



A little known personal journal and a global health catastrophe

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Samuel Pepys Junior and the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic in Great Britain - as reflected in his 'A Last Diary of the Great Warr?'.[\[1\]](#)

The 'Spanish Flu' pandemic of 1918-1919, despite its cost in human lives worldwide, is notable for its near absence from many standard histories of the First World War. The grave uncertainties and human drama of the international conflict of 1914-1918, and the enormous number of its casualties and vast scale of physical destruction have tended to overshadow the unprecedented social disaster represented by the pandemic with its own incalculable death toll[\[2\]](#). The second deadly wave of infection, occurring in the autumn of 1918, around the time of Allied victory, has ensured that the pandemic's existence has been acknowledged rather as a footnote to the man-made calamity it enveloped than a major historical event in its own right. Invaluable assessments of the pandemic's course and impact on societies of course exist but in widely disparate often very specialised forms, which makes the intimate observations of '*one who was there*' all the more important as providing a humane and readily intelligible outline of the social effects of its onset.

During these desperate, deadly and anxiety-filled days of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic some perspective or even solace may perhaps be derived from observations recorded of comparable health disasters long past. Of those associated with Great Britain, Daniel Defoe's '*A Journal of the Plague Year*' and Sam Pepys's plague-related entries in his *Diaries* offer glimpses of how similar, despite our own 21st century advantages in living conditions and health care, were these earlier initial reactions to the arrival of 'the pestilence' and its subsequent management. Concerns with social distancing, fake news, conspiracy theories and quack remedies are by no means new. But more recently, in fact just over 100 years ago, another and much less well known Pepys emerged in time to chronicle the arrival of the first two visitations of what was then commonly called the 'Spanish Flu'. Samuel Pepys Junior 'a wholly fictional but equally gifted 'descendant' of the original Sam Pepys - (and pseudonym for the combined literary talents of Robert Massie Freeman [1866-1949] and Robert Augustus Bennett) - produced three volumes of lively personal commentary covering his experience of the conflict of 1914-18[\[3\]](#) which his publisher was pleased to market as diaries of the '*Great Warr*' (sic). These artful histories are not everybody's cup of tea, retaining as they do the archaic spellings and complex syntax of his distinguished 'forbear'. But, and very importantly, they constitute a sustained and first rate parody of the original Pepys, and like the original, contain much wit, and an abundance of invaluable insights into the minutiae of civilian life. The diary entries open an almost primary source window into those profoundly troubled times - data accumulated from the acute perspective of an upper middle class government official on the British home front. His chronicles include indisputable facts merged with the authentic flavour of the period rooted in the shared anxiety, gossip, rumour, prejudice, and enduring concerns about food rationing and prices of everyday necessities; the very stuff of human existence in times of prolonged crisis.

The first explicit reference to '*the flue distemper*' comes in his entry for 24 May 1918, no doubt distilled from news reports or gossip, was concerned with estimates of the state of the German Army on the Western Front, which, given the military setbacks endured by the allies that spring, he optimistically rehashes:

The best news of the warr is, by a report out of Paris, the Emperour's army do mutiny for lack of victuall; and, moreover, the whole now mightily stricken with the flue distemper. So this thought to be the reason of their lying long so idle. (p.138)

Earlier, in his journal entry for 4 May 1918, while celebrating a slight ease on the bacon rationing, sinister reference is made to a gruesome-sounding disease observed at home. Though it is not absolutely clear that the infection he refers to as '*the botular sicknesse*', and its growing hold on '*the common people*', is in fact the very the beginning of the pandemic:

The news out of London is my Lord Rhondda^[4] will increase to each citizen, being of full age, his portion of cured flesh of hoggs; which is, I think, a thing to 'ease the publick discontent, increasing our portion of fatt victuall. However, some I hear say it shall further breed the botular sicknesse; which do now grow mightily upon the common people. (p.129)

No such uncertainty exists in relation to his second reference to the illness 'now clearly spreading on the home front in early summer. The '*flue?*', first linked with the German army, now reappears in an entry for 24 June, which also reveals something of the popular thinking about the disease's origins^[5], how its symptoms were presented, and fears of its rapid spread. Notably, he highlights a now long forgotten conspiracy theory, voiced by an hysterical minority, which held that the influenza illness was nothing less than an appallingly misguided German experiment in biological warfare:

..At our carpentry this day much talked of the new sicknesse that is come upon us, and is named the Spanish flue, the Spaniards first smitten with it, and the king and all his court catcht, they say; whence catching the French, and all the armies a-field, it do jump upon England. So some saying it is carried by the plague of lice among the soldiers, others making it to be sown abroad by the Germans, and their ayr men to carry the seed of it in bottels. However, as to lice, Mr Grainger did mention 4 ladies in our works that be flued, of whom it were a sin to name them for lousy; nor aught do he observe wherein this Spanish sicknesse is other than the old flue, save that in the first seizure many be awhile bereft of their senses, but presently, vomiting mightily, their senses do return. Which troubles me to hear, being that I am so apt to fall into the old flue.(pp.154-55)

By the beginning of July many civilians had grasped that close proximity to people, unavoidable especially in crowded cities, posed an increased risk of risk of catching the infection. Thus on 1 July 1918 we are told that Sam Pepys Junior gave his wife sufficient cash for her to use taxis that week rather than public transport, so as to avoid unnecessarily exposing herself to threat of contagion:

...I did giver her 10s to pay for taxi-coaches, charging her that she ride this week in nor buss nor tube, for fear of the flue sicknesse... (p.158)

The disease was then, as now, no respecter of persons, rank or authority and Prime Minister David Lloyd George was severely stricken by influenza during a visit to Manchester in September 1918. At the time Pepys Jr was much personally discomforted by a recurrence of his sciatica and rheumatics and, being no supporter of the 'Welsh Wizard?', showed a malicious delight at the PM's plight when informed about it by his doctor on 22

September:

...He did mention to my comfort, Lloyd George being likewise taken sick in Manchester, and is pretty bad of it, he hears. But is, it seems no more than the flue distemper, which is a small matter, such as God forbid one should say it of lumbago(p.221).

Of course, the 'flue' was no laughing matter; Lloyd George was seriously ill and Pepys Jr grudgingly records, 8 days later (30 September), that the Prime Minister was '*still sick, it seems*', (p.229) and Bonar Law [\[6\]](#) was acting in his place.

By the third week in October the first of Pepys' relatives had become infected; we are told on 21 October his sister Pal was then '*abed with the flue distemper (which do now grow heavy upon us*' (p.245) and on 23 October that '*The pestilence do wax daily; many dead of it, I hear, and the worst of it is the club of 4 serving wenches by it.*' (p.248) Two days later the disease strikes his own household - or so he then believed. Which forced him and his wife rapidly to relocate to a hotel:

So home, and to find, to my dismay and confusion, that cook is seized by the pestilence; so as I did sit awhile as one astounded, thinking of our victuall, how we may be fed, and my fear of my wife catching the distemper. In fine, I to the Grosvenor inn, where, by God's mercy, did find a fair chamber, which done and my wife dispatched, and our night baggs packed...With which, and our two noses washed with chymickall water, all is done that a man may do, I believe (pp.251-52).

The thorough cleansing of the nasal passages was indeed but one among a host of health and dietary recommendations gaining popularity as a consequence of astute product advertising and influence of the daily press. The routine of regular washing of the nostrils was in fact a nostrum energetically pedalled by the '*News of the World*[\[7\]](#).

Pepys's entry for the 26 October records his concern to get his 'ill', and presumably infectious, cook out of his flat and the property thoroughly sterilised. He also notes the growing practice of drinking of port wine [\[8\]](#)(at least among those who could afford it) as a protection against influenza and also reminds us of the deadly character of the disease itself especially for key workers ' trades people and servants:

...So to the club, where some discourse with Mr Glumby as to our best measures of security against the pestilence. As to which, he hath his physicien's word of a gill or 2 of port wine, drinking it daily, being as good a fortification of a man's body as there is almost...I hear that one of our serving wenches, that did sicken but 2 days since, is dead of the plague, the poor girl; and of some is said that they do die in 12 houres of it taking them. God preserve us! (p.252).

As it turned out, Pepys' cook did not have the influenza, merely what was described as a '*rheum of her head that did trouble her spleen*' (p.252); she was restored to health and the Pepys household returned to their now 'purged' home.

Several days later it was clear that the pandemic was in full and deadly swing, especially in London. The diary entry for 29 October records the dreadful toll and hints at an understanding that this flu was often accompanied by acute symptoms of pneumonia; improbable and rumoured 'causes' for the contagion are also detailed:

...The bill of the pestilence do encrease; in London above 5,000 sick, and 2 or 3 hundred dead this

last day or 2. Meeting Mr Chopley, he told me he has the best warrants of Mr Crowe, the undertaker, that it is no true flue sicknesse, but a putrid distemper of the lungs, that is bred of the corpses on the battlefields. But many I hear lay it to our great poverty of our victuall, and so much offal and foul matters as the people must eat.(p.255)

Certainly the poorer classes, and especially city dwellers, engaged in physically demanding work and living in inadequate accommodation would not have had their chances of resisting the disease improved as a consequence of their impoverished diet and crowded working and housing conditions.

By the end of the first week of November occurrences of influenza had by no means diminished as evidenced by entry for 9 November. By then, with the end of the war in sight, there was much celebration and crowding in the capital; additional thousands flocked to see the Lord Mayor's show, which included many 'trophies of war' and march pasts by contingents of the Allied forces, including Serbians and Italians. The pressures to loosen the disciplines of social distancing were seen to grow:

...This night to the Court House and to see 'Twelfth Night,' praying we catch not the pestilence; but, come whatt may of it, I cannot keep myself to sit at home evenings, such a tumulte as do now grow in all our minds. (p.267)

The armistice of 11 November brought the fighting to an end on the Western Front; but the battle with the pandemic was far from over; Pepys notes that it had, by 15 November, incapacitated the wife of a close friend (p.275) and, on 18 November (p.277), records that his own wife's cousin had too become a victim and lay 'abed', seriously ill.

No further references to the flu occur in the diary and his final entry, for 31 December 1918, constitutes a personal review of the year. This summary, like a number of sober and serious histories which were later to appear, includes no mention of the pandemic - despite its unprecedented toll of casualties. Pepys Junior instead, avoids depressing tallies of the dead in favour of expressions of profound and enthusiastic delight in victory, and his own and family's survival:

So ends this yeare; the most wonderfull, I believe, that ever was since the world begun; in particular for its at the first bringing the greatest extremity of our gloom and foreboding, yet in the end our greatest joy.(p.308)

Postscript: it is now recognised that the influenza pandemic occurred in three main phases ' in the spring and autumn of 1918 (a particularly virulent strain), returning in the spring 1919. We have no notion of how the diarist's family fared during the New Year, although the figures look grim. Estimates of total fatalities for Great Britain have increased over time^[9]; recent research suggests that over 200,000 of its citizens died of the disease.

Online References

- Free online access to the text of 'The Last Diary of the Great Warr, via the ALA's Internet Archive

- Part 1 (1916) <https://archive.org/details/wardiary00freerich/>
 - Part 2 (1917) <https://archive.org/details/diaryofgreatwarr00free/>
 - Part 3 (1918) <https://archive.org/details/lastdiaryofgreat00freeuft/>
- The 'Spanish' Influenza pandemic and its relation to World War I , by Kenneth Kahn <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/?p=2190>
 - The Influenza Pandemic of 1918, by Douglas Gill & John Oxford <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/?p=2574>

Published references

- *The First World War on the Home Front*, Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch (in association with the IWM), 2014
- *War Books*, Cyril Falls, Greenhill Books, 1989 (originally published by Peter Davies, 1930)
- *The Influenza Pandemic*, D R Sherman, Purnell's History of the First World War, Volume 7, pp.2973-2978

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[1] Free online access to the text available via the ALA's Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/lastdiaryofgreat00freeuft/page/n8/mode/2up>

[2] Exact figures have never been reliably established; current estimates of fatalities directly linked to the illness, range from 50 to 100 million people.

[3] The third and final volume was published in 1919.

[4] David Alfred Thomas, first Viscount Rhondda (1856-1918) the respected and highly efficient 'Food Controller?', had introduced compulsory rationing early in 1918. He died suddenly, aged 62, on 3 July 1918, not of influenza but heart disease and rheumatic fever.

[5] According to some sources cases of the illness were first reported in Spain; as a neutral Spanish press restrictions were less rigorous than the censorship employed by the belligerents. Strong arguments exist to support theories that the disease may have originated in the USA and France.

[6] Andrew Bonar Law (1858-1923), Conservative politician and Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lloyd George's wartime Coalition Government

[7] 'The First World War on the Home Front?', Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch, 2014, p.295

[8] Other popular preventatives included the consumption of quinine, cinnamon, OXO, Veno's cough mixture, and, as a disinfectant cleaning agent, Jeyes Fluid. (?The First World War on the Home Front?', Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch, 2014, pp. 294-95)

[9] Terry Charman, late Senior Historian at Imperial War Museums, considered that 'Britain escaped comparatively lightly with 228,000 deaths.' (op. cit., p.293)

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