

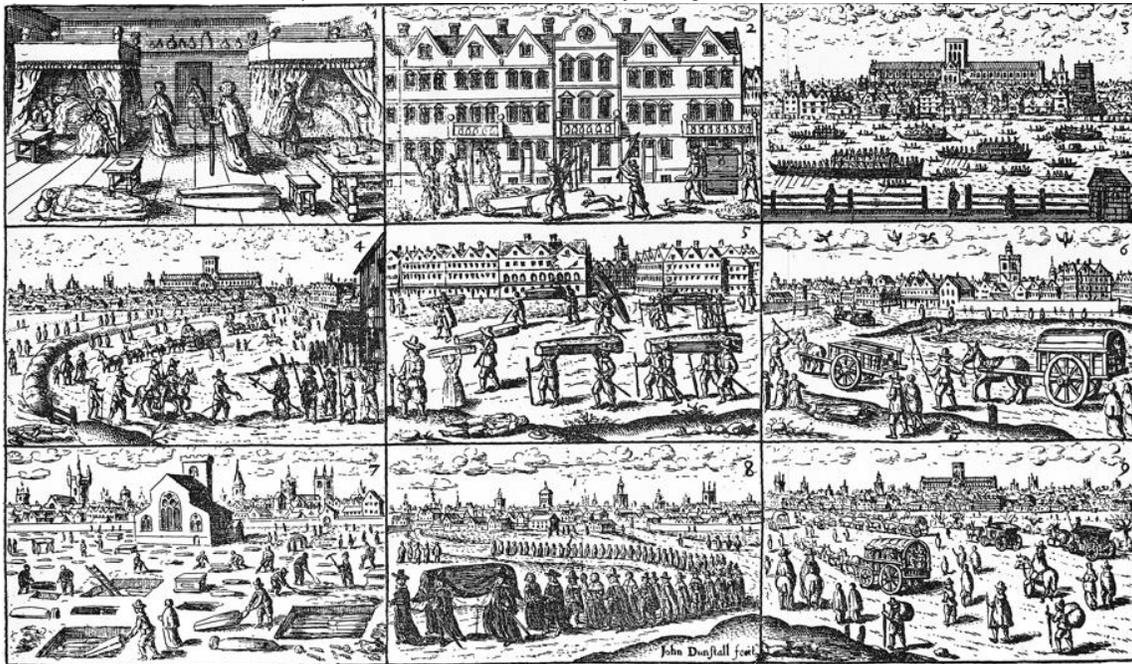
Revisiting Defoe, or: Why History Matters in the Time of Covid-19

CATHERINE TOURANGEAU

Why should history matter in times of crisis? The question is worth pondering. Historians and history teachers are not on the front lines, fighting for people's lives or providing food and medical supplies. Even their valuable knowledge and understanding of the crises of the past can seem useless and impractical. Every epidemic is different, after all; we can't very well apply the methods of former times to the current crisis. And yet—history sheds crucial light on the dynamics and behaviors of epidemics over time and space. Studying the experience of our predecessors often offers much-needed lessons in humility and humanity.

In the long list of epidemics that have hit western societies over the centuries, the Great Plague of London, which claimed the lives of 100,000 people in the mid-1660s, is perhaps not the obvious case to delve into. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 and the HIV/Aids pandemic of the 1980s certainly seem more relevant to the current situation. And yet, despite its greater distance in time, the plague epidemic of 1665 highlights a number of significant patterns common to modern epidemics. It also reminds us that even the darkest of human crises eventually give way to luminous days.

Compared to most early modern epidemics, the plague of 1665 left a very wide range of documentary traces. Modern historians, indeed, have access to official orders and laws; statistical data and news bulletins; medical and religious treatises; poems and prayers; and even cartoons and works of art. Most importantly, we possess a number of eyewitness accounts of the events. Of course, scholars frequently turn to the diary of Samuel Pepys, a dedicated civil servant and a keen observer of Restoration London's social, economic, and political life. Most, however, prefer Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year*. This is a most curious document,



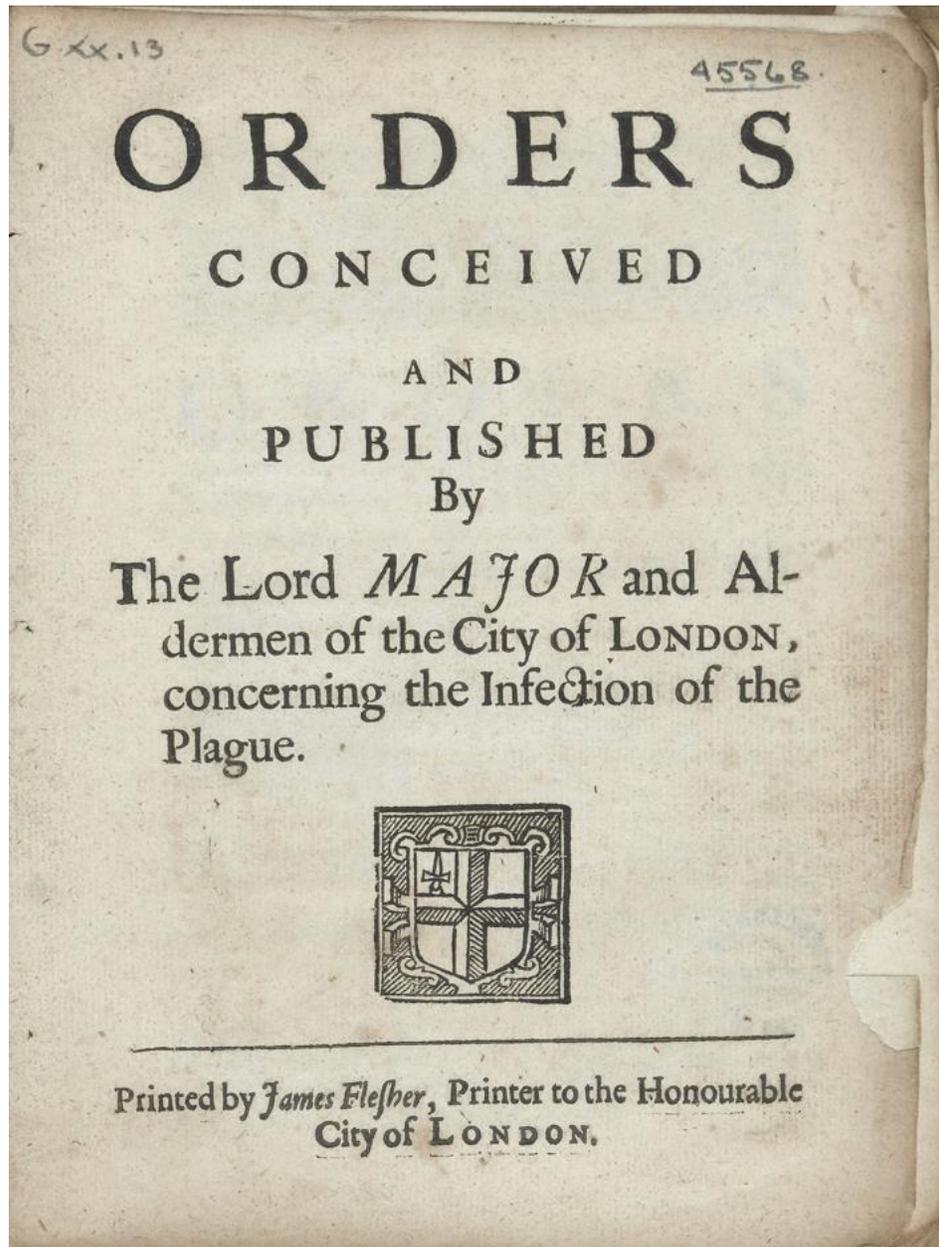
FACSIMILE REPRODUCTION FROM A PICTORIAL BROADSIDE OF 1665 [-6] IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



halfway between the documentary essay and the historical novel. Defoe did live in London in 1665 and 1666, but he was only a child at the time. His account of the events, published decades after they took place, is therefore not based on his own observations. Despite this time bias, however, evidence indicates that Defoe founded his narrative on interviews conducted among older friends and family members, and on a close reading of the statistical evidence. It is also telling that Defoe waited until 1722 to write and publish his account of the plague: only two years earlier, a virulent plague epidemic—the first in over five decades in Western Europe—had visited the Mediterranean port of Marseille. His timing suggests that Defoe, besides having a flair for the dramatic, wrote the *Journal of the Plague Year* as a cautionary tale for the generations to come.

Indeed, instead of listing tales of woe and despair, Defoe's *Journal* reads as a coherent analysis of the origins, progress, and conclusion of the epidemic. This should not surprise the modern reader: although they knew nothing of bacteria or bacilli and misunderstood the disease's mode of transmission, 17th-century Londoners were not senseless ignoramuses. They *did* have a certain understanding of epidemic cycles and of plague's behavior over time and space. They were, after all, intimately familiar with diseases and with epidemics. Between 1348 and 1665, London was visited by the plague no less than 40 times; every 20 years, on average, the plague came and took away as many as 20% of the population. Although plague *did* inspire fears and anxieties, as well as occasional effusions of violence, therefore, it did not cause the kind of social breakdown we might expect. Although they were sometimes ill-advised, most of the contemporaries' reactions were not irrational at all. In lots of ways, they were quite similar to what we still see today.

Importantly, the *Journal's* narrator distinguishes between the spontaneous responses of the community—flight, confinement, self-medication, prayers &c.—and the organized responses of the national and municipal



was immediately shut and marked with a great red cross and the words "Lord Have Mercy On Us." A city agent was also posted before it to ensure that nobody came in—or out.

To avoid spreading the infection to new parts of the country, the London authorities greatly limited the ability of Londoners to move between neighborhoods or to leave the city. Although their understanding of contagion was limited, they also enforced strict measures of social distancing. They forbid assemblies and funeral processions, for instance, and closed sites of questionable sociability such as bordellos, playhouses, and ale-houses.

The Lord Mayor also organized a thorough cleaning up of London's streets and houses. They had bonfires set up to purify the air and rounded up the city's population of cats and dogs to prevent them from spreading the infection. (The slaughter of 40,000 dogs and 200,000 cats proved ill-advised as it allowed the population

authorities. The latter are worth our particular attention, for they are both the most surprising and the most meaningful part of the narrative.

The Plague Orders issued by the King and his Privy Council, and enforced by the Lord Mayor of London, first planned for a strict quarantine of the sick. Rather than using pest-houses to isolate the sick from the general population, as was common in Italy, for instance, the London authorities favored the shutting up of houses. Once an infected person was reported, his or her house

of black rats to proliferate). The City also planned for the immediate burying of the dead, so as to avoid having piles of infected bodies piling up in the streets. When the parish churchyards could no longer keep up, they turned to the infamous dead carts, whose drivers roamed the streets crying out “Bring out your dead!” (Yes, like the bit in Monty Python).

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly from our modern-day perspective, the national and municipal authorities adopted a number of social and economic measures. The Lord Mayor organized, for instance, the distribution of money to the poorest; he also created a number of jobs which, although dangerous and unappealing, relieved many men and women who found themselves unemployed because of the crisis. And lest the plague epidemic should be compounded by famine, the authorities strengthened the regular supply chains and ensured that fresh produce was readily available to Londoners.

The most striking and yet frequently overlooked aspect of Defoe’s account is the way the epidemic of 1665 forced Londoners of all ranks and backgrounds to think deeply about the notion of “public good” and about the role of government in ensuring the safety and welfare of the people. The *Journal of the Plague Year* was an argument, in other words, for an interventionist state.

From the time of the publication of William H. McNeill’s seminal *Plagues and Peoples*, in 1976, historians have consistently argued that epidemics, like wars and environmental disasters, shape the course of human history.¹ More recently, however, many scholars have reversed the usual framework and highlighted the many ways in which human behavior has in fact shaped the course of epidemics throughout history—and continues to do so.² Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, published nearly three hundred years ago, certainly supports this notion.

The *Journal* is a much-needed reminder that even the early modern bureaucratic states were not merely war-making and land-conquering machines. When there was a political will to do so, they could use their tremendous resources to support the fight against epidemics and other social ills.³ Medical science has undoubtedly played, and continues to play a vital part in the struggle against bacteria and viruses; in itself, however, it cannot prevent epidemics or pandemics from happening or determine how they will play out over time and space. In this regard, governments—and especially well-advised governments—are the real MVPs.

If Covid-19 teaches us anything, it is that humanity is not yet through with epidemics and the war on diseases. Although the current crisis may change some things in the coming years, globalization and climate change will undoubtedly provoke yet more human crises. Hopefully, our societies will also consider investing in the social sciences and humanities: they will be most useful to face what is yet to come.

¹ See J.N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease: Epidemics and Human Response in Western History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Paul Slack, *Plague: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); -----, *Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London and Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1985)

² For instance: Richard J. Evans, “Epidemics and Revolution: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” in T. Ranger and P. Slack (eds) *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 149-174.

³ Political and social historian Charles Tilly famously cemented our understanding of early modern states as war-making machines when he suggested that “War made the state and the state made war.” For a different account of the capacities of early modern states, see James Robinson and Steve Pincus, “Wars and State-Making Reconsidered: The Rise of the Developmental State,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, Volume 71, Issue 1 (March, 2016), pp. 9-34.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine is currently a postdoctoral researcher at McGill University, in the Department of History and Classical Studies. She defended and submitted her doctoral thesis last December and will graduate next month (May 2020). Her current project investigates the rise and transformation of Britain's dynamic associational culture between the time of the Glorious Revolution and the turn of the 19th century. She is also working on an article on the voluntary hospital movement and the idea of public health in 18th-century London.

Image one: Plague in London, 1665 (Source: Wellcome Collection)

Image two: A street during the plague, with a death cart (Source: Wellcome Collection)

Image three: Plague orders, 1665 (Source: Wellcome Collection)