

NERVAL'S DIARY

Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...

29 June 1995, St. Peter and St. Paul's Day, within the ruins of the Old Portuguese Fort, Malacca, Malaysia

I sit close to the walls of St. Paul's church overlooking the Straits of Malacca with an endless file of ships along the horizon. Behind me, the Butik China, said to be the biggest Chinese cemetery outside the Middle Kingdom; to my left, the Fort St. John still displaying five six pounders in its walls ('Me fecerunt Claes van Noorden et Ian Albert de Grave, Amstelodami 1706'). Naval history is my topic this time, and Malacca a fitting place to interrupt the long trip to the South Pacific. Malaysia is familiar to me by plane and train: Ferringhi Beach and Sungei Buluh, the Batu Caves and Boh Tea, the skyscrapers of K.L. Honored with membership of the Malaysian Derm Society, participant of past meetings, I relish an encounter with old friends. Approaching this city, I visited the Malacca Butterfly and Reptile Sanctuary, allegedly one of the biggest in the world. Having previously worked with giant pythons [1 and Holubar K, Wick G, unpublished, 1989]. I was enticed by a large albino python confined to a special cage. Red irides and a soft cream-colored translucency of its long and elegant body, how fascinating to be confronted with such a distant vertebrate relative expressing the all too familiar condition we also meet in man in oculocutaneous albinism. We, the redheads of phototype I [2], are especially concerned: freckles, premature greying of hair, dysplastic nevi as manifestations of the perturbed pigmentary system; a reduced DNA repair capacity [3]; perhaps also some boobos in vitamin D metabolism [4]. Let us look forward to what the human genome project will eventually teach us as to the developmental position of the so-called Celtic traits and OCA.

Norfolk Island (168°E, 29°S) [5] discovered by Captain James Cook on 10 October, 1774, also of HMS Bounty fame, at the Congress of the Australian Medico-Historians (2-9 July, 1995)

Medicine and Mutiny, besides naval medical history in general, was the topic of this biannual meeting with a most appropriate venue because Norfolk Island, an erstwhile penal colony (6 March 1788), became a haven for the descendants of the Bounty mutineers living on Pitcairn Island some 60° eastward (130° W, 22° S) [6]. In 1856, 193 people (upon arrival 194) came over here when the penal colonies were finally shut down and Pitcairn was overcrowded. In 1858, some 16 people returned homesick to tiny Pitcairn (6 km²), in 1863 another 27. All others stayed on. Here you

meet them, the Christians, the McCoys, the Quintals, etc., also genuine Pitcairners of today, of the Christian family. A friendly, warmhearted bunch without exception. Norfolk has an area of 29 km², a paradisiac place with a fancy subtropical flora (cp. *Araucaria heterophylla*).

275 registered delegates came, 441 attendees overall. Certainly one of the biggest medico-historical meetings of all times. There were descendants of the Bounty mutineers, of the convicts of the first settlement, of later ones, a great-great-grandson of Captain Philip G. King, who commanded and landed the first ship on 6 March, 1788, Dr. Philip A. King. Quite naturally, the penal colonies and their peoples were in center focus of many papers. This however, did not preclude other speeches from referring to later mutinies, planned or carried out. My own contribution concerned Austrian Ships in Australian Waters 1857-1905. There were altogether twelve expeditions, among others circumnavigations of the globe plying the surrounding seas within this period. Some historical, some personal relations, even some semantic, had stimulated me to pursue this topic [7]. One tends to think of the history of medicine just as a goldfish pond with a small number of researchers. Over here this is not so. Many moving stories of researchers were told elaborating into their own convict roots. The History of Medicine combines all medical specialties and the Humanities in investigating historical events. Papers delivered here referred to three centuries of penal codes, convicts, mutineers, heroes, seamen, soldiers, men and women alike, starting from the time of Captain Cook and rolling into our century, including our own crimes during the IIIrd Reich. Much could be gleaned and even more speculated about what we, the medical profession, have achieved in such situations, where and how often we have failed.

- 1 Holubar K: Pemphigus an atavism? *Dermatologica* 1989;178:6-7.
- 2 Holubar K, Schmidt C: Sun and Skin. Wien, Österr Ärztekammer, 1994.
- 3 Wei Q, et al: DNA repair capacity for ultraviolet light-induced damage is reduced in peripheral lymphocytes from patients with basal cell carcinomas. *J Invest Dermatol* 1995;104:933-936.
- 4 Loomis WF: Skin-pigment regulation of vitamin B biosynthesis in man. *Science* 1967;157:501-506.
- 5 Hoare M: Norfolk Island, ed 4. St Lucia University of Queensland Press, 1988.
- 6 Pitcairn: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 28/29 April 1989.
- 7 Lodewyckx A: The Name of Australia: Its Origin and Early Use. *The Victorian Historical Magazine* 1929;13:99-115.