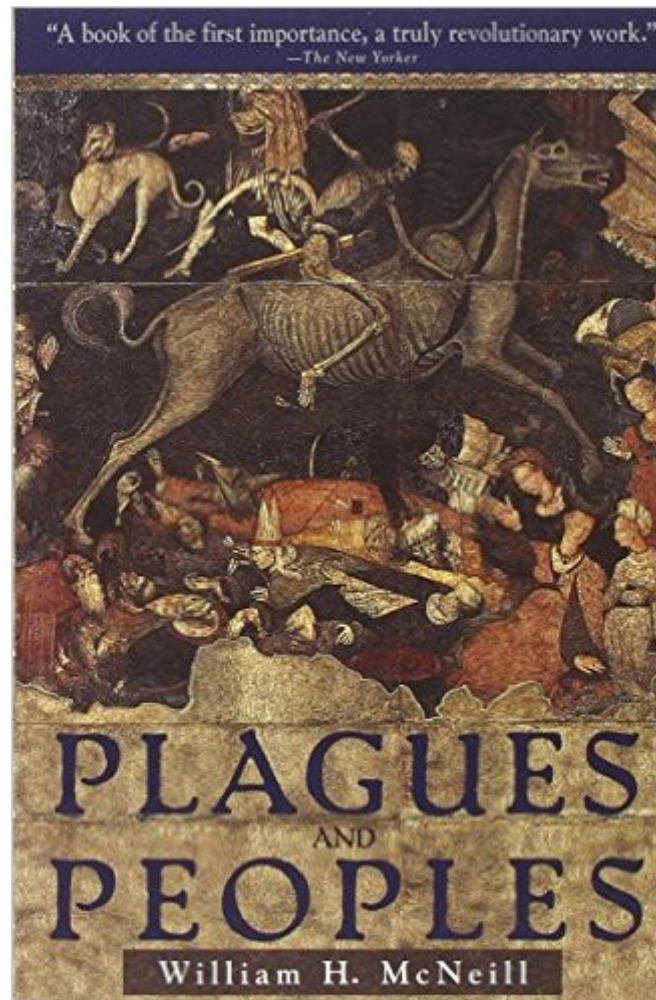


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Plagues And Peoples



Synopsis

Upon its original publication, *Plagues and Peoples* was an immediate critical and popular success, offering a radically new interpretation of world history as seen through the extraordinary impact--political, demographic, ecological, and psychological--of disease on cultures. From the conquest of Mexico by smallpox as much as by the Spanish, to the bubonic plague in China, to the typhoid epidemic in Europe, the history of disease is the history of humankind. With the identification of AIDS in the early 1980s, another chapter has been added to this chronicle of events, which William McNeill explores in his new introduction to this updated edition. Thought-provoking, well-researched, and compulsively readable, *Plagues and Peoples* is that rare book that is as fascinating as it is scholarly, as intriguing as it is enlightening. "A brilliantly conceptualized and challenging achievement" (Kirkus Reviews), it is essential reading, offering a new perspective on human history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Plagues and Peoples is an informative and very readable summary of the relationship between mankind and disease. The author consistently views disease as a parasite and describes the history of plagues in terms of a parasite interacting with a host population. The parasite and the host interact and, over time, reach an equilibrium within the population that allows the both the parasite and the host to survive. The most interesting feature of the book is his portrayal of mankind not only as a host, but also as a parasite himself. He uses the term macroparasite to describe human

institutions and phenomena that also drain energy and resources from producers. For example, very high taxes or rents, Medieval labor laws and practices, war, and forced migration all drain communities and nations as surely as disease. He provides excellent, while still brief, commentary on the interaction between microparasites and macroparasites and the resultant depopulation of certain areas during certain periods. One might argue that this is not a newly observed correlation, but it has certainly never been explained as clearly and succinctly as it is done here. McNeill covers a range of topics. There is, of course, discussion of the plague and mankind's response to it. There is also commentary on leprosy. Why, for example, was leprosy so common in Western Europe and the Middle East in biblical times, to disappear in the Middle Ages. (The answer is not what you think.) Did syphilis originate in the Americas? If so it may have been the Aztecs' revenge on the conquistadors. Why are there childhood diseases? McNeill's arguments are sometimes intuitive and are, in some cases, based on limited data, especially when he examines the history of disease in Asia and India.

History can be written from two major vantage points. From the top of a mountain, with broad brush strokes, showing the major streams and landmarks, the BIG picture. Spenser and Toynbee are such historians, so is this book. The other view is from the trenches, the pieces, the small connections that we find so fascinating and absorbing. I believe that the big picture view of this book is a result of how it came into being as an elaboration of a single constellation of ideas that the author discovered while working on *The Rise of the West*, he found them interesting and continued to build the structure around these ideas in this book. The book is about a collection of related ideas: Parasitism--as he defines two types macro and micro. Micro is the form we are familiar with as disease, the times viruses, bacteria, protozoan begin to use us as their energy and food source, to our consternation. He further defines two flavors: epidemic and endemic. Epidemic is the form in bubonic plague that swept Europe for 500 years at regular intervals. Endemic is the idea of a parasitic form like the liver flukes that effect irrigated agriculture the world over, or like the civilized childhood diseases that effect the body politic like measles, mumps, smallpox. Macroparasitism is this author's contribution to the discussion, unique to him as far as I know. Those other humans that prey on the weaker, less organized, less mobile etc. Epidemic macro are the Mongols (which are the topic of what I think is the best chapter in the book) or those horsemen like in the movie *The Seventh Samurai* who sweep out of the steppes or mountains to seize the harvest.

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