

**Malaria and Victorian Fictions of Empire**, by Jessica Howell, Cambridge, U of Cambridge P, 2019, 220 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-108-48468-8.

Aside, perhaps, from those planning a long holiday or encountering advertisements for expensive tonic water, one imagines few people in twenty-first-century Britain give malaria very much thought.<sup>1</sup> However, as Jessica Howell remarks in the opening pages of *Malaria and Victorian Fictions of Empire*, the disease was once one of the great 'scourges' of nineteenth-century Britain, and a pronounced concern of the nation at the height of its imperial power. Moreover, continues Howell, the impact of malaria on human civilisation has been 'so profound that it has even left its mark on the human genome' (Howell, 1), and it remains a continual source of risk to much of the world's population today. In this ambitious and interdisciplinary work, Howell aims to offer the first book-length study of malaria's modern history through analysis of its representation in literature and culture, with a particular primary focus on the work of eminent Victorians such as Charles Dickens, Henry James, Olive Schreiner, H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling, alongside consideration of contemporary author Amitav Ghosh's return to malarial fictions at the close of the twentieth century. Howell argues that malaria's place within culture alongside the other defining diseases of the nineteenth century (and imperial expansion) such as cholera, smallpox, cancer, tuberculosis and syphilis, has long been overlooked, and that its relevance to notions of colonial progress, imperial scientific and medical mastery, and the narrative patterns of Victorian fiction are both evident and revealing of their authors' views on and hopes for the British Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> UK-based Fever-Tree Tonic have been running a historically-themed marketing campaign since late 2018. Fever-Tree, 'The History of the Gin & tonic', 12<sup>th</sup> November 2018. [https://fever-tree.com/en\\_GB/article/gin-and-tonic-history](https://fever-tree.com/en_GB/article/gin-and-tonic-history). Accessed 30/9/19.

Howell divides her book into five chapters, each focused on one or more of her component authors, accompanied by a coda that suggests how the fusion of postcolonial literary studies and health humanities might be productively continued in the future. In her robust and cogent introduction, Howell suggests that fundamental to understanding malaria's place in Victorian literature and society are factors of literal and figurative spatiality and temporality; British medical discourse, Howell writes, sought to 'define malaria as a disease "out there" rather than "right here"' (Howell, 3), thus enabling its association with the contemporary understanding of the wasting and immoral character of foreign spaces, a portrayal she later reveals as aided and encouraged by literary works like Dickens' and James' where individuals displaced from their 'natural' environs are at deadly physical and spiritual risk as a result of 'geopolitics of illness' that cast such places as 'repugnantly or pleasingly dangerous' (Howell, 58-59). Such thinking contributed to the general and widespread belief in how tropical and equatorial spaces were inherently hostile to the European body, as well as the enterprise of colonialism, and, therefore, how medicine, science, and the individual colonist, were all engaged in a struggle for dominance over not only people and places, but also health, disease and their bodies.

The chapters themselves are often richly detailed, and present an engaging balance of textual analysis alongside the use of medical sources, or those drawn from the wider culture of Victorian publishing that informed the imperial adventure narrative. Howell's chapter on Kipling's *Kim* (1901) in particular is a rich and deeply rewarding exploration of how the novel negotiates the colonial bogeymen of hybridity and miscegenation through its central character's experience of malarial fevers, whilst also reflecting how the composition of the novel itself was a blending of Kipling's prejudices gained through his own travels (as per *The City of Dreadful Night*, 1885), his discussions and correspondence with friends and

professional contacts such as Haggard and Ronald Ross, as well as his own beliefs around illness. Howell interrogates Kipling's representation of the practice of colonial 'seasoning' as a means of acclimatizing the European body to the dangers of the tropical climate, arguing that whilst contemporary thinking feared that the 'explorer or colonist would be changed permanently' (Howell, 155), and always for the worse, by illness contracted in the East, Kipling's adherence to Lamarckian evolutionary thought makes *Kim* an argument for exposure to such experiences in the belief that they would become a source of strength, rather than a 'specter of racial degeneration' (Howell, 156). Such experiences suggest that the transformative experience of illness in service of empire embodied in Kim himself is an extension of Kipling's belief in the sacrifice necessary for British rule to continue; that the 'white man's burden' can count illness and disease amongst its hardships.

One of the book's strengths is its advocacy of a postcolonial health humanities. As Howell rightly observes and goes some way to correct, explorations of the intersection between postcoloniality and medical humanities and their reciprocal benefits has, to date, been somewhat lacking. The chapter on Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) and the potential threads of future research assembled in the coda, suggests the tangible import of medicine in criticising the literary and medicinal practices of the Empire from a post-colonial present. However, the limited material on this topic feels unfulfilling when compared to the focused analysis of the preceding chapters, and the topic would instead would be worthy of a volume to itself; to use the book's own defining terms, Howell does not have sufficient space or time within the confines of this volume to address the deeper questions of the postcolonial return to empire through historical fiction that she acknowledges. Cultural representation of the British Empire itself apes malaria in its periodic returns and recurrences, and how texts, or products like Fever-Tree tonic, that depict a phenomenon

that physically occurred elsewhere but remain tangibly 'right here' as part of national political and cultural discourse seems worthy of further reflection, especially given the frame of Howell's intervention.

Although this book might not be able to explore them fully, that Howell's research has helped reveal these further complexities, spur further research on literature, medicine and colonialism, and establish the terms of such approaches, means that her contribution is valuable indeed, and makes *Malaria and Victorian Fictions of Empire* a compelling addition to a growing area of scholarship with health humanities, literature, and medicine.

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