



THE BUBONIC PLAGUE AND ENGLAND

AN ESSAY IN THE HISTORY OF PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

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This book might as well have been entitled England and the Bubonic Plague. On the negative side it is neither a history of the plague nor one of England. It is a story of interaction. It is a story, on the one side, of the effect of the plague, both in actuality and in imminence, on religion and morals through mass psychology; on the toppling of economic balance and population balance, mirrored in accelerated emancipation, in dispersion, in the lapsing of property titles, in class differentiation and class emergence, by reason of the high and long continued mortality. It is a record, on the other hand, of the struggle put up by the society involved to conquer the invader if possible and in all events to ameliorate its effects; a record of almost hysterical proclamations toward sanitation, quarantine segregation, regulation of travel of the lightening of certain tax burdens and the imposition of other taxes specifically aimed at providing relief for the sufferers; of attempts at wage

and price fixation in labor and commodity black markets. The viewpoint of the author is conservative, and the facts and opinions stated are documented.

The book is an outgrowth of many years of historical study by the author of problems of public health, both as they affect social conditions, and as they are met by the struggle of society toward their solution.

The first chapter is a rather concentrated historical sketch, giving an overall preview of the period covered, and presupposing some basic knowledge of traditional English history for its complete appreciation.

There follow several chapters which, by way of emphasis, are constructed on the same general outline. A particular epoch is delimited, and, for those who delight in statistics, the best available mortality figures for the particular stricken areas are first reviewed to generate a feeling for the magnitude of the problem. The specific social, religious and cultural adjustments, the remedies tried out, both preventive and curative, with their possible therapeutic effects, constitute a second portion of each chapter in this section. Finally the catalytic effect of the visitation on specific literary output, both clerical and lay, is discussed. In this last connection, many may find the small partial anthologies of particular interest.

After twelve tolling chapters of a *danse macabre* one reaches the magic sunrise hour, at least for England, when the active dance of death becomes a memory and a potentiality rather than a concomitant; and the reader feels the lifting of a sort of burden as he turns to a well rounded treatment of the more recent attacks on the problems of public health, a majority of which were stimulated by the long continued plague experience.

When it is recalled that "beginning in the reign of Edward II (1307) down to 1670 scarcely a five year period was free from desolation" in some part of the country one realizes that this period extends from pre-Chaucerian England, through the Elizabethan flowering, through the Puritan relapse, and to the time of the Restoration, a by no means inconsiderable fraction of the time covered by traditional English history. Yet most English histories, even if they touch specific health problems largely confine their allusions to the famous Black Death of 1348-49 and the plague of 1665 which was popularized by Defoe and Pepys, thus giving the reader a rather emasculated view of events. For the non-student of history such treatment may well lead to the feeling that historical events and problems stem from personal ambition and lust for power on the part of a FEW, with a class struggle to retain *status quo* in social organization.

In this book we have not revision but amplification of the ordinary political history and even of the traditional social history. Not only will the student of public health find it profitable reading, but also the student of English history. Even for a more complete "feeling" for general European history the reviewer feels that its perusal will be rewarding.

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