Scurvy: How a Surgeon, a Mariner, and a Gentleman Solved the Greatest Medical Mystery of the Age of Sail

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might have been taken of concurrent mutinous outbreaks prompted by the same disinclination to fight Russians, after fighting Germans, onboard British warships off Archangel and among American troops in the same region. Homesickness and wartime restrictions were among the reasons why Australian tars defied their officers in 1919. The Chilean navy’s revolt had its roots, as had that of the men of Invergordon, in the world economic depression, but the Chilean navy’s revolt is notable as the first naval mutiny crushed by air bombardment. Indian sailors in the waning years of the British Raj staged lower-deck protests against their officers; the Canadian fleet developed “a tradition of mutiny” in the 1930s; and the Chongqing mutiny off Manchuria in 1949 “played a pivotal role in the... founding of the People’s Republic of China.” Each story is briskly told, thoroughly detailed, and accompanied by comprehensive source data. Perhaps fortunately for riddle lovers, the question persists—what is a mutiny? Many of the Port Chicago fifty awaiting trial were bewildered, believing that a mutiny involved a crew overthrowing its officers and taking command of the ship. High-level brass can be just as confused. At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing following the Vietnam-era disturbances on the U.S. aircraft carriers Constellation and Kitty Hawk, the chairman asked Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, then Chief of Naval Operations, to define mutiny. Zumwalt passed that one on to his lawyer. The chairman wondered aloud if the Caine mutiny of Herman Wouk’s novel, though fictional, was not the real thing; the CNO suggested that what happened on the Bounty was a genuine mutiny.

This book mentions these troubles on the American flattops only in passing. Were all the episodes it covers truly mutinies? Let the question rest. This is a fine book, eminently readable, and as definitive as any work can claim to be on the still mysterious matter of mutiny.

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Brown, Stephen R. Scurvy: How a Surgeon, a Mariner, and a Gentleman Solved the Greatest Medical Mystery of the Age of Sail. Markham, Ont.: Thomas Allen, 2003. 254pp. $23.95

The conquest of scurvy played as great a role as any naval battle in the history of England’s domination of the world during the Age of Sail. Today we understand that scurvy is a condition caused by dietary deficiency. The typical menu for a sailor in the eighteenth century consisted of biscuits, salt beef, salt pork, dried fish, butter, cheese, peas, and beer—hardly sources of vitamin C. According to the 1763 annual register tabulation of casualties among British sailors in the Seven Years’ War with France, of 184,999 men, 133,708 died from disease, primarily scurvy, while only 1,512 were killed in action. Such numbers are hard to comprehend today. Brown implies that America won its independence because the ravages of this disease prevented the British fleet from maintaining an effective blockade. Only a few years later, having conquered scurvy, the same navy thwarted Napoleon from mounting an invasion force and sustained a blockade preventing the French and Spanish from consolidating their ships into an effective fleet.
This book is a definitive history of scurvy. It had been known among the ancients, but its effects became truly dreadful during the Age of Sail, when ships would be at sea for months on end. The beginnings of a concerted search for its cure might be ascribed to the ill-fated circumnavigation of the world by George Anson in the years 1740–44. Five warships and one sloop began the journey, but only one ship returned. Scurvy had felled so many men that ships had had to be scuttled and abandoned for lack of sufficient crews. When Anson became First Lord of the Admiralty, he encouraged scurvy research and made changes to shipboard hygiene.

Three names stand out in the search for a cure: James Lind, a surgeon, performed controlled experiments; James Cook, a mariner, managed to circle the globe without his men’s succumbing to scurvy; and Gilbert Bane, a gentleman, was able to overcome tradition-bound prejudices and persuade the Admiralty to issue daily rations of lemon juice, which finally eliminated the dreaded disease.

Scurvy is important reading for today’s naval officer, not only because it tells a historically fascinating tale but also because it examines how progress was made by “thinking out of the box” and going beyond the assumptions of the times. As early as the early seventeenth century open minds discovered a cure but did not fully understand why it relieved the effects of the disease.

“Common sense” at that time made the approach seem implausible, and the cure was lost. Scurvy was eventually defeated, but its cause was not fully understood until the twentieth century. The Nobel laureate Albert Szent-Gyorgyi isolated ascorbic acid in 1932, and today we are able to buy inexpensive megadoses of vitamin C.

The story told by Stephen Brown is fascinating in the way it ties together seemingly disconnected events to show that cause and effect are not always linear. Vasco de Gama recorded the first naval outbreak of scurvy during his 1497 voyage around the Cape of Good Hope. Iroquois Indians helped Jacques Cartier’s crew survive scurvy while wintering on the banks of the St. Lawrence in 1534. The East India Company defeated scurvy in the early 1600s, but, as we have noted, the cure was lost. Scurvy developed during the Irish potato famine of 1847 and appeared among the Forty-Niners of the California Gold Rush.

Scurvy: How a Surgeon, a Mariner, and a Gentleman Solved the Greatest Medical Mystery of the Age of Sail will fascinate the history buff, the health-conscious reader, and anyone who can appreciate the difficulty we as humans have in accepting empirical evidence when it appears to contradict the conventional wisdom. At the very least, the reader will find interesting the story of how sailors endured the Age of Sail.

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