

# Tropic of Wonder-trees

**Renee Lertzmann** reviews a book about the discovery of quinine, which changed the face of tropical medicine completely

*The Miraculous Fever-Tree: Malaria, and the Quest for a Cure that Changed the World.*  
Fiametta Rocco, HarperCollins, 2003

As Fiametta Rocco, the author of *The Miraculous Fever-Tree* readily admits in her acknowledgements, many chapters of the malaria story have been told. So the question is, why add yet another historical account of malaria and quinine?

The fact is that despite its enormous role in the formation of modern medicine, the history of the cinchona tree is relatively unknown in popular discourse. While most people know that quinine keeps malaria from being deadly, few know the extraordinary story of how a tree in the Andes came to provide the necessary alkaloid, made from its bitter bark. Rocco's account of the 'miraculous fever-tree', cinchona, and the hundreds of people involved in its discovery and implementation, provides a much-needed reminder of the permeable boundary between humans and nature, which is exemplified both in the disease and in the cure.

The story of the cinchona tree (and more familiar to us, the pharmaceutical tablet called quinine) is precisely that: a story, a yarn, a plotline with narrative peaks, ascents and subtexts. This account, as told through the lens of quinine and with the lively writing of Rocco, is as much about how illness and the human body were perceived in seventeenth-century Europe, as it is about the birth of modern medicine, the violent struggles between church and science, and the sheer ravages to the human population by this complex disease.

Alas, central to this story is the fascinating dialectic of tree and disease, two poles of biotic relationship: malarial fevers that eluded Western medical understanding until the eighteenth century, and a 'miraculous' bitter bark. The passage of malaria from mosquito to human, often resulting in death, was attributed to extraordinary kinds of causalities, but it was only the emergent use of microscopes and the evolution of the laboratory that enabled the understanding we commonly accept today. It is precisely this kind of confluence of human imagination and innovation, religious piety and superstition, imperialism and the tree



itself, that renders the story of the fever tree and malaria as a vivid reminder of the coevolution of humans and nature.

Rocco's story begins with the intimacy of the family: we are immediately introduced to her grandparents, with the provocative opening line, 'My grandparents had been married for many years when they left Europe for Africa in 1929, though not to each other.' Through this circuitous route, we come to understand the presence the disease had in her life as a child in Kenya. She writes:

As far back as I can remember, the daily ritual of breakfast on the farm was broken on Sundays by the distribution of quinine, or its modern chloroquine-based equivalent, Nivaquine ... the vile taste of the syrup clings to your teeth and gums long after you have swallowed it down. Just writing about it makes me wince at the memory.

It is this fusion of the personal and the visceral that infuses Rocco's unfurling of this story: she writes as a journalist (she is the literary editor for *The Economist*) and has left no stone unturned in her quest to get at a nuanced account of quinine's history.

After the first chapter Rocco swiftly leaves the personal and the biographical, and unfortunately never really returns to it. She launches us quickly into history 'proper', taking us into the life of Giacinto Gigli, and his home in an alleyway by the Via delle Botteghe Oscure in mid seventeenth-century Rome. This, in a sense, is the 'opening act', where we are introduced to the first character in this fast-moving sequence of people,