Book Review


This book, first published in 2015 by the Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, is a comprehensive history of the management of leprosy in Queensland from 1850–1975. Hugo’s unflinching account of individuals who were found to have leprosy, takes the reader through the stigma and racism they faced from the ‘White Australia’ policy of the day, and the often hysterical and vitriolic attacks from politicians which were perpetuated through the press of the time – fearful of a disease they did not understand, and of which they were very frightened. However, he also balances this out by highlighting those politicians and individuals who stood up for the rights of those affected by leprosy, fighting against prejudice and ignorance.

This is a book that will make you wince as you read of the harsh treatment and extreme social deprivation meted out to those found to be ‘contaminated’ with leprosy. There were exceptions, but these usually only applied if the person affected was white. Hugo outlines the plight of those banished to Dayman, and later Peel Island and the abandonment they felt at being totally isolated and left to fend for themselves.

Hugo’s narrative is interspersed with the social events of the day which give a more rounded insight into the situation. As he puts it “Why did a people who considered themselves an important part of the British Empire, who prided themselves on the success of the colony they had built from a very unpropitious start, and who believed whole-heartedly in the British system of justice, act in this inhumane, despotic way towards a handful of sick men, and later, women?”

This book explores this question in a forthright, and sometimes painful way, which leaves the reader feeling almost ashamed at what our fellow human beings are capable of, but it also reveals the more humane attitudes that followed the scientific understanding of the disease and, as he puts it, “the final humanising influence of modern antibiotics”.

A must-read for those interested in the social history of leprosy.

Irene Allen