. By this time there were seventeen poorhouses—the equivalent of English workhouses—with lunatic wards in Scotland, and these accommodated over eight hundred patients. The focus is on four asylums, the Glasgow Royal Asylum, the Royal Edinburgh Asylum, the Barony Parochian Asylum (Woodilee), and the Midlothian and Peebles District Asylum. Davis notes ways in which the Scottish class system and social inequality were reflected in the Royal Edinburgh Asylum, where private patients and their families and officials and administrators advocated segregation