
This book is a sociological history of the changing attitudes to sunlight in Britain through the first half of the twentieth century and the emergence of what the author calls ‘Helio-humans’. I enjoyed this book and think it provides a fascinating account of the complex overlapping influences that have shaped our current attitudes to sunlight. These included classical ideals of beauty; a sense of the exotic; the hedonistic nature of sunlight exposure and notions of health both in terms of specific diseases and in terms of general vitality. I particularly enjoyed the descriptions of the work of Theobald Palm that sought to explain the lack of rickets in Japanese populations (40–41); ‘Vitaglass’ (pp. 68)—a glass designed specifically to allow ultraviolet light to pass through it and the Men’s Dress Reform Party (pp. 78 and 79) which was committed amongst other things to promoting the wearing of shorts.

The book is not long—134 pages including a notes section; a bibliography and an index. It well-written and divided into eight chapters. I would have liked to see some pictures to illustrate the topics covered though I accept that too many images might trivialize the subject or distract the reader. As an epidemiologist I was flattered to read (on p. 6) epidemiology described as ‘one of the dominant post-cold-war sciences’ though I am not convinced this is the case. I found some of the sociological sections heavy going and would have liked to have a better idea of how the evidence discussed had been located and selected.

I think it would be interesting to extend this history into the second half of the twentieth century and also to explore in more detail the development of attitudes in other countries. I would look forward to reading such an account.

So in summary a book that I would recommend to people carrying out research into current sun behaviour and diseases related to sun light—perhaps to be read wearing shorts and sitting by a vitaglass window?

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Kunitz’s book is a ‘brief for foxes’; those whom Isaiah Berlin depicted as pursuing ‘many ends, often unrelated and often contradictory’. The underlying argument of the book is clear from its title: that every general theory on the relationship between social and economic change and the health of populations, has been found wanting by ‘particular realities’. In particular, Kunitz makes a convincing case for bringing the State and the study of political cultures back into explanations of the changing health of populations.

Kunitz’s book is a subtle, yet provocative survey of over a century of social and epidemiological thinking. He sketches, with rare clarity, the links between how successive generations have thought about, and