

The Miraculous Fever Tree: Malaria, Medicine and the Cure that Changed the World by Fiametta Rocco. Harper Collins, 2003.

Fiametta Rocco tells an amazing story of the discovery of quinine and its use in the combating of the killer disease of malaria. This was a tale waiting to be told in popular form, and Ms Rocco has a personal as well as a professional reason for so doing – she has suffered from malaria, as did her father and her grandfather.

Malaria, Rocco details, is not just a disease of the tropics but was a mass killer in Rome, and even occurred in Kent up to the 18th century! In Rome it received the name by which it is commonly known, mal'aria, bad air, and perhaps because it killed numerous cardinals at a papal conclave, and the Pope they had gathered to replace, the Vatican gave much support to the Jesuits whose explorations in Spanish South America were to uncover the tree whose bark was to provide the long sought after cure.

Later, other explorers and adventurers, botanists and medics, travelled to the jungles to find the trees and to bring back seeds that could be grown on a large scale so that significant quantities of quinine could be manufactured. The chemical derivate of the bark of the cinchona tree thus became the means for the development of empire, global commerce and much more besides, opening up parts of the world that had previously been 'protected' by the mosquitoes that carried the dreaded malaria parasites.

The statistics that Ms Rocco cites are chilling: according to the WHO 500 million people are infected with malaria every year, three million of whom die, meaning that one person dies of malaria every 15 seconds. Ten times as many children have died of malaria in the last decade as have been the victims of conflicts. This is disturbing stuff, especially when juxtaposed with the heroic individuals who did so much to develop quinine and then to identify the causes of malaria itself. That malaria is still so rife and devastating today in the developing world says much about the West's selfishness and double standards, and its fundamental hypocrisy about Africa in particular.

Malaria may not be an eye-catching sympathy causer in our compassion-fatigue ridden societies, but Fiametta Rocco's excellent book, among other things, is a powerful manifesto for the groups that really do care about others to include it in their focus and seek to alleviate the dreadful suffering that malaria brings.

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