

Daniel Defoe's Pandemic

A Journal of the Plague Year



Imagine the last 18 months we've just been through – but take away the double jobs, take away the NHS. No cure. No furlough. No internet. Substitute an even worse virus than Covid-19.

It's inconceivable, isn't it? But it actually happened, in this country. And it was chronicled.

The year was 1665 and England was just getting back on its feet after years of civil war, a regicide, an unsuccessful experiment with a republic, followed by the restoration of the monarchy in the shape of Charles II. Things seemed to be looking up – and then the plague hit. Nearly 100,000 people died in London alone.

Daniel Defoe, known primarily as the author of arguably the first English novel *Robinson Crusoe*, was only a child when bubonic plague devastated the country. Nearly half a century later in 1722 he put pen to paper and wrote about it, using written and verbal evidence he had available. Bankrupted twice, jailed for libel and debt, forced to stand in a pillory, and later employed as a spy for Queen Anne's prototype prime minister, Robert Harley, Defoe was certainly no stranger to conditions of adversity. His life in itself would make a fantastic novel or film.

Prior to 2020, I might have picked up this book regarding it as an interesting curiosity from a remote period of English history. Literary commentators have hailed it as a virtuosic tour de force, a fictional sleight of hand masquerading as an actual account, foreshadowing the docudramas of our own time. However, in the light of Covid-19, the book now has a very eerie

relevance. The period concerned suddenly feels closer, more real. It's unnerving to recognise certain things: people keeping their distance in the streets; weekly statistics of deaths being drawn up; migration of the rich to the countryside while the poor have no such mobility; lockdown and restrictions; front-line workers. The list goes on.

But there are horrifying accounts, too, that made this reader wonder if perhaps we had been let off lightly this time. (Not, of course, if you had lost a loved one or been on a ventilator.) The sheer horror of the physical suffering, which Defoe does not spare us, accounts of people clearly going mad, throwing themselves out of windows, jumping into the Thames, not to mention attacks on watchmen posted to ensure that quarantine rules were observed. Defoe sometimes questions the asperity of those rules, especially in one story of a servant girl who infects an entire household but is an asymptomatic carrier herself.

It's heart-breaking to read of babies desperately trying to suck the milk of their dead mothers; chilling to read of the dearth of midwives and the mortal danger of giving birth alone; a horrifying account of an infected lunatic forcing a kiss on a woman in the street because he wants her to have the plague as well. And sad, of course, to hear that cats and dogs had to

be destroyed, bubonic plague of course being carried by infected fleas from small animals.

On first dipping into this book, one is initially lured into a false sense of security by the quaint language style of the period, with its Germanic initial capitals for all nouns, past participles with apostrophes ('shock'd' and 'dy'd'), endearing spellings ('Headach'), and archaic divisions of familiar words ('some Body'). However, it's only when you reach passages like the following that the underlying reality of this text begins to hit home rather hard and all illusion of 'period cosiness' rapidly evaporates. Defoe even indicates the limitations of language here, as he sees it:

This may serve a little to describe the dreadful Condition of that Day, tho' it is impossible to say any Thing that is able to give a true Idea of it to those who did not see it, other than this; that it was indeed *very, very, very* dreadful, and such as no Tongue can express.

There is something utterly chilling about those repeated and italicised words, despite (or even because of) his deliberately contrived clumsiness elsewhere in the sentence. Defoe then proceeds to describe something far more akin to the horrors of Belsen and Auschwitz as his narrator witnesses the operations of a plague burial pit.

That is the point at which this extraordinary book becomes horribly connected to our own more recent history. Although we

were mercifully spared the sight of corpses in the streets (unlike some who witnessed the London Blitz), or the disturbingly audible distress of the afflicted and the insane, we can now begin to fathom an uncomfortable connection to this hitherto 'historical' document. And, of course, Covid-19 brings it even closer.

But, amid the relentless horror, there are moments of farcical humour. A blind piper has a little too much to eat and drink, falling asleep in a doorway. Unfortunately, he is mistaken for a corpse, collected up and tossed onto a cart, unconscious all the while, and subsequently covered over with dead bodies. Just before he is about to be tipped into the plague pit, he wakes and pops his head up, scaring the wits out of his undertakers. 'Where am I?' he asks. 'Where are you! . . .why, you are in the Dead-Cart, and we are going to bury you.' 'But I an't dead tho', am I?' says the piper, causing unexpected merriment among his grim interlocutors.

Is it gallows humour that causes us to laugh at this as well, 299 years later, or is it simply a nervous response in keeping with T.S. Eliot's 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality'? Defoe's account is all too real, despite the artifice of his language to our ears. Perhaps that is the power of great art. Defoe was the archetypal journalist, innovating many forms of newspaper genres that we recognise today. His *Review of the State of the*

English Nation was a periodical single-handedly produced that acted as a laboratory for his future art. A sort of George Orwell of the time, his journalism nurtured a late and lavish crop of masterpieces, including the *Journal* and the unnervingly terrifying *Moll Flanders*. But however you view it, this book is absolutely essential and disturbing reading, a literary time bomb suddenly gone off, that only now we are suddenly equipped to appreciate in a place uncomfortably closer to the seventeenth century.

There is a final warning from Defoe, which might be worth taking note of. Just as the numbers of fatalities start to drop, a sudden irrational boost of confidence overtakes many people:

. . . they flock'd to Town without Fear or Forecast, and began to shew themselves in the Streets, as if all the Danger was over: It was indeed surprising to see it, for tho' there died still from a Thousand to eighteen Hundred a Week, yet the People flock'd to Town, as if all had been well.

Sadly to say, there was a relapse.

Ivor McGregor October 2021