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Book Review

STACKING THE COFFINS: INFLUENZA, WAR AND REVOLUTION IN IRELAND, 1918–19

by Ida Milne. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018,
pp. 280, £25. ISBN 9781526122698.

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Reviewed by: Kamminthang Mantuong, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Miranda House College, University of Delhi, Delhi.

Stacking the Coffins is a historical monograph on the influenza pandemic ('Spanish Flu') in Ireland between 1918 and 1919. Ida Milne gives a comprehensive picture of the influenza pandemic in an Irish context, which was marked by rising Irish nationalism, the possible imposition of conscription, the general election to be held in December 1918, and the demand of Sinn Féin for a 'republic'. Through a micro-history of this pandemic, the author focuses on cities like Dublin, Belfast, among others, as the groundwork for understanding the politico-military and healthcare history of Irish society. The author uses a wide range of primary sources to construct the historical narrative of the flu. In the process, the book describes in detail the impact of the influenza pandemic on Irish society undergoing the trauma of World War I and the rapid move towards independence. This work is significant as it is the second monograph, after Caitríona Foley's *The Last Irish Plague* (2011), to focus on the Irish experience of the pandemic that has often been overlooked by Irish historians.

One of the interesting features of this book is that the author clearly delineates for the reader the clinical symptoms of the disease. The influenza pandemic of 1918, unlike other previously known influenza, was unique in the sense that it was marked by *heliotrope cyanosis* (mauve or reddish purple) skin colour, which has become the signature feature of the Spanish flu. The other unique feature of the Spanish flu outbreak is that it follows a wave pattern (with numerous waves in less than a year), as distinct from 'early post-pandemic' and 'seasonal influenza' (which follows a wave interval of one year or more). Although the first outbreak of the influenza pandemic is attributed to 1918, F. G. Crookshank and others suggest that Spanish flu may already have been circulating in Britain and France since 1915 in the form of purulent bronchitis, which was caused by secondary infection.

It is estimated that the influenza pandemic of 1918 killed between 20 million and 100 million people across the globe. The number of people affected could vary between one-fifth to half of the world's population. However, the accepted estimate by the World Health Organization (WHO) is over 40 million deaths. Of this, the number of Irish deaths was estimated at 20,057, and those infected more than 800,000, or one-fifth of Ireland's population in 1911. One difficulty in estimating the death toll, as pointed out by the author, was the rudimentary nature of death registration in many parts of the world.

The pandemic narrative can be divided into three sections. The first section talks about the everyday experience of the people and officials with respect to the disease. The second section is from a biomedicine/public health perspective and the third section is on the political nature of the disease. At the outset, a critical introduction to the book, which gives a historical grounding of the Irish people and their revolutionary struggle, could have helped prepare the reader to grapple with some of the grueling details in the rest of the book. Having said that, the author traces the arrival and progress of the disease through the lens of journalists who kept track of this 'mysterious malady'. Ida Milne also observes that the narrative of influenza competed with war for primacy in newspapers and mass media. Even

though the influenza killed over 40 million people worldwide, which is more than World War I, it was hardly a news item, and in fact, its news-worthiness soon faded from public memory. The author also brings out how the pandemic overburdened the public health system in general, and the Poor Law dispensary service and hospital in particular, which in turn reveals the gross inadequacy of the system. This glaring inadequacy later became the basis of healthcare reform in 1919 under the Public Health Council.

There were various narratives to the origin and cause of the disease. It was a source of consternation and anxiety for the medical fraternity. The increasing cases of influenza and the inability to find a cure led people to question the medical profession's new-found confidence in bacteriology. Many believed that the disease emerged out of the war conditions in Europe and America, where rotting bodies of men and animals at the front could have led to the outbreak of the disease. This belief was based on the 'theory of miasma', which has now been debunked. However, there seems to be some truth in the possibility of the disease emerging out of the war conditions. The author observes that the demand for food (pig, chicken, etc.) for the soldiers at the front and their crowded, confined spaces, along with the animals, might have led to the circulation of influenza from chicken to man and pig, where pigs acted as a 'mixing vessel' for the mutation of the influenza virus. This might have led to the emergence of a virulent strain of the influenza virus. Although this knowledge comes with hindsight, it is now the most widely accepted theory for the spread of the influenza virus, especially in the case of avian flu and swine flu.

An important aspect that the book deals with is the growing tension between the increasingly nationalist Board of Guardians, who were responsible for implementing the Poor Law dispensary service at the local level, and the Local Government Board for Ireland, under the British Government. Besides, as the author convincingly shows, there was also emergent political tension between the Irish nationalists and the Dublin Castle administration, which represented the Crown. These political dynamics reveal how a moment of crisis further exacerbated the already difficult relationships in the administrative setup vis-a-vis the Board of Guardians, the Local Government Board, and the medical health fraternity.

What is also significant about this book is that the history of the 1918 influenza pandemic in Ireland provides a backdrop for understanding contemporary influenza outbreaks (like avian flu, swine flu, among others), where ethnographic studies have been carried out using sociological and anthropological approaches. For instance, Arthur Kleinman, a medical anthropologist, has conducted studies on avian flu in China and Southeast Asia using a biosocial approach. Similarly, other studies have also been recently carried out in South Asia and many other parts of the world.

The study of the influenza pandemic of 1918 needs to be encouraged as it provides the necessary backdrop for a diachronic perspective to the existing ethnographic study on influenza. *Stacking the Coffins* is an important contribution towards such a possibility. It gives clear insights to the kind of public health measures that were taken in the wake of the pandemic, and how some of these insights are still relevant in contemporary pandemic prevention and containment strategy. The book will be useful to political, military and flu historians. It informs scholars, practitioners and lay people engaged in the areas of political discourse, military history and flu research in understanding the socio-political conditions created by the intersection of influenza, war and revolution in Irish history.