



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HAWAIIAN STATE ARCHIVES/FROM "THE COLONY"

Raising the flag in Kalawao, Molokai. Below, Dr. Edward Hoffmann; in Honolulu in 1866, he chose the first leprosy patients to be exiled to Molokai.

THE COLONY

By John Tayman.
Illustrated. 421 pp.
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By MARY ROACH

ONE passage in "The Colony," perhaps more than any other, epitomizes John Tayman's singular powers as a chronicler of human misery. It appears in a chapter that addresses the very special torments of a subset of Molokai's leprosy sufferers known as the blinds. Tayman has earlier explained that the bacteria that cause leprosy (or Hansen's disease, as it is now also known) seek out the cooler peninsulas of the human land mass: noses, earlobes, toes and fingers and, most devastatingly, eyes. The bacteria — which take cover from the patient's immune system by hiding out in (and destroying) nerves — soon erase the cornea's exquisite sensitivity. With no blink reflex, the eye's delicate surface dries out and is torn and scarred by an onslaught of everyday irritants: dirt, lashes, the patients' own fists as they rub their eyes. Blindness follows.

Here comes Tayman to blow us away: "Doctors tried training patients to blink on schedule, using a timer or some other device. The technique worked in some cases, but only if the patient was physically able. Leprosy bacilli also attack the nerve controlling eyelid muscles, creating a condition known as lago-

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The story of the leper colony at Kalawao is the story of an injustice as deep and complete as any in human history.

the eyelids. In such cases surgeons rigged a thread of muscle from the jaw to the lid, which caused the person to blink as he chewed — doctors then handed them a pack of gum." Tayman's understated and unadorned presentation of these small, unthinkable human circumstances achieves a quiet greatness. It whispers; you cry.

"The Colony" chronicles the forced exile of leprosy patients, from 1866 to 1969, to the remote Kalawao colony on Hawaii's Molokai island. Tayman shows us that the true horror of leprosy lay not in the biological details of the disease, ghastly as those were, but in the day-to-day consequences of those details. What is it like, for instance, to try to dress yourself when you cannot see and the skin on your hands has gone numb? ("Makia learned to dress by touching his clothes to his lips, where a small spot of sensitivity remained. He could identify his shirts by the slickness

of the fabric and tell his shorts from his pants by the weight.")

Tayman's narrative pulls the reader beyond the superficial, medical horrors of leprosy to the more devastating human horrors that lie beneath. In doing so, he has brought to light the profound dignity of his subjects. Less mature, less comprehensively researched accounts of leprosy, with their slavering, rococo descriptions of the disease's horrid physical toll, generate, at their basest, revulsion, and at best, pity. Tayman's noble account makes you want to stand and applaud. It makes you want to walk up to these people and shake their hands.

And you could do so with almost no fear of contracting the disease. The kicker here, the monumental inequity, is that people with leprosy were exiled for no good medical reason. Leprosy is not an especially contagious disease. Only 5 percent of the population are genetically susceptible to it. And even they would probably emerge untainted: only a third of untreated leprosy patients have the disease in its active, infectious state.

Yet so great was the hysteria surrounding leprosy that hundreds, probably even thousands, of people who only appeared to have the disease were packed off to colonies. At one point, patients in Kalawao were allowed to request a rediagnosis. Ten out of the first 11 to do so did not have leprosy. A diagnosis of leprosy, accurate or inaccurate, amounted to a criminal conviction. By law, people deemed lepers could be hunted down, stripped of their rights and torn from their families. And most of them were — until well after effective treatment was established, in the 1940's. The story of

complete as any in human history.

The ignorance and occasional arrogance of public health policy makers was only partly to blame. To understand the indelible and abiding stigma of leprosy, Tayman takes us to the Bible. "And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, saying, When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, a scab, or a bright spot . . . he is a leprous man, he is unclean: the priest shall pronounce him utterly unclean." No matter that neither scabs nor bright spots are symptoms of leprosy. The disease took on an unshakable moral pall. "Although Leviticus contains no explicit moral diagnosis," Tayman writes, "scholars have determined that priests likely viewed any skin disorder as a sign that someone had offended God." This was the prevailing assumption in the early days of Kalawao. Even the colonists themselves viewed their afflictions as punishment for their sins.

With the exception of the book's opening chapter — a flash-forward account of a murder committed by a leprosy victim on the lam in the 1890's — the narrative of "The Colony" rides a straightforward chronology. For obvious reasons, Tayman bases his account of the early years of Kalawao on news reports and archival material — some 8,000 pages of it. (Tayman became something of an exile himself, moving to Honolulu to be close to the Kalawao archives.) The archives of an institution, alas, typically contain far more information about the people running it than the people confined in it. And it is the victims, at least in this case, who were the more compelling. For the final third of the book, Tayman is able to work from his own interviews with three of the colony's last living exiles. The strength and humanity of these people brings the book to life in a way that the archival matter of earlier chapters cannot. This imparts a noticeable, if unavoidable, unevenness to the book.

Tayman, a former deputy editor of *Outside* magazine, is neither the first nor the best-known writer to take on Kalawao. Jack London sailed to Molokai at the urging of the founder of the Hawaiian Bureau of Information, Lorrin Thurston, who was eager to dispel overwrought rumors of Kalawao's horrors. Leprosy had infected Hawaii itself, thwarting an early annexation movement and crippling the islands' nascent tourism. London held himself in check for the magazine piece that ran upon his return, then let loose some months later in a short story: "They were monsters — in face and form grotesque caricatures of everything human," he wrote. "One woman wept scalding tears from twin pits of horror, where her eyes had been." Thurston was enraged, calling London "a sneak of the first water, a thoroughly untrustworthy man and an ungrateful and untruthful bounder."

In 1889, Robert Louis Stevenson spent a week in Kalawao. "I have seen sights that cannot be told, and heard stories that cannot be repeated," he wrote. "Yet I never admired my poor race so much nor (strange as it may seem) loved life more than in the settlement." Stevenson's words are moving, but they are, at bottom, about Stevenson and not the colonists. Tayman never makes an appearance in his text or even directly states an opinion. He lets the facts condemn and the details amaze and appall; and his work is by far the stronger. □