

Mann, Barbara Alice. *The Tainted Gift: The Disease Method of Frontier Expansion*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009. 172 pp. Cloth, \$34.95.

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Book Review by Margaret M. Bruchac

Pathogenic diseases, whether accidentally or intentionally introduced, have long been associated with colonial arrivals in Indigenous territories. Barbara Mann identifies disease agents as tools of imperial expansion during an era when Indian removals were part of America's official public policy. Through painstaking analysis and source criticism, she illuminates key moments between 1760 and 1850 when virulent disease was deliberately spread among Native American populations.

Evidence is presented in four chapters concerning: the 1763 introduction of smallpox (*Variola major*) via tainted blankets to Native groups around Fort Pitt; the 1832 forced transport of Choctaw people into the midst of a cholera (*Vibrio cholerae*) epidemic; an 1837 epidemic of hemorrhagic smallpox (*Variola vera*) along the Upper Missouri River; and the 1847 poisoning of Native people in Oregon territory. Mann highlights primary documents that reveal colonizing intent, secondary sources that evade or gloss over the evidence, and oral traditions that testify to the memories of these events among survivors.

Chapter one examines the correspondence of 18th century British officers expecting to do battle against Native forces at Fort Pitt. Mann describes the gift-giving philosophies that characterized relations among both the Six Nations Haudenosaunee and Native nations along the Ohio frontier, and the influence of those relations on colonial strategies. In 1763, when Lenape emissaries promised peace to forestall looming threats, Captains Simon Ecuyer and William Trent responded by gifting them with infected blankets from the smallpox hospital. To spread the tainted gift to other Native nations, Colonel Henry Bouquet told Lord Jeffrey Amherst, "I will try to inoculate the bastards with some blankets...and take care not to get the disease myself" (p. 15-16). The strategem worked; a smallpox epidemic struck the Lenape and Shawnee, spread to the Haudenosaunee, and reached southward, infecting thousands. Despite the dense evidence of this

cause and effect, Mann notes, later historians employed sanitizing measures to conceal official complicity.

Chapter two investigates the 1832 relocation of Choctaw people during a cholera outbreak. Federal agents characterized this removal as a voluntary emigration; Mann labels it a form of genocide (p. 19). Choctaw people were starved, moved to the epicenter of the outbreak, and packed onto disease-ridden steamboats. Mann describes the insistence of government officials, resistance of Choctaw leaders, entreaties of physicians, and vain efforts of humanitarians. Proving intent to infect, she documents readily available protective measures (vaccination, isolation, or avoidance) that were specifically rejected in the case of the Choctaw, despite their usage to limit the impact of virulent diseases among whites.

The third chapter concerns an 1837 outbreak of hemorrhagic smallpox on the Upper Missouri. This epidemic has been variously blamed on: a drunken frolic by Arikara women; the theft of smallpox-ridden blankets; flawed vaccinations; and/or accidental contact with an infected mulatto. Mann delivers a scathing critique of popular histories, noting: “official documents are scanty, vague, or cryptic, secondary accounts are demonstrably falsified, and eyewitness accounts are fragmented, confusing, and often deceitful” (p. 43). Several groups were then lusting after Native land, including the American Fur Company, white settlers, railroad barons, and the United States Army. In exhaustive detail, Mann traces each vector responsible for carrying a disease “so malignant that death ensued within a few hours” (p. 73), killing approximately 90% of the Mandan, 70% of the Hidatsa, and 50% of the Arikara populations (Trimble 1994:82). Mann describes Native familiarity with epidemic disease, to the point of actively resisting variolation (inoculation with live smallpox virus) in preference for vaccination (inoculation with less-deadly cowpox), effectively counteracting the propaganda depicting ignorant, superstitious Indians.

Chapter four reviews the facts surrounding the 1847 execution of 14 white missionaries on a charge of deliberately poisoning Cayuse, Nez Perce, and Walla Walla peoples so as to seize their territory. In 1843, a wagon train sent by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions first arrived in Oregon territory, and was met with cautious welcome by Native peoples. When colonial impulses took over, “the settlers simply took anything they wanted” (p. 97). To protect their gardens, they injected toxic doses of tartar emetic into melons that they

knew would be consumed by Native people. When an outbreak of measles hit, the missionaries offered to treat the Natives with the current remedy--strychnine (*nux vomica*)---only administered at such high dosages that a 50% death rate resulted.

There are a few shortcomings in Mann's book. She ends, too abruptly, with chapter four. A closing chapter with synthesis and suggested applications of this research in current debates would have been very helpful. Her terse introduction offers little guidance for alternative or collaborative research models, and there are moments in each chapter when her ironic tone detracts from the power of her arguments. The intentional outbreaks of the 1700s and 1800s could have been better positioned in the aftermath of accidental outbreaks in the 1600s; these were exploited by eastern colonists as supposed evidence of God's choice to "sweep away by heapes the Salvages" thereby clearing the land for Christian settlement (Morton 1637:120). In this light, it would have been interesting to hear Mann's challenge to the historical characterization of disease in the Americas as "virgin soil epidemics" (Crosby 1986:196) that enabled (theoretically) biologically superior European populations to thrive. Lastly, in the absence of any nuanced discussion of the positive effects of European trade and social intercourse that enhanced Indigenous economies and cultural relations, Mann inadvertently creates the impression that *all* gifts were tainted.

Overall, Mann's work is provocative, informed, and refreshing. She provides crucial historical evidence that effectively answers the charge (by some modern scholars) that disease epidemics were largely accidental, and that complaints of genocide are merely polemical. She stresses the need for meticulous research to establish clear lines of accountability. Most importantly, she makes it clear that the intentional spread of disease abetted a general discourse of destruction that promoted death (by whatever means) as an appropriate "final solution" to the Indian problem. That toxic dream informed the vision of manifest destiny, resonates in American popular culture, and continues to threaten Indigenous survival today.

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