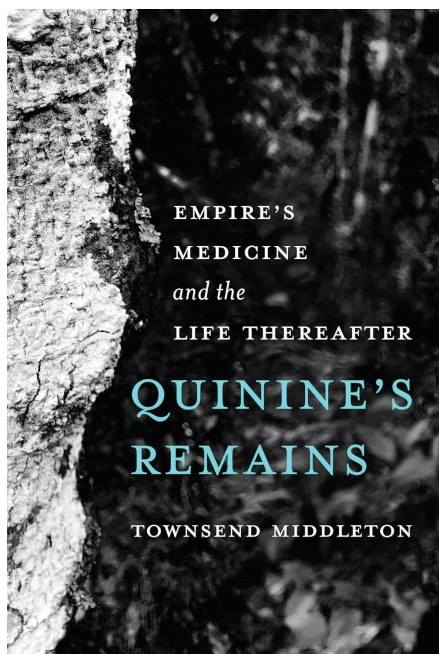


**Quinine's Remains: Empire's Medicine and the Life Thereafter**

By Townsend Middleton

Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2024. Pp. xv + 192. Paperback, £30.00, ISBN 9780520399129. Open Access: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.187>, ISBN 9780520399136.



Reviewed by Mark Nesbitt

The colonial story of cinchona is oft-told: the emergence of its bark in South America some 400 years ago as one of the few effective treatments for malaria; the role of the quinine it contains in enabling European occupation of tropical zones, and the appropriation of plants by the British and the Dutch to enable cultivation of this vital resource within the colonial territories of Asia. The innovation of this book is its focus on the aftermath. What happened to cinchona plantations once

quinine was replaced by synthetic antimalarials in the 1940s? In the case of Darjeeling the plantations continue under government management to this day, employing a labour force of some 5,000 to cultivate a plant for which there is no longer a market.

Based on fieldwork in Darjeeling over an eight-year period, this book is centred on the contemporary workforce of the plantation. This is mainly comprised of Nepali-speaking Gorkha labourers whose forbears migrated to work on the plantations in the nineteenth century. Unlike the tea plantations this is not a story of indentured labour, but rather of a system which provides a combination of land and wages in exchange for work. If the plantation fails, or is privatised, the workers will lose their homes. Thus, more than 150 years after the establishment of the government plantations, colonial legacies greatly affect the Gorkhas.

This book does not shy away from big topics – industrial and colonial legacies, the Anthropocene, multispecies relations – but these are handled with nuance and subtlety. Above all, the story is told in the voices of the labourers, whether in nineteenth century images from the British Library, or ethnographic fieldwork today. Their agency is emphasised, in the context of political developments in West Bengal and the campaign for a self-governing Gorkhaland. This is a highly readable book, not just because it is well-written, but because it is personal. The author takes the reader with him into the plantation fields, the labourers' homes, and the manager's office.

This is a journey into cinchona's past – the colonial story is well told – and its present, even discussing the plantation's attempted revival in the context of the renewed interest in quinine during the COVID-19 pandemic. In its emphasis on the long history of cinchona, in its deep engagement with the plantation workforce, and its refusal to accept easy answers, this is a profoundly original and engaging study. It should be widely read.

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