

Mad Dogs and Englishmen: Rabies in Britain, 1830-2000

Review Number:

645

Publish date:

Thursday, 31 January, 2008

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ISBN:

9780239542402

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£12.95

Pages:

257pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

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In the past decade Britain has finally relaxed the strict controls on the movement of dogs and cats across its borders. The most potent and compelling arguments used for the retention of quarantine regulations could be found in the pictures of rabid dogs posted at marinas and other embarkation points. Neil Pemberton and Michael Worboys provide a fascinating account of the long antecedents of these modern anxieties in their vivid portrait of Victorian responses to the terrors of hydrophobia (the 'fear of water' which was experienced by rabies sufferers). In this well-written and copiously illustrated text, the story of the scientific discovery of the causes of rabies is explained by medical historians who have a fine sense of the peculiar social and cultural terms in which diseases and cures have been identified. The book considerably extends the scope of John Walton's pioneering exploration of the social impact of rabies on Victorian England, and while drawing on many of his original insights, the bulk of this new narrative focuses on London and the English provinces. (1) Indeed, the title and sub-title suggest a tension of national as well as sexual identity in a study which attempts to encompass the march of European (as well as British) science and the peculiarities of English culture. Reflecting no doubt the authors' own base in Manchester, the Lancashire sources are particularly strong and provide a welcome counterpoint to the metropolitan newspapers and official documents which have often dominated the history of modern medicine.

The value of this book lies in its clear exposition of the social history of the medical and veterinary science surrounding the examination and treatment of rabies, particularly its human sufferers, and the social and cultural meaning of the disease for contemporary Britons during the past two centuries. The most innovative and successful chapter is that dealing with the rise of Pasteurism and laboratory investigation of the disease. The final chapter sweeps across the whole 20th century; from the 'eradication' of rabies in 1902 to the

introduction of passports for animals more recently. The development of an effective vaccine in the early 1880s and the opening in 1889 of Paris's Institut Pasteur marked an important step in the growth of laboratory science, though research efforts were also seen in Britain and elsewhere before this point. Pemberton and Worboys chart the passage of sufferers from many countries to the new Institute, including a group of Bradford children and a party of Russian peasants bitten by a wolf. Pasteur enjoyed growing British support in the struggles over bacteriology which swept European medical science in the 1880s, though there was no London institute founded in his name to match those in other capitals.

By way of contrast this book reveals the significant, often neglected, role played by John Burdon-Sanderson, William S. Greenfield and other luminaries in the important research of the Brown Animal Sanatory Institution. The Brown was also the scene of a bizarre case of paralytic rabies, which helped to fuel the accusation that Pasteur and bacteriological laboratories were responsible for breeding a fresh panoply of diseases. Although many efforts were made to exclude veterinary science from medical debates, investigations of animal to human infection were critical in the emergence of bacteriology (pp. 84-5). (2) Such links only exacerbated fears of uncontrolled science and the corruption of species which are vividly apparent in the fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Conan Doyle.

The public figures who established a claim to expertise in dealing with the 'dog problem' and the control of 'street curs' ranged from Victor Horsley (another Brown Institution notable) to leading London policemen and literary publicists such as G. H. Lewes, husband of George Eliot. For the prolonged discourse on the problem of rabid dogs, which claimed a growing number of deaths in the early 1860s and again in the mid-1880s, owed less to scientific consensus than to a ferment of competing theories on the nature and origins of disease. As this study shows, the probable number of human casualties directly due to rabies infection remained tiny throughout the 19th century and fatalities were extremely rare. The authors plausibly argue that a more accurate recording of rabies cases after the passage of the Contagious Diseases (Animals) Act in 1886 contributed to lower rabies statistics by 1897 and the apparent elimination of the scourge by 1902. While Walter Long at the Board of Agriculture drew great political capital from his role in the battle to control the disease and removing the necessity of muzzling the dog population, the real effect of official measures is left in some doubt. In its broad survey of the post-1902 period, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* engages with the resurgence of the disease in 1918-22 and 1969-71 when the problem was associated with the introduction of a 'foreign' infection from Europe, as rabies was affirmed as an exotic illness not native to Britain and excluded by strict quarantine controls. By the middle decades of the 20th century, the greatest risks had become identified with hot countries in the eastern Mediterranean, Africa and Asia. (This was despite the fact that, historically, large numbers of stray dogs were the problem, rather than climate.) In the same period the hazard moved from domestic to wild spaces as foxes and other untamed creatures were recognised as carriers.

One important advantage of the social history of medicine which has developed, particularly in Britain, during the past four decades is the availability of a sophisticated analysis of the way societies develop particular, historically sensitive understandings of illness and health. Pemberton and Worboys document not only the social setting in which medical science progressed, but also the distinctive motivation for medical research and the multiple ways in which scientific knowledge was translated and absorbed by different audiences.

The story of rabies and the enormous attention given by governments and civil society to this rare and unusual disease can only be comprehended by examining the relationship between competing forms of expertise and the distinctive articulation of popular experience at different periods of British history. In their discussion of the 'dog days' of Victorian rabies panics, the authors largely follow the earlier work of scholars such as Walton and Ritvo in framing battles over dog ownership within a setting of class identity and popular politics. (3) The struggle to control rabies and the clusters of infection in working-class districts of industrial north England should be seen against the growth in pet ownership across society in the first half of the 19th century and bourgeois efforts to civilise and domesticate leisure pursuits and extricate labouring people from the grip of cruel sports, often patronised by indulgent aristocrats. Peaks in anxiety over rabies often occurred before and during periods of popular political protest. The threats to the domestic family and

the need to police lawless streets as well as open spaces figured in the language of concern. Active and passive resistance to restrictions came from working-class dog owners as well as radical anti-vivisectionists and a host of dog-lovers who disputed the case made by the Kennel Club and others co-operating with muzzle advocates.

Our contemporary anxieties about the threat of unregistered pit-bull terriers, middle-class abhorrence of dog-fighting and badger-baiting, and continuing controversies over fox-hunting, capture echoes of these earlier concerns to civilise manners and control brutish urges among the unlettered and their aristocratic sponsors. Violent past-times could be more easily associated with mongrel breeding of people and dogs than the selective pedigree shows of Victorian dog-fanciers. We can see the fashion for proud pet-keeping as a proxy for racial purity in a Victorian society increasingly concerned with eugenic quality. These class dynamics are certainly evident in scientific as well as public discourses about the control of animal energies in public and private spaces.

It is also possible to detect developing identities of gender and ethnicity in the story told by *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*. The fact that Walton wrote his 1979 article in response to an earlier spoof which satirised claims for rescuing and giving a historical voice not only to homosexuals but also pets, indicates the distance which scholarship has travelled since the 'new' social history of the 1970s. Given the recurring attachment of rabies to worries about immigration, foreign invasion and racial purity, it would be interesting to push the authors into hearing more about the possible links with waves of Irish, European, Jewish and Asian migration in the past two centuries. The strong association of some dog-centred leisure pursuits, including whippet racing and hare coursing, with masculine fraternity also invites further comment.

It would be all too easy to suggest that the social history of medicine, and social history itself, should take on the concerns and methodologies of cultural history in seeking to develop deeper explanations of a social psychoses of rabies scares. The authors themselves make early references to 'hysterical hydrophobia' in considering popular responses to images of foaming victims. Yet as Peter Mandler has noted, exaggerated concern with discursive practices and linguistic nuances can lead us away from a rigorous consideration of the fundamental statistics of life, debilitation and death that people faced and which informed their existence as they struggled to make sense of the civilised and uncivilised options which they confronted. (4) There is also a danger that we merely juxtapose professional or scientific expertise and popular experience in a slack assumption that working people have little capacity for abstract reflection. Indeed, dog-keeping and handling (along with pigeon-fancying, budgerigar-breeding, fly-fishing and a host of other pastimes) provided working men and even women with the living materials from which to assemble fields of knowledge that belonged to them. We clearly need more than a re-dressing of earlier social history by more fashionable lines taken from cultural studies.

This book offers the possibility of a fresh perspective on the social history of disease in addressing the important question of the political meaning, as well as the cultural significance, of animal control in the past two centuries. Ross McKibbin and other historians of the British working class have presented the growth of hobbies during the 19th and 20th centuries as an expression of the accommodation of labouring people with a society which offered workers private as well as collective space for enjoyment and self-realisation away from class confrontation. (5) The narrative provided in this and other texts suggests the possibility of a fresh and more illuminating interpretation: we are given glimpses both of the high politics of disease reform and the turf battles for control of dogs between respectable reformers and an alliance of radical anti-vivisectionists, dog-lovers and working-class owners. As Hamlin has noted of nuisance removal in Victorian Britain, the identification of a problem involved the demarcation of social space and the invasion of civil society by official experts claiming ownership and control of inert and living matter. (6) The rabid dog, like the putrid midden, the rancid carcass and the untreated milk pail, became the subject of ecological management.

What is less often noted is the degree to which such spatial re-arrangement of offensive objects implied and precipitated a remodelling of the architecture of state control in modern Britain. For instance, the threat of rabies brought into political life the new Board of Agriculture as a significant player at a time when English

and Welsh local government was being overhauled during the 1880s. As in the parallel case of anthrax, where a relatively rare and exotic animal disease threatened a small number of working-class men but attracted huge political interest, forensic laboratory work became the battleground between bacteriologists and their enemies. There were also an institutional struggle for control of disease management between the Home Office, responsible for policing factory health and safety, and the Local Government Board which was broadly responsible for environmental health in the localities. (7) At a time when the British state was reforming to encompass the new agenda of industrial and social welfare reform which changed the terms of social provision for the population between the 1880s and 1914, battles over expertise in animal diseases and the risks of urban life were more closely connected to the changing politics of class than is often recognised. The accommodation reached by 1902 to unmuzzle dogs but exclude foreign canines and other creatures capable of infecting the British stock was one reached, appropriately enough, by the avuncular Conservative, Walter Long. As a result, different classes were free to invest emotional sentiment in their domestic animals as a distinctly British virtue.

This book displays many of the positive qualities and some of the limitations of the kind of social history which has developed in Britain since Walton's early work on rabies in England. The authors are two respected medical historians who succeed in providing a careful analysis of the social setting in which scientific investigations were conducted in the 19th and 20th centuries. The style is assured and confident, though occasional attempts at a more popular appeal give rise to occasionally racy and colloquial passages. As social history and medical history acquire a mature, not to say ageing, methodology, it may be time to extend the boundaries of these intellectual practices and consider the problems of linking debates in the history of science and the politics of class and gender to the question of expertise in state formation and re-formation during the period covered by this interesting book. *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* suggests that the history of scientific knowledge and the anxieties raised by forensic research yield interesting insights for our own society as we face new challenges in the management of space and environmental resources.

The authors welcome this thoughtful review and do not wish to comment further

Notes

1. J. K. Walton, 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen: the conflict over rabies in late Victorian England', *Journal of Social History*, 13 (1979), 219-39. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sir G. Wilson, 'The Brown Animal Sanatory Institution', *Journal of Hygiene*, 83 (1979), 171-97, provides biographical cameos of the Brown's superintendents. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example, 240-1 in H. Ritvo, 'Pride and pedigree: the evolution of the Victorian dog fancy', *Victorian Studies*, 29 (1986), 227-53. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. P. Mandler, 'The Problem with Cultural History', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 94-117. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. R. McKibbin, 'Work and Hobbies in Britain, 1880-1939', and 'Working-class gambling in Britain, 1880-1939', in *The Ideologies of Class. Social relations in Britain, 1880-1950* ed. McKibbin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 101-66; A. J. Reid, *Social classes and social relations in Britain, 1850-1913* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1992), pp. 47-51. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. C. Hamlin, 'Public sphere to public health: the transformation of "nuisance"', in *Medicine, Health and the Public Sphere in Britain, 1600-2000*, ed. S. Sturdy (London: Routledge 2002), pp. 189-204. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. I. Mortimer and J. Melling, "'The contest between commerce and trade, on the one side, and human life on the other': British Government Policies for the regulation of anthrax infection and the wool textiles industries, 1880-1939", *Textile History*, 31 (2000), 223-237; T. Carter and J. Melling, 'Trading with anthrax: national attempts to regulate a "new" industrial disease. Expert evaluation of hazardous materials and political demands for market regulation, c. 1875-1930', *Dangerous Trades Conference Proceedings*, State University of New York (2007). [Back to \(7\)](#)

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