Title—Mosquito Empire: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean
Author—John R. McNeil
Year—2010

Categories: Environmental History, Medicine, Atlantic World, Empire
Place: Greater Caribbean
Time Period: 1620-1914

Argument Synopsis:
McNeil aims to demonstrate the profound role of mosquitos and the diseases they carried, specifically yellow fever and malaria, in the Greater Caribbean, arguing that mosquitos were historical actors during this period. He claims that yellow fever and malaria underpinned the geopolitical order of the Greater Caribbean. Overall, he aims to demonstrate how ecological changes shaped the fortunes of empire, war and revolution during this period.

He criticizes earlier historians for ignoring the political role of diseases, claiming that is was justified by covering short periods of history. Disease became a bigger historical actor when armies began fighting far from home, as in the Greater Caribbean. During this period, the Greater Caribbean was a veritable crossroads of different groups from around the world, including: **European explorers, indigenous Americans, and African slaves**. Important to the argument is the understanding that mosquitos could not have been historical actors without the ability to effect the actions of humans.

The creation of the plantation system, McNeil focusing on sugar in the Caribbean, caused an ecological and demographic transformation that made the region much more preferable to mosquitos and pathogens. *"The sugar plantation had three main pillars: the slave trade as a source of labor, the plantation as a unit of production, the port city as the organizer of exports. All three combined to improve conditions for the vector of yellow fever." (61)* Yellow fever was concentrated in sugar plantations and urban zones, and was particularly deadly to Europeans who grew up outside the Caribbean.

McNeil uses case studies of attempted colonizations to demonstrate yellow fever as an obstacle to colonization. Europeans faced increased difficulties in conquering land that suffered from both malaria and yellow fever, as in Scottish attempts to take Panama in late 1600s.

The role of immunity and resistance had massive political effects. Resistance to malaria could be developed through exposure and survival, which could be found in the bulk of African slaves. Yellow fever provided immunity to anyone who survived it, making those who grew up in the Caribbean likely to have immunity by adulthood. McNeil argues the American Revolution was successful, in part, due to differential immunity.

The late nineteenth century realization that insects spread disease caused the lost of their political significance. Effective disease control turned profoundly politically significant pathogens into a trivial public health problems by the mid-twentieth century.

Key Themes and Concepts:
- Mosquitos and pathogens were active historical actors, but will never again hold the power they did in the era before germ theory, and understanding insects spread disease
- European settlement brought about permanent ecological change to Americas