

H. Leon Greene. *The Confederate Yellow Fever Conspiracy: The Germ Warfare Plot of Luke Pryor Blackburn, 1864-1865.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2019. 255 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6890-1.

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The Confederate Yellow Fever Conspiracy: The Germ Warfare Plot of Luke Pryor Blackburn by H. Leon Greene explores a Confederate “diabolical plot” to unleash yellow fever on the Union during the years of the US Civil War (p. 2). The book’s little-known tale of betrayal, international intrigue, dramatic trials, conflicting sworn testimonies, Caribbean smuggling, and nefarious schemes promises much to its readers. Lest they write off such a tale as mere lore, Greene specifically emphasizes, “This book is entirely history; it is not historical fiction” (p. 3).

Greene weaves biography and detective work together to plausibly document the aspects of what he labels an instance of germ warfare (p. 1). Sixteen roughly chronological chapters highlight the players and the 1864-65 plot to spread yellow fever from St. Georges, Bermuda, to Union cities via trunks of blankets and clothing worn by deceased yellow fever patients. Greene dedicates some chapters, such as chapters 2 and 6 to introducing the titular “yellow fever fiend” and nineteenth-century yellow fever medical expert, Dr. Luke Pryor Blackburn (p. 147). Other historical agents who helped Blackburn and his Confederate allies in Canada with their plan to spread yellow fever, such as the “great rascal” Godfrey Joseph Hyams in chapter 7, drive other parts of the book (pp. 52, 54). Greene dedicates additional chapters, such as

chapters 9 and 10, to outlining some of the logistical aspects of Blackburn’s plan (p. 103 for example). The final chapters of Greene’s book, chapters 13-16, document the lives of the co-conspirators after their disease dissemination plan failed.

Greene clearly spent significant time and energy tracking down various sources. He employs testimonials, letters, maps, and newspapers frequently rooted in “deep mystery” because they are often the only relevant records available to him (p. 103). As Greene acknowledges, his sources regularly contain extreme bias, exaggeration, aliases created to escape detection, or conscious lies. To make research even more difficult, Greene’s available information is often filtered through three or four different people, such as in the instance of the name of a captain Hyams approached to try to smuggle the trunks infested with yellow fever from Bermuda to Boston; the captain’s name appears variously as McGregor, McGreggor, and McGriffin in relevant records (p. 111). Compound this one inconsistency across historical sources with similar inconsistencies in most of Greene’s sources and Greene’s source description, “maddingly imprecise,” becomes an understatement (p. 73). Because of this dearth of sources, Greene often entertains possibilities and plausible explanations more than is traditional in most history books (pp. 103, 218). To its credit, *The Confederate Yellow Fever Con-*

spiracy is well illustrated and includes several documents in order that readers may reach their own conclusions (see pp. 105 and 128 for examples).

My concerns about Greene's book as a whole stem from differences in our training rather than from any significant flaws in his work. Greene is a cardiologist first and a self-professed amateur historian second (p. vi). As such, Greene passes judgement on the state of nineteenth-century medicine when he describes it as "crude" and "primitive" (pp. 38, 50). He also employs terms such as "weapons of mass destruction" in ways that uproot these terms from their surrounding cultural contexts (p. 102). Greene's evaluations are understandable conclusions from the perspective of a modern medical doctor but are a little too decontextualized and ahistorical for this historian. Similarly, given his background, Greene is more interested in gathering pieces of information rather than interrogating the various nineteenth-century understandings of race, class, and gender that appear in his story (pp. 14-15, for example).

The Confederate Yellow Fever Conspiracy stands as an informative work on the yellow fever plot of 1864-1865. Greene set himself a very difficult task and succeeds in putting together as many pieces of the plot as he is able. Readers with an interest in the international context of the US Civil War, conspiracy theories, wartime medicine, and a good story that also happens to be "entirely history" will appreciate his efforts.

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