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Pandemics Past and Present;
Extract from The Tell-Tale Skull

Pandemics Past and Present

A new year brings expectations, but 2020 threw most of these aside. Instead we all found ourselves as extras in a remake of the film *Contagion*—a prophetic tale, with its depiction of a pandemic not only possible, but inevitable. Yet it was nothing new in human experience, as a cursory glance at history shows. Consider 102 years ago, when Spanish influenza hit, or Sydney’s episode of plague, recurring from 1900–1910.

In previous centuries epidemics occurred even more frequently. When researching/reworking a murder case from the mid-1600s, I found myself writing a past pandemic. Because the case took over a decade to resolve, those involved endured two major catastrophes, the plague of 1665–1666, followed by the Great Fire of London. If Australia had bushfire followed by coronavirus in 2019, then London had the same thing, in reverse. Yet neither event got much wordage in the major published source for the case. It seemed that because fire and pestilence were so much the common experience they were not remarkable, unlike a murder investigated by a determined woman with the help of a coroner, the Chief Justice, and her husband’s ghost.

To fill out these gaps in the source text meant using the imagination, which engages the writer more intensely than following a narrative of established facts. Yet fancy has to be supported by historical research to be credible. In writing plague I was obliged to dive deep into its history—and then found myself living in a pandemic, in the present.

Thus I came to share the experience of my subjects, my characters, in a way that could not have been imagined. Indeed, the way we live now during coronavirus proved remarkably like surviving pandemics in the past. It may seem unbelievable, but London’s response to the Plague of 1665–1666 was not so different from today and COVID-19.

Nearly 500 years of intervening history has meant huge advances in the understanding of medicine. Disease was then poorly understood. If people suspected fomites, objects likely to spread contagion, then they could be fatally wrong. God’s wrath upon sinners was blamed, also effluvium from the earth or polluted Thames. We know now that coronavirus is spread less by touch than by virus-ridden aerosols—as is the most deadly form of plague, the pneumonic, from person to person. Yet for months in 2020 that information was lacking. We too were ignorant, in the same state of wondering fear as our ancestors.

They did have a notion that animal transmission was involved, and they were correct, for the infectious pathogen, *Yersinia pestis* (only identified and named in 1894) requires a vector. London’s cats and dogs famously got slaughtered, but not the rats and

their associated fleas. “Fleas on rats,” sings Gwen Stefani in “Black Plague.” Recent research posits other culprits: human fleas and lice. These insect bites caused bubonic or septicemic plague, a little less lethal.

If medicine was lacking, then simple human observation, from generations of seeing contagions come and go, had identified protective measures. Vinegar, a natural antibacterial, washed anything from doorsteps to the coins used in transactions. It also sprinkled the cloth masks commonly worn. More elaborate Personal Protective Equipment was donned by the plague doctors—grotesque full-head coverings, complete with glass goggles and bills resembling a giant bird.

They also understood the benefits of isolation. The best source on London’s plague is Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722 but compiling contemporary experience. In its pages are unforgettable images, of English warships in port dropping anchor in the deepest part of the Thames and waiting out the contagion. Similarly the ubers of London, the wherry-men, lived offshore in their boats. When citizens ventured outside they kept their distance from walls and other walkers. Even the empty streets of coronavirus cities have a precedent, for grass started growing in London from lack of traffic.

The sheer scale of the plague in a city of 500,000 souls meant unprecedented responses. Panic sent the King, court and anyone with means fleeing London, leaving the city to deal with the remaining populace. The Mayoralty lacked mass media but had town criers. Printing presses produced handbills for public information, which got liberally plastered on walls, along with quack cures and pleas for piety.

London needed feeding, so supplies of corn were guaranteed for bread. Servants deserted by their masters watched plague houses or became searchers, diagnosers of disease. The bubonic plague had one advantage over coronavirus, being easily detectable by the black bubos—infected lymph glands—in armpit and groin. A bodily inspection was compulsory for anyone seeking a pass to leave London.

For those who were infected, measures were practical but brutal: 40-day isolation, a cross painted on the door. If the watchmen prevented escape, then they could also provide food. Thousands died each week, taken to burial pits after dark to avoid more panic. Yet thousands also survived the infection. For the time, the public health response was extraordinary. The plague never again attacked so powerfully in Britain.

With these precedents in mind, I walked the quiet streets of COVID Melbourne in mask—no hardship, particularly if you knew the history. That so many rejected the tried and tested measures of preventing contagion implies a wilful ignorance, as deadly as disease and spread as readily via social media. To be mindful of the past made the strange times I now inhabited seem an extension of the 1600s. Indeed it seemed as if I had suddenly stepped into a Dutch genre painting, that unparalleled portal into how people lived in that era.

In hard lockdown other humans encountered outside the home were seen in part only, masked, or rarer, glimpsed in windows. In the older houses of the neighbourhood, the rectangular window-frames suggested an art gallery. Repeated were studies of person at laptop, as intent as Vermeer’s women reading. Once I saw a young man with a polar blue Stratocaster, practising at his front window, perfectly framed, a moment in time that seemed ageless.

Like the people of the past, we waited out contagion in the domestic space. We baked bread, a familiar activity to them, and watched a lot of Netflix—something completely alien. They would likely have deplored the lack of bible-reading and prayer on our part. Yet we

had a commonality of experience, surviving through the pleasures of small things and going about our lives as much as possible. In that we are linked—lost survival skills unexpectedly surfacing 500 years later.

I could only guess at how the subjects in my narrative experienced the plague. The source stated that three ghostly visions of her husband impelled the female “detective” to walk from London into Essex in the midst of contagion. On that long day’s journey she got lost, but found a lead ... only to discover the prospective witness dead of the plague. As the investigation continued, another plague death occurred, but ultimately no hindrance for a successful prosecution and hanging. Divine providence at work, said the source.

That attitude, with our diet of police procedurals, seems truly alien. At best I could only walk mentally into the past and write it on the page. Yet, though these characters defy exact knowledge, via the coronavirus I still experienced a little of what they felt.

Extract from *The Tell-Tale Skull*

Anne locked herself inside the corn-chandlers’ for the night. She slept in her day-clothes, listening to footsteps and handcarts passing by outside, and further away, shrieks, she did not know whether from a plague house, or a woman’s outrage.

In the morning she opened the shutters and fell to her knees in horror. Two men stood in front of the Stanfro’s house opposite, one with the paint pot, the other daubing the words “God Have Mercy Upon Us” onto the door. Now the Stanfros would be shut inside for forty days, with a guard paid by the city to stop anybody escaping to spread disease.

How could the plague have travelled so fast and so far? Anne slammed the shutters, nothing but flight in her mind. She ran past the plague house, holding her breath, only in the next street slowing to gasp. Walking onwards, she remarked a strange thing, for London: the streets were silent, near-deserted. What foot traffic she saw comprised mostly those with plague business: more watchmen; plague-searchers, women swathed in white, with only their eyes showing, like engravings of the Mahommedan ladies; and doctors, grotesquely masked, their eyes hidden behind glass, breathing through a beak stuffed with herbal mixtures.

Though she longed to take the river-road to Greenwich, she lacked protective clothing, let alone vinegar. She changed course, remembering her sister Mall’s pantry and rag-basket. Mall had fled the city, she could not object. Copying the other walkers, she kept to the centre of the street as if even the walls carried contagion. Then as she turned the corner to Mall’s coffee house, she stopped abruptly: some ten doors down blazed the red cross.

Though her heart pounded she pushed the panic away, her thoughts clear and coldly practical. If plague followed wherever she went, then she could not flee the city. At least the pestilence was not directly opposite.

Once inside, she dampened some sacking in vinegar and stuffed it under the street door. For good measure she swabbed the floor until it smelt like a pickle-shop. Seating herself at a table and gnawing on a stale crust, the only bread left behind, she read through a small pile of handbills accumulated by Mall: advertisements for pills, potions or piety. If you could believe them, the plague was caused not only by cats and dogs, but also fornication, or foul effluvium rising from the ground, like mist on the Thames. On the verso of one she found a list of plague symptoms, jotted by Mall from some customer’s report:

fever first, followed by the painful black lumps, the bubos, in armpit and groin, then spreading across the body. It would end with delirium, even the eyeballs bursting before merciful death.

Much disturbed but very tired, when night fell she took herself to bed in her garret room. Next day she slept till mid-morning, with nobody to rouse her and bid her work. Opening her shutter, she saw no new crosses; and to the east she could smell a bakehouse at work, obeying the Lord Mayor and keeping London fed. She dressed, suddenly very hungry, dabbing herself with vinegar and wrapping an old apron around her head and mouth. Emerging into a fine summer's day, she found more people out and about, though sombre and keeping their distance.

With bread and pantry supplies, she need not emerge except to sweep clean outside the doors, as mandated by the Mayoralty. Yet within the house she felt restless almost to distraction. Burrowing into Mall's linen chest, she found a sheet, worn but still serviceable. The top hemmed and a drawstring added, it became a cloak of white, so that she looked a searcher—even more reason for people in the street to avoid her. The weather continuing warm, she needed no thicker clothing to venture out. Like a spy from the late wars she conducted a reconnoitre of the neighbourhood. The enemy plague may have invaded London but not every house harboured it, the spread being scattered and erratic. That gave her hope.

The bakers apart, the only person who spoke to her was a ragged woman, who stood in her path crying:

“Do ye not see it, the sword hanging over the city?”

Anne squinted up but saw only a cloud.

“God has punished us,” said the woman.

What had the Stanfros done but make candles and twins? Anne wondered.

“Woe betide us for miserable sinners!”

Anne turned away, thinking: do I sin? She listed the Ten Commandments in her head, being not able to honour her father and mother anymore, they being long dead, not stealing, nor committing adultery. Though she found herself innocent according to these strictures, the woman's words oppressed her with the sense that she was at fault. She walked to the river, to see the wherry-men living in their boats, moored a safe distance from the bank.

On the way back it seemed God reached down His hand to punish her. She heard shouts, feet pounding and around the corner ran a man in his shirt, half naked. His skin looked deathly white, and also black, from fresh bruising. In his wild rush he knocked against her, and she felt the fire of fever, damp sweat, though worst was the sight of the lump on his neck, the size of a tennis ball and engorged dark with blood. She grabbed at a wall for support, as running after came the watch, their long red staves in hand to beat or chivvy the man into his plague-house again.

For a long time she stood still, numb with shock. Though he had gone, she could smell his fetid sweat on her hand, a drop of it ... though when she looked closer she saw only a louse. She flicked it onto the ground, crushed it into bloodstain with her heel. Now she had touched a victim of the plague and could only cry: “God have mercy upon me!”