

## Methods and Issues/ Problematiques et methodes

### The Re-appearing Shadow of 1918: Trends in the Historiography of the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic

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**Abstract.** This article traces the ways in which the subject of the "Spanish" Influenza pandemic of 1918-19, the worst short-term pandemic of modern times, has been treated (or ignored) by historians over the last 86 years. In doing so, it identifies four distinct surges of interest in the topic, each producing a different conception of this pandemic as history: as epidemiology, as high drama, as social science and ecology, and as scientific saga. It seeks to explain these differing conceptions as part of a wider phenomenon, viz., how an event can be neglected, discovered, made, and re-made as history.

**Résumé.** Cet article décrit comment le sujet de la pandémie de grippe espagnole de 1918-19, la pire épidémie de courte durée des temps modernes, a été traité (ou ignoré) par les historiens au cours des 86 dernières années. L'auteur identifie quatre différentes vagues d'intérêt sur le sujet, chacune produisant une conception différente de cette pandémie dans l'histoire: comme épidémiologie, comme haut drame, comme science sociale et écologie et comme saga scientifique. Selon l'auteur, ces différentes conceptions font partie d'un phénomène plus vaste. Il cherche à expliquer comment un événement peut être négligé, découvert, fait et re-fait comme histoire.

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The publication during the past four years of five histories in English<sup>1</sup> of the "Spanish" influenza pandemic of 1918-19, the worst pandemic of modern times in terms of speed and toll, is the result of yet another of the sporadic surges in publication which have characterized the historiography of this pandemic over the last 80 years. It is the fluctuating nature of this historiography which this article will characterize and try to account for, by reviewing popular and scholarly historical writing on this topic, which was slow to emerge in the first place and then proceeded by fits and starts, triggered in most cases by contemporary concerns and events and changes in historians' conception of their subject. Viewed from this perspective, analyzing the pattern of historical writing on the "Spanish" flu of 1918-19 becomes an illuminating case study too of a complex and more general process whereby an event can go from long being ignored by historians to being "discovered" by them and then accepted as part of their historical "canon"—in other words, the making of a historical topic, in which what constitutes history is itself a mutable construction.

A graph tracing writing which focused specifically on this pandemic over the last 86 years would be very uneven in character: a sharply ascending curve indicating the initial flood of contemporary and near-contemporary accounts in its immediate wake would be followed by a steep descent and a relative lull for almost 40 years, before a series of sharp spikes began to appear in the late 1950s and 1960s, indicating spasmodic bursts of interest. From the mid-1970s these would, in turn, be succeeded by a curve, which continued to climb upwards, right up to the present. These rises and falls provide a telling record of the past being "discovered" and "rediscovered," in accord with changing pre-occupations, both popular and scholarly.

From this it follows that the way in which the 1918-19 pandemic has been conceived of by those who have written about it has not been constant over time—its image has changed, largely depending on the eye, angle, and prevailing concerns of the individual beholder. Since the total number of such authorial beholders since 1918 is over 800, any first survey like this of the historical writing on the topic must resort to broad generalizations about particular genres, limiting references to specific works to a mere handful of significant titles. This is how the overview that follows will proceed, as it plots the graph of the "Spanish" influenza's historiography and the pandemic's changing conceptualization therein, and tries to explain these contours.

At the risk of oversimplifying trends unduly and doing damage to continuities, it is possible to define four main phases in historical writing about the "Spanish" flu, each characterized by a different conceptualization of the pandemic and thus ultimately of what constituted history. In roughly chronological sequence these conceived of the history of this pan-

demic as firstly, epidemiology; then as high drama, then as social science and ecology, and most recently as scientific saga. The article will analyse each of these appearances of the "Spanish" influenza's shadow in turn.

#### EPIDEMIOLOGY AS HISTORY

The initial surge of writing in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic was barely historical in character. Largely recounting what had happened from a medical participant's point of view, these works aimed mainly to make medical sense of the devastating episode so that lessons could be drawn from this experience lest the pandemic return within months, a dire event fully expected to occur. Of historical perspective or approach there was scarcely a hint, nor is this surprising.

What is more remarkable, however, is the almost complete silence of professional historians of the day about the pandemic, in striking contrast to their readiness to tackle as a historical topic its contemporary, World War I. Although they had lived through both, it was almost as if they deemed a world war to be suitable as a subject for historians but not a world pandemic. Typically, a historical survey published in 1924 by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, *These Eventful Years—The Twentieth Century in the Making...Being the dramatic story of all that has happened throughout the world during the most momentous period in all history*, ignored the pandemic entirely,<sup>2</sup> while even as medically aware a historian as Sir Andrew Macphail, professor of history of medicine at McGill University, did no more than lump influenza together with "other infectious diseases" in his chapter on "Diseases of War" in the official history of the Canadian medical services in World War I—this, while the rest of his chapter dealt with 10 other diseases individually.<sup>3</sup> Trumping even this failure to recognize the significance of the influenza pandemic, the *Casualties and War Statistics* volume of Britain's official *History of the Great War* published in 1931 blithely declared, "Apart from reproducing...the recorded figures for influenza in the British armies at home and abroad during the Great War little need be said about this disease."<sup>4</sup>

Given the presence of such a blind spot among historical scholars of the day, it comes as no surprise either that, in all the Carnegie Endowment's 208 volumes in its *Economic and Social History of the World War*, only one brief chapter (in the volume on health in Austria and Hungary) was devoted to the influenza pandemic as such, while a few other chapters by doctors or health officials mentioned it, but only in passing, and then solely as a medical or statistical phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

To such reasons as have already been suggested for this neglect of the pandemic by the historians of that era—its subsumption by World War I, its very rapid passage and non-return, the hard-to-grasp magnitude of its toll which could not be credibly attributed to as everyday a

disease as influenza, and the absence of any really household names among its victims—a historiographical perspective can add three hypotheses: that it was overlooked by historians-at-large firstly because of the essentially political conception of history as then conceived; secondly, because its impact was relatively light in Europe and North America, the areas of the world whose academies effectively defined what then constituted “scientific history”; and thirdly, that, as the “Spanish” flu amounted to an enormous rout in the war against disease for the medical profession, it was not a subject to hold much appeal for the triumphalist brand of medical history then in vogue thanks to medicine’s stream of successes since Pasteur. Where, for instance, would it find a place in the upbeat chapter in *These Eventful Years* entitled “Harvest Time in Medicine and Surgery?”

The upshot of this indifference to the pandemic by historians was that, for over 40 years after 1918, historical accounts treating it were, by default, the by-products of investigations into the nature of the pandemic by epidemiologists and virologists, whose prime goal was to discover why it had been so lethal as they sought to find ways to prevent a recurrence of similar proportions. As the British Ministry of Health’s comprehensive, multi-authored survey of the pandemic’s course and toll around the world put it in 1920, “There can be no doubt that as an historical survey it [the Report] will prove invaluable for future reference in the event of subsequent epidemics.... That to understand the aetiology of a disease we must study both its historical and contemporary manifestations is as much a truism to the epidemiologist as the parallel proposition in the science of social and economic institutions.”<sup>6</sup> Seven years later a similar epidemiological overview, this time undertaken for the American Medical Association by a Chicago University bacteriologist, Edwin O. Jordan, devoted nearly half of its 512 pages to spelling out the pandemic’s origin, course, incidence and toll, aspects which, it noted, were “gigantic but urgent” to unravel “in the face of the almost certain recurrence some day of another world-wide pandemic.”<sup>7</sup>

In such accounts, history was treated as a utilitarian object for quite specific epidemiological investigation and, consequently, in these the pandemic was seen through a narrowly medical science lens, with most attention being given to elucidating its cause, mode of transmission and toll, and practically none to its social and cultural dimensions or consequences. To these authors the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 was one laboratory specimen among several, to be dissected in the interests of preventive epidemiology of the future and not its own historical significance, a perception only intensified by the decisive identification of the causative virus in 1933. Such, for instance, was the perspective of Burnet and Clarke’s 1942 survey of the preceding 50 years of influenza “in the light of modern work on the virus.” To these medical scientists, the 1918-

19 pandemic represented primarily the pre-eminent example of "influenza in its serious form"—that, to them, was its chief claim to significance.<sup>8</sup> Not until the appearance of the second big influenza pandemic of the 20th century, the "Asian" flu of 1957, was the 1918-19 pandemic to be perceived in another light, as a topic for historical examination in its own right.

The extent to which such a medically centred conception of the 1918-19 pandemic was one-dimensional, was clearly revealed by the re-appearance of major influenza pandemics in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s: the "Asian" flu pandemic of 1957 awakened memories of just how socially catastrophic and all-enveloping the 1918-19 calamity had been, and in so doing produced a surge in historical writing on the topic, but this time in a new guise, viz., high drama as history.

#### HIGH DRAMA AS HISTORY

Taking his cue from this realisation and recognizing in it a gripping story, in 1961 an American popular historian, Adolph A. Hoehling, produced a lively account of what he called *The Great Epidemic*.<sup>9</sup> Based on contemporary newspapers and published reports, the work focused on the "Spanish" flu as a historical event in its own right, tracking it primarily through the USA where Hoehling highlighted the responses it had evoked by means of a rich array of anecdotes, photographs, posters, handbills, and cartoons. Though it was largely descriptive, without much understanding of what underlay these responses, the book displayed an interest in the pandemic's social side for the first time. To the medically minded reviewer of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, however, this made it "Fairly superficial as a medical history... [though] brisk enough reading."<sup>10</sup>

Across the Atlantic, however, the "Asian" flu of 1957 had quite the opposite effect on publishers, if one contemporary author is to be believed. In England it aroused such anxiety about a recurrence of a 1918-type disaster that a manuscript giving a global account of the "Spanish" flu and intended for publication on its 40th anniversary in 1958, was put on hold as "No publisher in his senses would have dared to face charges of frightening the public still further than it had already been by the newspaper reports."<sup>11</sup>

When the work was finally published in 1969, in the wake of the "Hong Kong" flu pandemic of 1968-69, which had yet again stirred up memories of 1918 (but this time without deterring a publisher!), Charles Graves' sensationally titled *Invasion by Virus: Can It Happen Again?* provided the first world survey of the 1918-19 pandemic since the epidemiological overviews of the 1920s. Patching together an extensive body of material collected by a small team of researchers from official reports and newspapers of the time, Graves described the pandemic's trans-

mission and toll country by country and the counter-measures it elicited in an uncritical chronicle of events, lacking perspective, analysis or an interest in longer-term consequences.

Epitomizing his conception of the pandemic as an unfolding drama of how a deadly virus was unwittingly spread world-wide was his line that, "The story of the 1918 pandemic is really the story of ships sailing the seven seas carrying cargoes of potential death, which were unloaded at ports of debarkation in countries in all parts of the world."<sup>12</sup>

In this it typified the genre of popular accounts of the pandemic, which portrayed it primarily as a dramatic tale of human catastrophe. Publication of such a work soon after a new influenza epidemic had abated, it became clear, held with it the prospect of good sales to a general public whose awareness of the disease had been temporarily raised.

From another angle, at least one pharmaceutical company involved in the manufacture of anti-flu vaccine, Philips-Duphar Nederland, presumably saw other marketing possibilities in the story of the 1918-19 pandemic. In 1968 it commissioned a Dutch journalist, A. C. de Gooijer, to write a popular account of the pandemic, to be distributed to doctors in Holland exactly 50 years after the outbreak. Not surprisingly in these circumstances, the richly illustrated *De Spaanse Griep van '18: De Epidemie die meer dan 20,000,000 Lewens Eiste* which resulted<sup>13</sup> did not fail to mention, after graphic descriptions of the pandemic's passage through Holland and Switzerland in 1918, how the development of anti-flu vaccine had subsequently allowed influenza to be far more effectively countered. Nor, it would seem, was it unsuccessful in getting this message across, because in 1978, in the aftermath of yet another international flu scare, the book was republished so as to reach the wider public too.<sup>14</sup>

Undoubtedly the best example of the dramatic genre was published in 1974, six years after the "Hong Kong" flu's reminder of 1918. With melodramatic chapter titles like "Are We Going to be Wiped Out?" and "Doctor! Doctor! Do Something!", Richard Collier's *The Plague of the Spanish Lady* (1974) set out to recount the pandemic's story through the lens of ordinary human experience. However, whereas other popular works with this intention relied largely on the press of the time, Collier drew too on the personal memories of over 1700 flu survivors, collected by a large research team around the world via interviews and letters. "For the first time we have not a medical textbook or the creation of a novelist, but the diverse reactions of ordinary citizens as the disease grew in intensity," clamoured the publisher's blurb.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, how to shape this mass of individual testimony into a coherent account was a problem, which Collier did not resolve. As a result, though his book effectively captured the contemporary horror and panic as the "Spanish Lady" circumnavigated the globe, it failed to grasp the event as a whole or put it into perspective, or even track it chronologically or

assess its impact. Its focus was solely the pandemic's course and the human responses it evoked in the short term. Ultimately, the whole is no more than the sum of its many vignettes, which is probably why Collier felt constrained to add a short appendix on some of the basic questions not treated in his text, such as its toll, its causative virus and, inevitably, the likelihood of another such visitation. None of this was original, however. What Collier's book did do very effectively, however, was to highlight most strikingly the value of personal testimony for gaining a full measure of the "Spanish" flu, a dimension which he actively encouraged later historians of the pandemic to heed by his generosity in making readily available to them his store of letters from flu survivors.

Nevertheless, it was not principally the sales of popular works on the 1918-19 pandemic, which drew the attention of academic historians to the topic—they have usually been disdainful of such success—but the changing intellectual climate in universities from the mid-1970s onwards, which yielded a new phase in the historiography of the "Spanish" flu.

#### SOCIAL SCIENCE AND ECOLOGY AS HISTORY

The emergence of social and environmental history and, a little later, of the social history of medicine as academically respectable sub-disciplines saw epidemics beginning to be perceived as part of the mainstream of history and not as some quirkish phenomenon in the margins of the past. This meant that a number of historians who had chanced upon the 1918-19 pandemic in the course of their research into more established fields like the history of World War I, urban and regional history, economic history, and administrative history or who had heard of the pandemic from ageing relatives who had lived through it were more inclined to pursue their chance "discovery" than their predecessors a decade or two earlier had been.<sup>16</sup>

A further sign of the gradual recognition of the "Spanish" flu as an acceptable topic in the historical academy was the trickle of university theses on the topic, which began to appear from the mid-1970s. In the 25 years after 1976 nearly 30 such theses were submitted to university history departments in countries as widespread as the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Switzerland, Sweden, South Africa, Zimbabwe, New Zealand, Australia, and Brazil; in the 25 years before 1976 only five such theses had been submitted, and they had been predominantly medical in character.

By far the best-known academic history of the pandemic to appear from these years, Alfred W. Crosby's *Epidemic and Peace, 1918* (1976),<sup>17</sup> fits appropriately into this category of the "discovery" of the subject as a result of the emergence of a novel approach to history, in this case environmental history—though it is perhaps worth noting that it was not this aspect which ultimately made the flu historically significant in his

eyes, but its impact on the war and the peacemaking which followed it. In regard to the latter, he postulated (without convincing many) that President Woodrow Wilson had been so incapacitated by an attack of "Spanish" flu at Versailles that his moderating hand was absent from the final treaty—with major long-term results. It was clearly not yet possible for an environmental historian (perhaps responding to his publisher's concerns) to ignore well-established landmarks of traditional political and diplomatic history to give an epidemic meaning.

Having already explored the role of epidemic diseases like smallpox in the European conquest of Latin America and determined it to have been decisive, in *Epidemic and Peace* Crosby sought to extend this line of inquiry to the "Spanish" flu pandemic. His crystallizing contention, he later reflected, was that "[W]e need to look at history not only as politics or religion or economics, but as biology."<sup>18</sup>

Focusing on the pandemic in the USA, its troops at home and abroad and its peace negotiators at Versailles, he concluded—somewhat short-sightedly, it turns out—that, except with regard to peacemaking and medical research, it had had its greatest impact at the level of the private individual rather than of public policy. For the millions of people who had lost loved ones, Crosby argued, it was clearly a (if not "the") watershed event in their lives. Though this argument became explicit only in his final chapter, his prior synthesis raised historical writing on the influenza pandemic onto a new plane. He clearly demonstrated that the "Spanish" flu was far more than just a swiftly passing moment of horror worthy of a good raconteur, but rather a momentous historical event requiring serious scholarly inquiry by virtue of its huge death toll and its extremely disruptive all-round effect. "It serves a useful counterpoint to the concerns and pretensions of political and diplomatic historians, forcing us to recognize that a single, brief epidemic generated more fatalities, more suffering, and more demographic change in the United States than all the wars of the Twentieth Century," observed one academic reviewer acutely.<sup>19</sup>

Weaving together a wide range of published and unpublished sources into a coherent and easily accessible narrative which wore its learning lightly—the work won the 1976 American Medical Writers' Association award for the Best Book on a Medical Subject for Laymen—Crosby set on foot this scholarly inquiry, balancing his rich qualitative and quantitative data as he followed the pandemic's course and noted the immediate responses it evoked. Crosby "deserves plaudits for his provocative speculations and for his lively style which makes his solid scholarship eminently readable. His combination of medical, political, and social history is an effective one and should appeal both to professional historians and to general readers," concluded the *American Historical Review's* reviewer enthusiastically.<sup>20</sup> As in the case of

many "discovery" works, however, when it came to putting the USA's experience in the pandemic into longer or comparative perspective or tracing the longer-term consequences, the book faltered. "Too much of this book consists of details without a context," commented one reviewer summarily.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, it was not just Crosby's book and the publicity it attracted or a changing historiographical climate which brought the "Spanish" flu more within scholars' purview, particularly in the USA, but also changing viruses. The 1976 swine flu episode in the USA, coming just weeks after the publication of *Epidemic and Peace*, instantly triggered widespread interest in the 1918-19 pandemic and made Crosby a much sought-after speaker, while the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s revived dormant memories of the last time the USA had been subjected to an awesome epidemic. In fact, so striking were the parallels with the "Spanish" flu that in 1989 Cambridge University Press bought the publication rights of *Epidemic and Peace* from the original publisher and re-issued the work with text unchanged but under a telling new title, *America's Forgotten Pandemic—The Influenza of 1918* (1989). In a brief preface to the new edition, Crosby pointed out that "AIDS is the first killer disease to spread worldwide during most of our lifetimes....If we want to know how we react to calamitous surges of disease, we should take a look at the 1918 flu."<sup>22</sup>

This combination of later epidemics apparently resonant of the 1918 pandemic and a congenial intellectual environment meant that historical studies of the "Spanish" flu effectively took off all around the world from the mid-1970s. An analysis of all works on the "Spanish" influenza published in the last 85 years indicates that nearly 85% were published after 1975.

The largest category of these has been local, regional or urban studies of the pandemic, many by non-professional local historians. Typically, such works use a mixture of local newspapers, reports by local authorities and doctors and, sometimes, snatches of oral evidence from elderly residents too, to describe the arrival and deadly course of the disease in their locale, the counter-measures taken against it and its ultimate toll. Of consequences, public or private, little is usually said. In a sense, these studies resemble old-style military history, with influenza as the enemy and the battle to defeat it the authors' dominant theme. Though sometimes verging on the antiquarian, these modest works will become the building blocks for broader national histories of the "Spanish" influenza and, in this regard at least, their timely collection of vanishing personal testimony and local tales is invaluable.

Generally, studies of the 1918-19 pandemic from this period, which began life within university history departments, have provided perspectives, which are both longer and broader. A good example is Fred van Hartesveldt's ambitious edited volume, *The 1918-19 Pandemic of Influenza:*

*The Urban Impact in the Western World* (1992), which examines four themes chosen by the editor—the pandemic's morbidity and mortality patterns, its effects on daily life, the medical and public health response it elicited and its economic impact—in 10 Western hemisphere cities, in a bid to "pull together some of the pieces of what is known about the pandemic and provide some comparative elements for a more general picture."<sup>23</sup>

Adopting an urban focus so as to "provide manageable units for study and because concentrations of population are natural foci of infectious disease,"<sup>24</sup> the chapters have many of the strengths of fine-grained microhistory, but Van Hartesveldt does not adequately weave together their array of local perspectives or draw out their similarities and differences. At the final hurdle, therefore, this potentially exciting attempt at comparative history falters, leaving the book as not much more than the sum total of its individual chapters.

In keeping with first forays, these are stronger at tracing the pandemic's progress at the public rather than the private level—noticeably, oral evidence has scarcely been utilized—and pay less attention to its social and cultural sides and its long-term consequences than these merit. It is thus a book whose substantial promise is not fulfilled, providing what the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* called "a valuable framework for comparative studies,"<sup>25</sup> but not that study itself. Comparative inquiries into the "Spanish" influenza will have to go a long way to match the insights of Winter and Robert's *Capital Cities at War—Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (1997).

Few comprehensive national histories of the influenza pandemic exist yet. Where they have been attempted, such studies—twelve would be a generous estimate of their number<sup>26</sup>—owe more to the zeal of individual historians than to the impetus imparted by some systematic project. At their best, they weave together a number of local studies of the pandemic into a greater whole, putting the result into a larger national context. This is particularly effective for highlighting long-term national trends and identifying how the "Spanish" flu either accelerated or redirected these, in keeping with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's judgment that "[T]he best studies of *l'histoire événementielle*... [look] both backward and especially forward in time, to find out whether the event in question really 'made any difference' or not."<sup>27</sup>

The broad scope of such works and their wide-ranging source-material also encouraged them to open up novel angles on the pandemic, such as the social composition of flu victims, popular and religious explanations of the disaster, its social and psychological effects on those who survived, and the physical after-effects of a serious bout of the disease, particularly encephalitis lethargica.

Yet, these new perspectives have not been the sole preserve of a handful of national histories. In many cases they were pioneered by scholars

with a less ambitious agenda, whose response to the stimuli of the last quarter-century was to focus on one particular feature of the pandemic. For instance, historical geographers have tracked the pandemic's pathways across oceans, continents, and even individual towns and suburbs with as high a degree of precision as their often imperfect sources allowed. With an equal zest for exactitude, historical demographers have subjected contemporary statistics to close scrutiny and argued that long-accepted mortality figures seriously underestimate the toll, perhaps by as much as 100 per cent. Discerning patterns in these mortality figures—for example by age, gender, place of residence, and occupation—has allowed better-defined questions to be posed about the pandemic's distinctive impact as a consequence. In turn, such questions have been skillfully used by anthropologists studying first nation populations in North America to interrogate the experience of those communities in 1918-19.<sup>28</sup>

For their part, historians of medicine and the healthcare professions have moved beyond anecdotal recollections of doctors and nurses to investigate what light the trial of the pandemic sheds on the nature of these professions and contemporary medical thinking or of such public health systems and networks as existed in 1918, both nationally and imperially. In a similar vein, of using epidemics as "mirrors reflecting social processes,"<sup>29</sup> one or two historians have begun to explore how the pandemic experience illuminates colonialism, although, on the fundamental question in this regard, how traditional medicine and thinking in colonial societies responded to the challenge of the pandemic, little inquiry has yet been undertaken. For that matter, the response of universalist religions has not been much analysed either, which is surprising, given the obvious scope for drawing enriching comparisons with their stance during earlier and subsequent epidemics and thereby plotting their changing ideas on the nature and extent of divine intervention in the world.

Perhaps most unexpected in the historiography of the last 25 years is the absence of any systematic investigation of the connection between the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 and World War I. That might alter with the growth of a social history of warfare approach to the conflict, but historians thinking along these lines will, as a first step, have to wrestle successfully with Jay M. Winter's insistence that "The flu and its huge death toll were a product not of the war, but of the (then as now) unknown processes of viral morphology."<sup>30</sup>

Coincidentally, even as Winter was penning his discontent with a war-pandemic link, dramatic and ingenious state-of-art virological research was getting under way to try and identify precisely the causative virus of the 1918-19 pandemic through the analysis of tissue specimens taken from flu victims, either in 1918 (and since preserved in a Washington pathological museum) or, more dramatically, from the exhumed bodies of Norwegian and Alaskan victims buried 86 years ago

within the Arctic Circle. This has begun a fourth phase in the historiography of the "Spanish" flu, scientific saga as history.

#### SCIENTIFIC SAGA AS HISTORY

These virological ventures of the late 1990s caught a popular imagination already aroused by the drama of the 1997 Hong Kong chicken flu outbreak and, as a result, they received extensive coverage in the daily press, in international magazines like *TIME* and the *New Yorker*, on television and, to date, in three popular histories and two texts for children.<sup>31</sup> All this media attention served to revive the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 as a topic for discussion, this time, however, as a vehicle for a sensational scientific quest at the end of the second millennium. It is too soon to say whether this episode will prompt even more scholarly research on the "Spanish" flu, but, going by what has happened in the past, it should.

Moreover, momentum to pursuing such research should also be added by the recent SARS outbreak, which elicited many superficial comparisons with the "Spanish" flu.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, despite all the spurs to a considerable growth in specific studies of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic since the mid-1970s, it is clear that few academic historians outside the circle of these authors have taken on board the significance of the subject. Most national histories ignore it and few of the histories of the 20th century which accompanied the end of the last millennium noticed it—at best they mentioned it in a line or two.<sup>33</sup> This does not say much for the readiness of these historians to recast their parameters to accommodate a topic outside the usual ambit of political, social, economic, and cultural history.

What this review of the changing historiography of the "Spanish" flu over the last 86 years reveals is how a historical topic can be neglected, discovered, constructed, and re-constructed in different ways, in accordance with changing contemporary pre-occupations and conceptions. Such a process is not novel of course: it was neatly summed up over 60 years ago in Benedetto Croce's succinct maxim, "All history is contemporary history."<sup>34</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Of the five, three are popular histories and two, tellingly, aimed at schoolchildren, the supreme mark of acceptance as a historically respectable subject. The three popular histories are Pete Davies, *Catching Cold—1918's Forgotten Tragedy and the Scientific Hunt for the Virus That Caused It* (London: Michael Joseph, 1999); Gina Kolata, *Flu—The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999); and Lynette Iezzoni, *Influenza 1918—The Worst Epidemic in American History* (New York: TV Books, 1999). The two texts aimed at schoolchildren are Virginia Aronson, *The Influenza Pandemic of 1918* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 2000) and David Getz and Peter McCarty, *Purple Death—The Mysterious*

- Flu of 1918* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000). Also aimed at children and thus confirming the arrival of the "Spanish" flu as a "valid" historical topic was a work of historical fiction in "The American Adventure series," published in 1998, Joann A. Grote, *The Flu Epidemic* (Uhrichsville: Barbour & Company, 1998).
- 2 *These Eventful Years—The 20th Century in the Making... Being the dramatic story of all that has happened throughout the world during the most momentous period in all history* (London & New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1924).
  - 3 Andrew Macphail, *The Medical Services* (Ottawa: F. A. Acland for Official History of Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1925), p. 271.
  - 4 T. J. Mitchell & G. M. Smith, *Medical Services—Casualties and Medical Statistics of the Great War* (London: HMSO for History of the Great War Based on Official Documents, 1931), p. 85.
  - 5 Herbert Elias, "Grippe" in Clemens Pirquet, ed., *Volksgesundheit im Krieg* (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), p. 54-66; G. Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia durante e dopo la Guerra* (Bari: Laterza e Figli, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), p. 259-64; L. Bernard, *La Guerre et la Sante publique* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1929); F. Bunn, ed., *Deutschlands Gesundheitsverhaeltnisse unter dem Einfluss des Weltkrieges* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), Vol. 1, p. 329-40, Vol. 2, p. 181-82, 224-26.
  - 6 Great Britain, Ministry of Health, *Report on the Pandemic of Influenza 1918-19* (London: Ministry of Health, Number 4 in series of Reports on Public Health and Medical Subjects, 1920), p. iv, 3.
  - 7 Edwin O. Jordan, *Epidemic Influenza—A Survey* (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1927), p. 3.
  - 8 Frank M. Burnet and Ellen Clark, *Influenza. A Survey of the Last 50 Years in the Light of Modern Work on the Virus of Epidemic Influenza* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1942), Introduction. A Canadian example of exactly this approach is to be found in W. G. Smillie, "An Epidemic of Influenza in an Isolated Community—Northwest River, Labrador," *American Journal of Hygiene*, 11 (1930): 392-98, which used the 1918 epidemic outbreak as a benchmark against which to assess an epidemic outbreak in 1927-28.
  - 9 Adolph A. Hoehling, *The Great Epidemic* (Boston & Toronto: Little Brown, 1961).
  - 10 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 March 1961, p. 37.
  - 11 Charles Graves, *Invasion by Virus. Can It Happen Again?* (London: Icon, 1969), p. 7.
  - 12 Graves, *Invasion by Virus*, p. 131.
  - 13 A. C. de Gooijer, *De Spaanse Griep van '18: De Epidemie die meer dan 20,000,000 Levens Eiste* (Amsterdam: Van Lindonk, 1968).
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