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A. Lloyd Moote, Dorothy C. Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. xxi + 357 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-7783-4.

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Surviving Plague and Keeping Going

Goodwoman Phillips, from grubby St. Giles-in-the-Fields, was the first to die, on Christmas Eve, 1664. Searchers found giveaway "buboes" on her skin and she was declared dead of the plague. Nearly 100,000 people died in London over the next twelve months according to "official" counts–more than two-thirds of them from the "sickness"–as well as 40,000 dogs and 200,000 cats, who were prime suspects for passing germs to hapless humans.[1] London boomed and bulged on the eve of the epidemic. There were about 500,000 people living there, mostly over the old walls by now. As many as 200,000 of them sprinted to the countryside as news of the growing body-count spread like wildfire. They were the lucky ones with enough money and clout to get out. Back in London bodies piled up in crammed plague pits. This would turn out to be London's last crushing plague, but nobody knew that at the time. It was twice as bad as the second-ranking instance of plague, which had occurred in 1625.

Plague spewed out from the "sluttish parts," Roger L'Estrange wrote in his news sheet. The "great plague" started in one of the squalid shanty-towns of migrants on London's rim and quickly circled the city in a pincer movement. A crop of plague-deaths was reported from St. Giles-in-the-Field in spring 1665 and the "sicknesse" moved west, all the way round to St. Sepulchre, but not yet climbing over the walls. It had done a complete lap of the city by mid-June and plush homes were also in the firing line. People thumbed through the columns of plague-dead in the weekly "Bills of Mortality" to track the plague's progress–as the Moote's also do in this fine book that is full of suspense at times, though we all know what happens next. It hugged the walls for almost two months, and then the bad news broke in early May–someone had been buried inside the walls. People were now dropping dead in the streets. The mid-July bill was hard-to-take: 2,010 dead, not a single suburban parish was spared, and almost half of the City parishes had losses. Nowhere was safe. The plague-pits were chock-a-block. The number of dead shot up in the sweltering summer heat; 7,496 was the next weekly peak, with the real total even higher, since numerous nameless people were slung into pits with no note taken and nonconformists were not listed in the bills. August was a cruel month but September was worse, even though temperatures dipped. Church bells

tolled round the clock. Whole families were wiped out, and others were brought to their knees. John Hayward lost three daughters and a son in five gruesome days. The worst week of all was September 12-19, when 8,297 corpses were put in the ground, 7,165 had the "tokens of plague," according to the bills. Buriers worked flat out as soon as darkness fell until dawn; more than one thousand bodies were buried each night in the September slaughter.

Yet the city did not come to a complete standstill. Streets were eerily empty at times, but London was not a ghost-town. The City was running on a shoestring budget by autumn, as tax-yields hit rock-bottom. But traffic and trade continued. The river was busy. Londoners died in droves, but plague stories are also about surviving, and getting-by is what this book is mainly about. Its main source is survivors' stories, nine of them, with one narrative from outside London, Ralph Josselin's well-thumbed diary of his life and times in Earl's Colne, Essex. The other journal and letter writers are a mixed bag, but the common thread is middling status (or better) and better than average salaries. They include a City big-wig and silk-tycoon; an apothecary from the plague front-line in St. Giles-in-the-Fields; a doctor from the well-to-do parish of St. Stephen Walbrook, who was one of two doctors picked by the City to care for the plague-sick; a Covent-Garden minister who stayed on in London, writing love letters to a married woman who dodged the plague near Brentwood; a cash-strapped, migraine-prone dissenter who lived south of the river, watching the plague creep closer; and the inevitable Samuel Pepys. They all lived to tell the tale. The poor have not left stories behind for us to read. This is not a book about paupers in the main. We rarely hear from them at the best of times, and plague had a creepy silence all its own; records were not kept up-to-date, some were not kept at all. The Mootes do not tell us much more about the poor in plague that we did not already know from Paul Slack and others after him.[2] Jacket blurbs almost always make big claims, but the Mootes do not "dramatically recast the history of the Great Plague." Nor do they give us "fresh interpretations of key issues." There is nothing "fresh" in arguing that people knuckled down and got on with living and trading, or that there were "two Londons," one for the haves and one for the have-nots, that overlapped all the time and helped each other to get through the terror. This is a book of stories not dazzling new readings to change our minds about the causes and consequences of plague.

But it is not any less put-downable for that. It is a gripping though grim read. The story of the 1665 killing fields had been told before in close-up, though a long time ago.[3] We have needed something new for a long while. This book is not a top-drawer research monograph, though both Mootes did a fair amount of digging in archives. Nor is it a trade book for coffee-tables. It is somewhere in-between. Neither Moote is a specialist on London's past–A. Llyod is a first-rate historian of France, Dorothy is a microbiologist. This shows at times. They get a few things wrong about the nitty-gritty of City government and its troubled dealings with its next-door neighbor in Whitehall, for example. But where their book shines is as good down-to-earth story-telling. They do give us "a masterful portrait" of a city caught in contagious crisis. The book-blurb got that right. Their prose is pacey and stylish. The story whizzes along. And it has real depth too. There are some lovely human touches all the way through this book. The Mootes have a razor-sharp eye for moving moments and a real knack for blending raw data with life-stories. "Grief" grabbed three lives one week in September 1665. Their nine eyewitnesses give readers a deep feel for the trials and tribulations of surviving plague. And, of course, many people kept going. This book is full of stingy, caring, and plucky people–magistrates who never left their posts, ministers who dropped in to cheer up their nervous flock, sometimes sharing bed-sides with gutsy doctors. Two of the Mootes eyewitnesses cared for the sick round the clock. One often reports not getting to bed to snatch some sleep until near midnight. Another "commonly drest 40 soares in a day," seeing sufferers in his waiting room first thing in the morning and doing the rounds of infected houses later on in the day, burning coals at doors and windows, and tossing herbs and spices on beds to block the germ-thick miasma.

Not all doctors and physicians come out so well from this book. Many were too scared to care for the sick and scarpered. The College of Physicians closed down for the year. Doctors bickered when some sort of united front would have been a bonus. They squabbled about the causes and cures of plague in pamphlet wars that sapped precious time and energy. Penny-pinching civic leaders did not dig deep enough to cover the costs of a large-scale health drive that might have saved more lives–only two physicians were put on the City payroll, four apothecaries were added a little later, along with a surgeon and a couple more doctors. We get a long and hard look at the medical marketplace in this book. Following others, the Mootes sketch long linking lines that stretch from white witches and quacks at one end to high

and mighty physicians at the other. These titles were all blurry and it angered physicians at the time to realize that they had things in common with healers they put well below themselves on the medical pecking order.[4] Plague tightened these ties. The drug of choice for stopping plague was a blend of viper's flesh, garlic, rue, vinegar, walnuts, onion, and opium. Most hard-up people had to make do with rubbing onions on their sores, and garlic of course was the drug for all seasons.

People also prayed. Prayer soothed. The plague was God's arrow, striking the sinning city, and it was up to people to clean themselves up in all senses of the word for the good of all. The City had a four-pronged defense–praying and policing along with public health and hygiene schemes. Household quarantine was like a death sentence for healthy people. Other steps seem off target, like the three-day long fires lining the riverbank that got snuffed out by heavy rain on the last day or the dog-slaying. The Mootes capture the whirl of the times and the plague's frenzy. They catalogue slip-ups, blind terror, indecision, shock, sorrow, loss, confusion and longing for light at the end of the tunnel, as well as the speed with which some people had to make decisions: to stay put, to go someplace safer, to keep on trading or to shut up shop. But they also describe reasoned discussion about what to do next. Policy-makers sat round tables to debate the main cause of the "infeccon"–was it contagion, touch, miasma? People took polar positions, even within top-level plague committees. The muddle continued. Lord Craven, who was asked to head the royal crisis committee at the tail-end of the plague in February 1666, plumped for contagion and put the case for building hospitals up and down the land, but this was still nowhere near becoming the accepted view and his plan was scrapped.

London's most awful plague was also its last, but people stayed on their toes, never fully accepting their good luck as another year went by without a single plague corpse. Thirty-five people died with "buboes" blotches in 1667, the tally plunged to fourteen in the next year, and to a tiny two in the next year. There was a single death in a far-flung suburban parish a decade later, and nothing after that until, in 1703, the column for plague-deaths was dropped from the bills for good.

The Mootes do not stop there, however. There are lessons for us in the 1665 slaughter and all the "microbial killers" that came after. A thirty-page epilogue skips through one deadly disease after another up to the present day; it is a shopping list of big killers that creep up on us unawares–malaria, smallpox, SARS, TB, HIV, AIDS. Some common threads, trials, pointers and/or puzzles are put on paper for us to consider. We should not be sitting comfortably. This book is not a requiem for plague. London's "great" one was its English swansong (perhaps), but plague is still with us today, taking lives in huge numbers, including campers in Arizona, New Mexico, or Nevada in most years. This reflective epilogue might seem like a stuffy sermon to some early modern buffs who will probably skim it. But the Mootes make some sobering links between the past and the present. They warn us that plague is not a third-world problem today. It could creep back and mug us when we least expect it. There is much eloquent suffering in their book, and many people who were at a loss about what to do next. But this is a book about surviving plague, written by top-notch story-tellers.

Notes

[1]. Mark S. R. Jenner, "The Great Dog Massacre," in *Fear in Early Modern Society*, ed. William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (Manchester: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 44-61.

[2]. Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985). J. A. I. Champion, *London's Dreaded Visitation: The Social Geography of the Great Plague in 1665* (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, 1995); and "Epidemics and the Built Environment in 1665," in *Epidemic Disease in London*, ed. by J. A. I. Champion (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, Working Paper Series, 1993), pp. 35-52.

[3]. Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722); and Walter George Bell, *The Great Plague of London* (London: Bodley Head, 1924).

[4]. See, most recently, Margaret Pelling with Frances White, *Medical Conflicts in Early Modern London: Patronage, Physicians, and Irregular Practitioners, 1550-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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