documentary evidence.) In fact, the office diary kept by the Atomic Energy Commission's general manager, Ken Nichols, who stage-managed much of the prosecution's case against Oppenheimer, notes that on 24 April 1954, Teller told Nichols that "he would be glad to testify." As Teller also promised Nichols, his testimony four days later was, almost verbatim, what he had told the prosecution's lawyers about Oppenheimer several weeks earlier: that Oppenheimer's judgment could not be trusted. At the hearing, however, Teller went even further and, during cross-examination, volunteered that he considered it "wiser not to grant clearance" to Oppenheimer.

Despite Teller's modest disclaimers, he has always been much more a force of nature upon the American political landscape than the simple physicist-concerned-with-current-events portrayed here. Those not already familiar with the history of the times, and the man, may miss the fact that the author of this well-written and often fascinating book was, quite simply, the most politically influential scientist of the 20th century. Readers of the book should keep in mind that *Memoirs* is not the truth, rather—to paraphrase Teller's physicist friend, Leo Szilárd—it is Teller's version of the truth.

BOOKS: EPIDEMIOLOGY

Certain Diseases, Uncertain Explanations

David Morens

"The only way to make our planet safe and habitable...is to turn into adaptation the still frequent disadaptation between man and his environment." So wrote the physician Félix Martí-Ibáñez in the 1950s, a distant time when diseases were believed to be instances of personal bad luck, curable by the wondrous drugs, and procedures of medical archangels. Few listened to him.

Much has changed since then. Epidemiology has shown that the occurrence of disease is not just a matter based on the individual but is the result of complex interactions between the triumvirate of agent, host, and environment. In fact, as proto-epidemiologists have been saying since the 1820s, diseases are sometimes preventable by interventions at the population level.

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Unvanquished disease. The cholera pandemic that began in 1961 is the largest and longest-lasting of seven that have occurred since the early 1800s. (The drawing depicts residents of Cairo fleeing an 1883 outbreak.)

But even that concept proves too narrow. On the way to eradicating malaria, DDT poisoned the environment and elicited mosquito resistance. Better food distribution led to bigger food poisoning epidemics. And agricultural and environmental fiddling provoked unintended health consequences: administering antibiotics to farm animals enhanced meat production and lowered prices, while creating antibiotic-resistant bacteria. A broader context within which to understand human health and disease is clearly needed.

Enter disease ecology. Although it doesn't advertise the trendy term, Tony McMichael's new book, *Human Frontiers, Environments and Disease*, nevertheless is in this still-developing tradition. Other works on the shelf, including Jared Diamond's Pulitzer Prize–winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Norton, New York, 1997) and William McNeill's classic *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor, Garden City, NY, 1976), cover similar terrain. What does McMichael, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, offer that is new? Most obviously, his book encompasses a broader scope—broader even than Diamond's, if that is possible. Enlisting the approaches of anthropology, demography, epidemiology, genetics, history, sociology, and other disciplines, McMichael addresses not only infectious diseases but also chronic, nutritional, and genetic ones. Such wide coverage raises the danger of incoherence, and *Human Frontiers* does sometimes seem a patchwork quilt, roughly stitched. Yet the narrative's drip-drip-drip of disparate facts eventually does run together. McMichael is specific and integrative when he needs to be. Ecology is not so much the subject of the book as its organizing principle, the interdisciplinary framework for pigeon-holing disciplinary specifics.

Human Frontiers, Environments and Disease
Past Patterns, Uncertain Futures
by Tony McMichael
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001. 413 pp. $59.95. ISBN 0-521-80311-X. Paper, $24.95. ISBN 0-521-00494-2.

McMichael sprinkles the text with anecdotes that urge the reader to examine familiar problems in new ways. For example, in discussing long-term effects of marked improvements in nutrition around 1850, he notes that almost exactly 100 years later Buckingham Palace suddenly found itself sending congratulatory telegrams to centenarians. Other historical asides also freshen things up. We learn about Beethoven's health, tuberculosis as a plot device in Italian opera, the "English Sweate," Napoleon's retreat from Russia, and the decline of Hawaii's native population. We also read that Pythagoras (who had a genetic glucose 6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency) was killed by an angry mob when he found a geometry problem he could not solve: whether to escape directly along the hypotenuse of a field of flowering fava beans, risking hemolytic crisis brought on by the pollen, or to run along the edges of the field, allowing his pursuers the shorter route of the hypotenuse. Such historical tales provoke thought without seeming gimmicky.

There is a little to quibble about. One misses some discussion of the psychological and psychosocial impacts of modernization. McMichael's humans are too much like dandelion puffs helplessly buffeted by the winds of genetics and environment; *Homo sapiens* is given too little credit for rational problem-solving. And, alas, despite 35 pages of notes, the most interesting information is usually unreferenced. On the plus side, McMichael resists mentioning either the Aswan High Dam (tough for any ecologist) or rabbit myxomatosis (nearly impossible for an Australian such as himself).

The book's forte, however, is found not in McMichael's talent to lightly charm but in his ability to honestly alarm. Without preaching or reaching for political correctness, he leads the reluctant reader to a state of worry. By the last chapter, we have come not just to learn but to understand why humans are standing at the edge of disaster. There are already six billion people on our planet, and the global population continues

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to grow at a great rate. Our societies haven't imploded yet only because most of the world lives at a level of privation Westerners would not accept, beyond the reach of the very resources Westerners cannot live without.

And therein lies the dilemma. To the extent that Westerners support development in, and extension of their prosperity to, the rest of the world, they sow the seeds of everyone's destruction. As McMichael stresses, there may already be too many people in the world to support universal living standards at a level Westerners consider minimal. There isn't enough land, enough water, or enough resources. In a zero sum game, reality trumps altruism; the price of comfort for some being the misery of others. Reading *Human Frontiers* after the September 11 attacks was a particularly eerie experience: the horrible pictures on television somehow seemed a logical consequence of the book's complex ecological truths.

What to do? McMichael doesn't say. But *Human Frontiers* makes a strong if understated case for broader thinking and broader planning, for getting and hanging onto "the big picture." He takes no position on Francis Bacon's view that the dream of every thinker is to replace the politician by the scientist. Probably aware that kings and statesmen once agreed with that proposition, McMichael instead allows the modern reader to discover the need for just such an infusion of science and ecological thinking into public policy-making. Are such changes possible when so many distrust science and associate "ecology" with nerdiness and political agendas? Perhaps at this point it is helpful merely to voice alarm, in the hope that scientists and policy-makers will find new ways to realize Bacon's 400-year-old dream.

BOOKS: GENETICS

Also Sprach *Homo mutans*

Norman A. Johnson

At the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, an extraterrestrial monolith implants in ape-like animals increased intelligence and the ability to make bone weapons. With this skill, our ancestors defeat their enemies. In reality, however, *Homo sapiens* is the monolith. The fictional monolith perturbed hominid evolution, but it is our species that has deliberately influenced the evolutionary paths of countless others. Our "one preeminent trait," according to writer and essayist Sue Hubbell, is "our ability to modify the world to make it nice for ourselves." In *Shrinking the Cat*, she explores the means and consequences of our shaping animals and plants for our own use.

Hubbell presents four case examples of domestications we humans, whom she calls "*Homo mutans*," have performed: corn, silkworm moths, cats, and apples. As her title suggests, in the course of domesticating cats, humans have shrunk them. Not only have we reduced the size of their bodies, we have also disproportionately shrunk their brains; house cats have only about 70% of the neurons that wildcats have. In addition, their adrenal glands, which are involved in the production of "fight or flight" hormones, are smaller. We are thus left with a more docile animal.

As much as we have altered the cat, we have altered other creatures even more. Hubbell asks us to consider the following thought experiment: Suppose humans were to completely leave Earth (perhaps, as she suggests, due to an invasion by "little green men"). What would eventually happen to the species we *Homo mutans* have altered? The success of feral cats suggests that domesticated cats may be able to survive without humans. Would the silkworm moth, *Bombyx mori*? In the process of shaping it into a silk-producing machine, we have made it larger and more docile than its wild counterpart, *B. mandarina*, and unable to fly. The domesticated moths lack the foraging skills of their ancestors. "They simply wait patiently to be given food by a human hand, and they placidly die if it is not forthcoming." These creatures of our designing would soon perish without our care. So would the apple (a cross between disparate ancestors, usually raised by grafting) and corn (many varieties of which are sterile hybrids).

Not simply red. A small sample of the existing variety in apples.

In the course of describing how we domesticated these species, Hubbell also tells stories about our history and culture. She discusses, for instance, how various governments, from ancient China to pre–Civil War United States, have encouraged their populaces to raise silkworms—with varying degrees of success. We also learn the true story of "Johnny Appleseed" as well as how the silk roads led to the spread of both apples and the plague.

In the film *2001*, the bone that goes flying up into the sky becomes a spaceship orbiting Earth, suggesting no fundamental difference between bone tools and spaceships. Likewise, Hubbell states that there is no fundamental difference between our thousands of years of domestication and our scant-decades-old practice of genetic engineering. She argues that we have engineered the genes of countless species long before we knew of genes. But as science writer Colin Tudge (*1*) and many others have pointed out, there is a profound difference between traditional breeding and genetic engineering. In the past, we modified organisms, but the range of genetic variants we could choose from was strictly limited to what already existed within the species (or possibly, closely related species) or what could appear via mutation. Now, we can grab a gene from a mammal and put it in a plant. This is an important difference, one minimized by Hubbell.

Shrinking the Cat
Genetic Engineering Before We Knew About Genes
by Sue Hubbell
Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2001. 191 pp. $25. ISBN 0-618-04027-7.

We need to be mindful of the novelties as we decide how to use the new technique. We also need to be mindful that the advantages of genetic engineering are not limited to the pocketbooks of "big pharm." Indeed, environmentalists should support responsible uses of biotechnology. After all, as Hubbell reminds us, genetically engineered bio-control was developed as a more environmentally friendly alternative to pesticide use.

Hubbell believes that part of the controversy over genetically modified organisms arises because "biologists haven't done a very good job of explaining their research in terms that non-scientists can comprehend." I agree and commend her for trying to bridge the gap. Hubbell's narrative and her short, user-friendly guide for further reading offer an excellent starting point for exploring how we humans have deliberately modified organisms throughout our history.

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Reference

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