The Doctors' Plague: Germs, Childbed Fever, and the Strange Story of Ignác Semmelweis

Carter, K. Codell (Kay Codell), 1939-

Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Volume 78, Number 4, Winter 2004, pp. 898-899 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/bhm.2004.0159

For additional information about this article

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/bhm/summary/v078/78.4carter.html

Sherwin B. Nuland deserves much credit for drawing attention to various topics in the practice and history of medicine. This latest book is certainly not his least significant contribution of this kind: it is a partly fictionalized account of childbed fever, a horrible disease that devastated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maternity clinics. Against a background of nineteenth-century medical beliefs (especially those of the British), Nuland recounts Semmelweis’s adoption of chlorine hand washings, his rejection by the medical establishment, and his tragic death in a Viennese insane asylum. Semmelweis’s story is so moving and so filled with tragic irony that it cannot be other than engaging; surely it is among the most interesting episodes in the entire history of science.

*The Doctors’ Plague* includes eight chapters, plus an afterword that recounts, among other things, Pasteur’s depiction of the streptococci that, he concluded, caused childbed fever. There is also a five-page bibliographic essay. However, there is no table of contents, no index, no list of sources, and no footnotes or other means by which to identify the exact sources of Nuland’s numerous quotations.

Despite nearly a century of scholarly interest and study, many aspects of Semmelweis’s life and work remain controversial: What was his personal relation to his teachers in Vienna? How did his conclusions relate to Anglo-American opinions about childbed fever? Did his increasingly strident criticisms of contemporary obstetricians reflect mental instability and, perhaps, some organic pathology? How exactly did he die? Nuland reviews and answers all these questions, and whether or not one accepts his answers, they must be taken seriously. However, in this context I can address only what I see as the two chief defects in his account: he misconstrues (1) the conceptual relation between Semmelweis and his predecessors (including his teachers in Vienna), and (2) Semmelweis’s role in the sea change that swept medicine during the middle decades of the century.

First, according to Nuland, Semmelweis’s innovative claim that every case of childbed fever shares a single cause (namely, the resorption of decaying organic matter) somehow emerged by induction from research in pathological anatomy. However, Semmelweis himself wrote that his intense study of victims’ remains was fruitless and left the disease a complete mystery. Moreover, all of his predecessors who were trained in pathology, including his teachers in Vienna, continued to believe in a plurality of unrelated causes. In his own later writings on childbed fever, Josef Skoda—who, according to Nuland, was “more active in promoting the [Semmelweis] *Lehre* than anyone else” (pp. 130–31)—continued to ascribe the disease to a plurality of causes. How exactly could the idea of a single necessary cause be induced from research in pathology? It couldn’t, and it wasn’t—at least not in the sense Nuland seems to have in mind.¹ Of course, in one horribly ironic

sense, Semmelweis’s discovery did stem from studying pathological anatomy: he eventually saw that medical personnel who cut up cadavers infected patients with decaying organic matter. In this sense (but in no other) the study of pathological anatomy proved appallingly enlightening.

Second, what was the relation between Semmelweis and his successors? Here the choice for the historian is simple: (a) perpetuate the myth that, after his death, Semmelweis was ignored and forgotten (Nuland: “his work was neglected and all but forgotten” [pp. 182–83]), or (b) take the trouble to look at the literature. Which alternative did Nuland choose? Shortly after claiming that, following his death in 1865, Semmelweis’s name was “barely remembered” (p. 179), Nuland mentions the pivotal and widely cited research by the French scientists Léon Coze and Victor-Timothée Feltz—apparently overlooking the fact that Coze and Feltz’s monumental book (1872) itself includes a favorable discussion of Semmelweis. Ten years later, Wilhelm Fischel, a prominent German physician, wrote that, by his day, Semmelweis’s teaching had become part of the common property of a whole generation of medical personnel. Nuland states that Semmelweis “in reality, had no lasting effect on obstetric practice” (p. 179), but in fact, in French and German medical literature between 1863 and 1883, he was cited and discussed dozens of times—more frequently than almost anyone else—and references to his work appeared regularly until the end of the century. To claim that, after his death, he was ignored and forgotten, is on a par with claiming that, in 1491, European astronomers believed the earth was flat.

K. Codell Carter
Brigham Young University


This work is a timely contribution to this country’s observance of the two hundredth anniversary of the lengthy explorations of the Lewis and Clark expedition, a westward trip across mostly uncharted land from the existing United States to the Pacific Ocean. The book is also a scholarly and publishing rarity, a book-length volume that deals with the medical aspects of the expedition. Moreover, although Bruce Paton has directed his work deliberately toward the ordinary reader, what he has produced should appeal as well to physicians, historians of medicine, and other types of historians. In short, his retelling of this classic episode of American history is highly engaging and deserving of plaudits.

Paton, a retired cardiac surgeon, describes himself as having a longtime enthusiasm not only for history, but for the wild places of the world and for the often daring individuals who have explored such places. He has frequently worked as a physician on extended modern tours and expeditions into remaining wild places, and has played an important role in the organization of wilderness