

NEA now became a purveyor of "taxpayer-funded pornography".

The NEA chairman whom President George Bush appointed to sort out the row, John Frohnmayer, was in effect destroyed by it. His successor, the actress Jane Alexander, who was picked by President Clinton two years ago, was thought to be doing a fair job of mollifying artists and lawmakers.

But last summer the culture war reopened. Conservative Republicans protested about a piece of protest art the NEA had paid \$150 towards: Ron Aithey, an HIV-positive artist-performer had cut a partner on stage, dabbed the blood with paper towels and sent them winging into the audience on an overhead gantry. This new row made it easy for the NEA's congressional opponents to cut its budget. In vain the NEA's defenders point out that the money for it in this year's budget is less than the Pentagon spends on marching bands. The Republican right was not disarmed.

The NEA is not, for all that, without popular support. Many blockbuster art exhibitions would end without it. Private companies could not afford the insurance of borrowed masterworks that the NEA currently underwrites.

Something else to allay the anxiety of the NEA's defenders is that most of the new Republican majority in congress is more preoccupied with crime and the economy than with culture. Mr Gingrich's sager colleagues have already warned him not to be distracted by crusades for school prayer or against contemporary art.

The NEA's future still looks shaky. When it was created in the 1960s few foundations or businesses supported contemporary art. Now most of them from the Andy Warhol Foundation to Morgan Guaranty Trust Company do. Against this it is argued that private money tends to flow only after the NEA has set its seal on new artists or new art forms with money, so to speak, of its own.

viruses whose natural habitat seems to be somewhere in the rainforests of central Africa, near the presumed origins of the AIDS virus. Several filoviruses rank among the most lethal micro-organisms in the world; one strain of Ebola kills 90% of the human beings it infects, in a way that would be better left undescribed—though Mr Preston does not so leave it. Suffice to say that it involves the "sloughing off" of vital parts of the internal anatomy.

Given that strains of Ebola can jump between species, and have fatality rates that make them "slate-wipers", the story of Ebola in monkeys makes a heady read. Mr Preston is a writer of talent and the story of how the Reston people got to grips with 450 sick, infectious and irritated monkeys gives him ample scope to deploy his skills.

Nobody will get white knuckles holding on to the 750 pages of "The Coming Plague", but this account of the past 30 years of epidemiology and disease ecology is just as scary in its own way. The whole roller-coaster drama at Reston gets handled in two sentences on page 594. Laurie Garrett has a wider tale to tell.

She takes the reader from the unbridled optimism of the 1950s, when the World Health Organisation was going to wipe out malaria and everything else, through the gradual humbling of scientists, doctors and health officials as they have faced the resurgence of infectious illnesses, logarithmic rates of drug resistance, and a new appreciation of the stunning molecular and ecological complexity of disease. The book is ambitious, but it succeeds.

It takes a lot of reading. The filoviruses get their coverage; so do Lassa fever, swine flu, Legionnaire's disease, Machupo and others. The grim reaper haunts Ms Garrett's accounts of these epidemics, but the white knights are never far behind—the swashbuckling "disease cowboys", brash young epidemiologists who go out into the bush to confront exotic ailments. There is much genuine heroism in their exploits, and Ms Garrett laments their replacement by bureaucrats and lab-rats, but she chucks in a bit too much real-man dialogue ("Just get your butt on that copter!").

The spice can help; an embarrassing richness of background, including useful chapters on such things as the effects of urbanisation and the rise of genetics, makes the first nine chapters seem exhausting even to the diligent pupil. But perseverance is well rewarded. The chapters on AIDS, the centrepiece of the book, provide a meticulously documented social and scientific context for the emergence of a new global plague. Ms Garrett is probably the best-informed AIDS

The chances of a new plague

It's out there, waiting

THE COMING PLAGUE. By Laurie Garrett. Farrar Straus Giroux; 750 pages; \$25.

THE HOT ZONE. By Richard Preston. Random House; 400 pages; \$23. Doubleday; £14.99

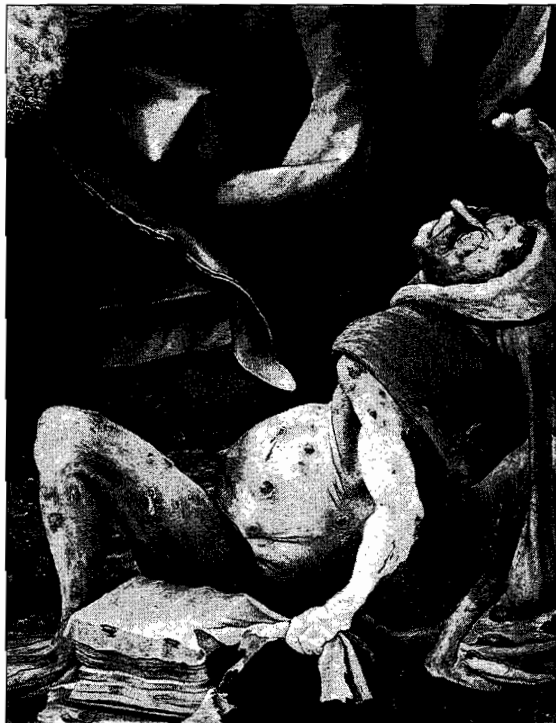
There are lots of things to worry about, from the economy to whether you left the toaster on. The possible demise of the human species may be hard to make room for: too abstract, too unlikely. Unlikely, that is, before you spend a few hours with "The Hot Zone" or "The Coming Plague", two new books of investigative journalism that pose one troubling question: Why haven't crafty viruses wiped out human beings? Both books suggest it could yet happen.

Over the past decade or so AIDS has been burning a slow and hideous fire across Africa, America, Europe and Asia. The transmission of AIDS is relatively easy to control; it requires the direct contact of body fluids. Mutations that made an AIDS-like virus or something worse—yes, they get even nastier—spread like a cold are a scary possibility. How scary? Look at the dust-jacket of Richard Preston's "The Hot Zone", an account of a real 1989 virus scare just outside Washington, DC: "One of the most horrifying things I've read in my whole life," says Stephen King.

Despite the pulp-fiction cover and a silly set of opening pages, Mr Preston has written a tolerably restrained piece of journalism about an alarming event. He tells the story of the courageous and ingenious way some American soldiers and the Cen-

tres for Disease Control contained an outbreak of a virus called Ebola in monkeys at a research centre in Reston, Virginia.

Ebola is the kind of virus that gives health officials bad dreams. It is a member of a family called filoviruses, worm-shaped



Not safe from him

journalist writing, and these chapters are a chilling tour de force.

The book's message—that changes in human behaviour and the environment inevitably disturb the ecological balances between man and microbes—is not original, but in Ms Garrett it has found an eloquent messenger. She gives warning that scientific specialisation and health-care bureaucracies may have made the world even less prepared than it was before to face a plague that grows more likely with every disturbance in the balance of the earth's environment.

The book's scope is encyclopaedic, its mass of detail startling. Who knew that the annual budget of the World Health Organisation was less than New York city spends on street cleaners? Or that a square inch of human intestine contains more microbes than there are human beings on the planet?

The squeamish should face up to both books: Ms Garrett's because of her disturbing portrayal of a "world out of balance", where new ecological pressures and niches provide breeding grounds for new and potentially devastating microbes; Mr Preston's for the plain old palm-sweating fear of reading about a victim of a filovirus as he "crashes and bleeds out", dying from a virus that no one can cure—and which is really out there, lying low in the jungle, just a few hours' airliner ride away from any of us.

George Nathaniel Curzon

A very superior person

CURZON. By David Gilmour. *John Murray*; 608 pages; £25

STRANGE how an outstanding man can have one ultimately tragic flaw: little understanding of other people and how to get on with them. George Nathaniel Curzon, a great British statesman, was such a figure. Humorous and sympathetic to his family and friends, he was arrogant and intimidating to others, impatient of their opinions and maddened by their mistakes. Such tactlessness cost him dear—his resignation as viceroy of India was accepted only because he had lost the allies who would have enabled him to survive. He was later denied the prize he longed for most when the prime ministership was given to Stanley Baldwin in 1923.

David Gilmour, who has a patrician politician father himself, has written an elegant biography of Curzon. Based on solid research, it looks at his whole career and the complex of issues it involved. It also gives the first full account of his private life.

Despite his two crushing disappointments, Curzon enjoyed a glittering career.

It's a man's world

A HALF dozen men living ordinary lives in the boondocks of the north-eastern United States are the principal characters in "The Village"*, an impressive first novel by David Mamet, the American playwright who won a Pulitzer prize for "Glengarry Glen Ross". One of the men, Dick, is the owner of a failing hardware store; another, Bill, is a state trooper; a third, Marty, works in a garage. With the exception of Dick, all the men are great outdoorsmen: fishermen and hunters, especially hunters, who spend a lot of time in the woods tracking game.

They meet in Dick's store, on the street, and in the local bars; they hunt together in the woods and get drunk in crude cabins afterwards. Each is often on his own, and leads a rich interior life, preoccupied not only with the practical side but with the meaning of such activities as chopping wood, mending a clock, hunting or just taking a walk.

Certain external events intrude on their seemingly continuous reveries. Dick loses his store, another man gets lost in the snow and almost freezes to death; the trooper's young mistress disappears and his wife finds out about her; Marty's son is killed in an accident. Yet the men seem to change little. They keep talking to each other and to themselves, telling stories about unusual animal

Little Brown; 238 pages; \$21.95. Faber & Faber; £14.99



sightings they have had—a pair of kestrel chicks, a bear, a mountain lion—and thinking their private thoughts.

Over the past 25 years, in the 17 plays he has written, Mr Mamet has developed a half-poetical, half-authentic vernacular style. Now, in "The Village" he has succeeded in finding a narrative equivalent to that idiosyncratic dialogue.

However, what is most striking about this episodic work, as it was about "Glengarry Glen Ross", is the charged rendering of what the author believes are typically masculine states of mind. "I don't want sympathy, understanding or a special break from anyone that lives," the trooper tells himself during a solitary fishing expedition—thus giving voice to the fantasy all the male characters of "The Village" share, and try to live out. Yet gradually they are revealed to be not proudly free but anxiously solitary. They sentimentalise both their loneliness and the benefits of their shared companionship. They feel safest in the woods because they feel beleaguered by the world, which is often represented in their minds by their wives and girlfriends.

Each of these characters is full of conceit, but those who cause others pain suffer the consequences. Mr Mamet's convincing portrayal of their distress, and his relish in evoking the men's ferociously pursued, exclusionary pleasures, are the book's main achievements.

An MP at 27, a privy counsellor at 36, he went on at the age of 39 to become the youngest consul Britain sent to the Indian sub-continent. In 1907 he was appointed Chancellor of Oxford University and later, in 1923, he scored a diplomatic triumph as foreign secretary in negotiating the Lausanne Treaty with Turkey. As well as being a dedicated conservationist—Britain's National Trust owes its existence largely to him—Curzon also engaged in arduous travel and wrote lengthy books making him an authority on Asia. Yet for most of his life he was dogged by constant back pain—the steel corset he had to wear contributing to his stiff, pompous demeanour.

As this biography emphasises, Curzon was a fanatically hard worker. His achievements in India included financial and currency reform, a 20-year scheme of agricultural improvement through irrigation, and the restoration of the ancient city of Fatipur Sikri, the Red Fort in Delhi, the Taj Mahal and countless lesser monuments. But though any form of injustice towards the In-

dians aroused Curzon's fury, his view of them was that of a benign headmaster who considered the British Empire "the greatest instrument for good the world has ever seen". He never conceded that the Indians might one day govern themselves.

Mr Gilmour describes in detail how Curzon dug his own grave as viceroy. The commander-in-chief of the Indian Army, Lord Kitchener, wanted greater autonomy than the viceroy was prepared to allow. And although the author believes Curzon was right, his tactlessness and inability to conciliate enabled the more wily Kitchener to defeat him calamitously.

In 1922, when rumours of Bonar Law's retirement began, Curzon insensitively staked his claim to the succession in a letter to the dying prime minister. He was the obvious choice, but Mr Gilmour concludes that Balfour and King George V were right to deny him that prize. He reacted to change by attempting to ignore it, preferring to remain a 19th-century grandee.