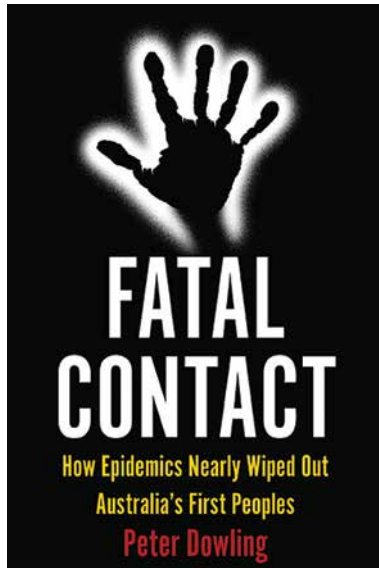


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## Fatal Contact: How Epidemics Nearly Wiped Out Australia's First Peoples

By Peter Dowling

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Peter Dowling's *Fatal Contact: How Epidemics Nearly Wiped Out Australia's First Peoples* is a comprehensively researched book that explores the devastating impact of infectious diseases on Indigenous Australians during the colonial period. The book provides a detailed account of the historical and social context in which these epidemics occurred, and the profound consequences they had on Indigenous communities. While perhaps more of a teacher reference, and one with uneven regional coverage, it is a contribution to the debate surrounding the effects of settlement on Indigenous populations.

Dowling explores the various epidemics that swept through Indigenous communities, including smallpox, influenza and tuberculosis, and the devastating impact these diseases had on Indigenous populations. Perhaps most interesting—but probably least useful for the classroom—is the chapter on sexually transmitted diseases. These diseases were at the intersection of frontier relations: high rates of sexual contact between European males and Indigenous women through 'the common practice' (p.120) of prostitution, consensual relations and rape led to infection rates of 50 per cent or more among women, though less among men. Stillbirths, infertility, congenital infections of babies and death resulted from these STDs or from other diseases opportunistically attacking STD-weakened bodies.

Indigenous populations dropped precipitously in this rolling epidemic, quite apart from the more dramatic occasional bouts of smallpox, 'flu or diseases such as measles. This example reveals the limits of this book. While

documenting the impacts of such diseases in depth, there is neither an examination of the social and cultural practices that led to disease transmission—both consensual and violent, by both Indigenous and European peoples—nor a discussion of the subsequent impacts on the Indigenous population.

The precipitous decline in the population of Indigenous people produced two enduring observations. First, disease-ravaged Indigenous populations indicated to European eyes a 'primitive' culture with sparse populations. Unknown to the colonial eye was the perhaps 50–90 per cent decline in Indigenous populations as disease spread in advance of the frontier. Secondly, continued declines led to the extrapolation that 50,000 Aboriginal people in the early 1900s would fall further, with little to be done apart from corral survivors in missions and reserves, even though 'the main diseases ... caused exceptional morbidity and mortality' (p.204). Interestingly, Dowling notes that the Indigenous–non-Indigenous health disparity has maintained this historic ratio to the present.

One of the strengths of the book is its use of primary sources to provide a detailed and nuanced account of the impact of epidemics on Indigenous communities. Dowling draws on a wide range of sources, including letters, diaries and newspaper articles, to provide a vivid and compelling picture of the devastation wrought by infectious diseases.

While the book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in a bleak dimension of the history of Indigenous Australians, it is not without its limitations. One of the main criticisms

of the book is its relatively narrow focus on the impact of epidemics on Indigenous communities. While this is an important and under-researched area, it would have been useful to see more discussion of the broader social and political context in which these epidemics occurred. In particular, the book could have explored the ways in which colonial policies and attitudes towards Indigenous Australians contributed to the spread of infectious diseases.

Also notable is the way Dowling entirely sidesteps the debate about the origin of the first smallpox epidemic in Sydney in 1789. For instance, ABC News has described how a deliberate release might have occurred as part of a pre-emptive attack on Indigenous people, and quoted the view among many Indigenous people that ‘a lot of our people understand what happened back then as biological warfare’.<sup>1</sup> However, Dowling evades this by arguing that ‘the limiting factor in this debate [about the origins of this first smallpox epidemic] has been the historical records [that] show no conclusive evidence either way’.

It is also disappointing that Dowling sidesteps debate with authors such as Judy Campbell, who argued that this first epidemic was the product of exposure to infected Macassans in the north, and indeed only cites her work for three trivial details.<sup>2</sup> Given the eagerness by some to argue for deliberate biological warfare, it is a pity he simply ran away from the fight.

A final misgiving comes from the lack of Indigenous accounts. Few instances are not mediated by colonial medical or bureaucratic voices.

Despite these limitations, *Fatal Contact* is an important and valuable contribution to the study of Indigenous history in Australia. It provides a detailed and nuanced account of the devastating impact of infectious diseases on Indigenous communities, and highlights the ongoing legacy of these epidemics in chapter-ending examinations of the contemporary impacts of each disease. The book is well-written and engaging, and its extensive use of primary sources makes it a valuable resource for researchers, anyone interested in the history of Indigenous Australians, and for the inquiring teacher (if perhaps not too many students).

In conclusion, *Fatal Contact* is a valuable addition to the study of Indigenous history in Australia, and its focus on the impact of epidemics on Indigenous communities makes it a particularly important resource for anyone interested in public health and the history of infectious diseases. While the book could have benefited from a broader contextualisation of these epidemics, its use of primary sources and engaging writing style make it a valuable and informative read. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of Indigenous Australians or the impact of infectious diseases on human societies.

- 1 O. Willis, N. Thorpe and C. Smith, “‘Those Floating Islands Brought Something We’d Never Encountered Before’: The Sickness that Changed Australia,” ABC News, 18 August 2021, retrieved 24 February 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2021-06-07/patient-zero-smallpox-outbreak-of-1789/100174988/>
- 2 J. Campbell, *Invisible Invaders: Smallpox and Other Diseases in Aboriginal Australia, 1780–1880* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007).