

ARTICLE

# Henry Foe's dilemma

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## Abstract

In 1722, Daniel Defoe published *A Journal of the Plague Year* – a supposed account of the ‘great plague’ of 1665. It is commonly thought to be one of his most incisive pieces of ‘realist’ fiction. And, in our moment, one of his most prescient. The purpose of this paper is to revisit Defoe’s *Journal* in order to stimulate reflection on our present experience of living through the ‘plague year’ of 2020. There is much, as we shall see, about governance during a plague that is resonant – but much also about ‘hearts melted into tears’, about suffering, how it is felt and how it is perceived. The purpose of the *Journal*, according to Defoe at least, was to inform ‘those who come after’, so that they might be better prepared, so that they would not make the same mistakes. We will see.

**Keywords:** Defoe; plague; coronavirus; Public Health Act; lockdown

## 1 Introduction

Henry Foe was faced with a dilemma. It was spring 1665, bubonic plague was spreading across London and, like so many of his neighbours, he was wondering what to do. Should he stay or should he go? Henry was a saddler, with a thriving business, much of which was conducted abroad. He wondered the wisdom of abandoning it. His decision was made a little easier by the fact that he was unmarried, so had no family to worry about. Unlike Samuel Pepys, who first despatched his family before departing himself at the end of August.<sup>1</sup> By which time, tens of thousands of fellow Londoners had already left. Late June and early July witnessing an exodus of truly biblical proportions – the ‘better sort’, in the main, nearly all the physicians and most of the vicars and poets.<sup>2</sup> Milton went to stay with Quaker friends in Buckinghamshire.<sup>3</sup> Dryden, having married very well, stayed with the in-laws on their country estate in Wiltshire.<sup>4</sup> The king, meanwhile, decamped to Hampton Court, then Salisbury and then Oxford, taking his council with him, his wife and most of his mistresses.

But what should Henry do? There was little time to dither. Death rates recorded in the weekly mortality bills were rising alarmingly and the authorities were starting to implement a kind of lockdown. Tier 4, absent adequate health-care services, surrounded by the dead and dying, was hardly an attractive proposition. Henry sought counsel from two familiar places. The first was his brother, who had travelled widely and seen plenty of plagues: get out while you can, ‘save thyself’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 30).<sup>5</sup> The second was his conscience. Flicking through his Bible, Henry alighted on the 91st

<sup>1</sup>Moving the family home up-river to Woolwich, to stay with relatives. Pepys’s decision to join them was made easier by the removal of the Navy Board to Greenwich in mid-August (Tomalin, 2003, pp. 168–70, 174).

<sup>2</sup>The flight of the physicians attracted particular criticism, and some disappointment in regard to the clerics too. No one expected the poets to hang around.

<sup>3</sup>Where he put the final touches to *Paradise Lost* and, with the apparent help of his friend Thomas Ellwood, conceived *Paradise Regained*.

<sup>4</sup>Dryden had married Elizabeth, daughter of the Earl of Berkshire, at the end of 1663.

<sup>5</sup>All internal references are taken from Defoe (1986).

Psalm, verses 6–5 and 10: ‘Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night ... Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness’. Trust in Him and ‘no evil shall befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling’. So Henry did, casting himself under ‘the protection of the Almighty’ (*ibid.*, p. 34). He would stay, and compose a testament.

For the edification of coming generations faced with similar dilemmas. ‘I know not but it may be of moment to those who come after me’ he wrote (*ibid.*, p. 29) – or at least Daniel Defoe wrote. For Henry, to borrow a term familiar from medieval theology, has ‘two bodies’. There is Henry Foe the saddler who lived in the parish of St Botolph’s Aldgate, about whom we know, in fact, very little aside from the fact that he was the uncle of Daniel Defoe.<sup>6</sup> And there is HF, the narrator of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which Defoe published in 1722. What we know of him is what Defoe wants us to know. The fact that we are contemplating allusions comes as no surprise. Little that Defoe wrote is ever quite what it seems.

The *Journal* is not, for the most obvious of reasons. It is not a journal, at least not in the testamentary sense. There is no evidence that Henry left a testament, still less that his nephew read it. They may have conversed, or not. Young Daniel was aged five in 1665. So his personal memory of the ‘great’ plague would have been sketchy at best. There are plenty of other narratives, though, as we will discover: historical, medical, theological, poetic. In fact, no previous generation had written anything like as much about their ‘great’ plague, which is precisely why, of course, it has embedded itself so firmly in the historical memory. Terror needs testament. Otherwise, there is no reason to fear.

And it is this that animated Defoe in 1722: the fear of the next pandemic – something about which he had been writing, intermittently, for the previous twenty years.<sup>7</sup> In the moment, the fear was that the plague presently waning in Marseilles might still arrive in England. He was not alone in his concern. Walpole’s administration had passed a Quarantine Act the year before as a precaution.<sup>8</sup> A few weeks before the *Journal* appeared, Defoe published an essay prosaically entitled *Due Preparations for the Plague*. In the main, earthy suggestions for surviving another ‘pestilence’, much of it focused on how to keep the local economy going, together with advice on social distancing, parochial relief and a beneficial diet. The *Journal* was the supplement, for the broader audience.<sup>9</sup> The Gothic version, written to horrify and to warn of the ‘dreadful’ consequence of not preparing for the inevitable, *A Journal of the Plague Year* was a history of the future.

The purpose of this paper is to do what Defoe wants us to do – to revisit his *Journal* in the context of our ‘great plague’. For, in his pessimistic surmise, Defoe was rather obviously right. The plague of 1665 would not be the last, as we have learnt to our bitter experience. COVID-19 is the third coronavirus this century,<sup>10</sup> to which we can, of course, add the various flu pandemics of the previous century<sup>11</sup> plus all the other epidemics and pandemics that have come and sometimes gone over the last 400 years: cholera, typhoid, smallpox, measles and so on. One of the virtues of history is that it

<sup>6</sup>And, it seems, a successful businessman, like HF. His house, taxed for six hearths, was one of the largest in the parish (Bastian, 1965, p. 158).

<sup>7</sup>Defoe had been warning about the risks of the plague returning for years (West, 1997, pp. 266–269). Essays in the *Review* in 1709 on the Russian ‘winter’, another in 1712, on recommended treatments.

<sup>8</sup>Giving renewed statutory force to the practice of inspecting ships arriving from countries where there was thought to be plague. There was no necessary period of self-isolation for those found to be knowingly carrying the infection, hanging instead. The Act was predictably unpopular amongst merchants, who denounced it as being a ‘French’ affectation.

<sup>9</sup>*Due Preparations* made ‘little impression’ on contemporaries, thus Defoe’s decision to have another go, in a different format. Richetti suggests that it might be read as a ‘prologue’ to the *Journal* (2015, pp. 308–309).

<sup>10</sup>After MERS and SARS (Sahu *et al.*, 2020, pp. 384–386).

<sup>11</sup>Commonly named after countries. The ‘Russian flu’ of the early 1890s might ring a bell with contract-law students. It was this flu that Mrs Carlill caught and for which she bought her useless ‘carbolic smoke ball’. The ‘Spanish’ flu was perhaps the most devastating in terms of casualties. An estimated 20 to 100 million died between 1917 and 1920 – a suggestive range, as no one can ever really be sure in a pandemic as to how many might have died of what. It had nothing much to do with Spain either save for the fact that King Alfonso was amongst the higher-profile victims who contracted it. ‘Asian’ or ‘Chinese flu’ occurred in 1957–1958 and ‘Hong Kong flu’ occurred in 1968–1970. Pandemics are no longer named after countries, as it is considered too rude. Animals are sometimes used, such as bird and swine, otherwise it is numbers and letters.

commonly dispels the myths of unpredictability. Another pandemic, whether it be a coronavirus or influenza or something different again, was never a ‘possibility’. It was an ‘inevitability’.<sup>12</sup>

The only variable is the extent to which the consequences might be anticipated and mitigated – how much the ‘moment’ is learnt. This is the other thing that history does. It uses the past to make better sense of the present, and possibly the future. COVID-19 will not be the last pandemic, probably not even the last coronavirus pandemic. There will be lessons to learn from the great plague of 2020, much as there were in the long wake of the ‘great plague’ of 1665. Lessons about crisis management, the nature of governance and the place of law; about ethics too; the role of science; the nature of suffering; and, most importantly perhaps, about how they all dissolve. It is here that recourse, not just to history, but to the ‘poetical’ text, as Richard Weisberg has termed it, can help (1992, p. 46). It encourages us to read the present with a greater sensitivity.

This is what we will now try to do, proceeding chronologically, starting in 1665, before moving to 1722 and then finally on to 2020.

## 2 The great plague

It is generally agreed that the plague of 1665 originated somewhere in central Asia, arriving in Europe in the second part of 1663 and then spreading across the continent. The modellers knew it was coming, not just because they had heard report from abroad, but because there were signs: a series of ‘fiery’ comets flying through the skies in late autumn 1664. John Gadbury, astrologer to the stars, as well as of them, noted a particular comet in the early hours of 18 November. It could only ‘portend pestiferous and horrible windes and tempests’.<sup>13</sup> The winds came first with a very stormy December, and then the rest.

Every pestilence needs its modellers to imagine the future and the present. Gadbury would continue peering at the skies throughout 1665, astrology being ‘the only science that can give the cause and effect of plagues’. The dissenting alchemist John Allin was more grounded, in a sense. His particular science being the ‘scent of smelling’, Allin spent much of the coming year sniffing his way around the streets of Southwark in search of ‘foggy infected aire’.<sup>14</sup> And looking for *coelifolium*, which he might distil into *aurum potabile*, the elixir of life and with which he rather hoped to make his fortune, but neither of which he quite managed. Unlike the famed William Lilly, another with sharpened olfactory senses who specialised in sniffing urine. Lilly also happened to be the king’s favourite astrologer, or so he said, and plague-therapist. A client list of 2,000 wealthy patrons of variously indifferent health ensured a serious income, along with all the almanacs. William told his own fortune and invested well, chiefly in property in Surrey.

As a precaution, the authorities had started issuing ‘triantine’ and then ‘quarantine’ notices, designed to regulate traffic across the Channel.<sup>15</sup> Being an island should, in theory, have helped. It was difficult to police though, as early reports of quarantine ‘breakers’ confirmed. Some sanctioned breaches too: exemption certificates for the Duke of Albemarle to import some horses, the Duke of York some cordage and various treats for the court. Oddly, responsibility for policing international quarantine fell to the same two dukes.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, it was simply a matter of waiting, wondering whether the coming pestilence would be as ‘great’ as that of 1636 in which 40,000 had died, or 1625, or 1603, or 1592. There was nothing unprecedented about a bubonic plague in early modern

<sup>12</sup>Mobility being, as Ian Morris supposes, the ‘mother of plague’ (2017, p. 154).

<sup>13</sup>In his *De Cometis*, quoted in Mooto and Mooto (2004, p. 20).

<sup>14</sup>As we will see, the idea that the infection might spread in ‘miasmatic air’ was widely shared. We can assume that Allin was very familiar with nasty smells given that his rented accommodation overlooked Southwark plague-pit.

<sup>15</sup>A quarantine facility was already established at Canvey Island to inspect ships arriving from countries known to be experiencing a plague outbreak. On this occasion, there was an attempt to get the Dutch to set up a similar facility: a ‘thing never done before,’ Pepys recorded (1993, p. 327), and not then, either, as it transpired.

<sup>16</sup>Albemarle’s role in the Restoration is well known. He was made Master of the Royal Horse, amongst various other honours received in 1660, and ‘captain-general’ of all ‘His Majesty’s forces’, on land and sea. York, the king’s brother and future James II, was Lord Admiral of the Fleet.

England,<sup>17</sup> or any other kind of epidemic. Pleurisy and influenza the year before, ‘spotted fever’ in 1658. The variable was the experience; every generation liked to think that their plague was ‘great’ (Moote and Moote, 2004). We remember the 1665 plague as ‘great’ simply because it proved, in fact, to be the last, of the greater bubonic plagues at least.

The first reported deaths were in Yarmouth in December 1664. Tradition supposes that the first death in the capital was recorded on Christmas Eve in St Giles Cripplegate. The celebrated physician Nathaniel Hodges was called in and discovered patients with ‘two risings about the size of a nutmeg’ on each thigh, encircled with a ‘black hue’ (Rideal, 2017, pp. 25–26). After that, there was a curious quiet until early April, when a couple more were recorded, in Broadchurch Lane. These particular deaths have passed into something akin to folklore. The fact that the victims were French immigrants, associated with a local Quaker congregation, gave a first airing to a familiar prejudice: foreigners always make the best scapegoats, along with the Jews, who pretty quickly found themselves blamed too. And it was always useful to pin something on the Quakers.<sup>18</sup>

Here again, the occasional plague-death was hardly unusual. But, in this instance, the situation quickly started to deteriorate. By the end of the month, Pepys was recording ‘Great fears of the Sickenesse here in the City’ and first reports of houses being ‘shut up’ (1993, p. 486). A few weeks later, the terror had spread: ‘to see in what fear all the people here do live would make one mad’ (*ibid.*, p. 508). The tendency among the ‘common people’ to assume the worst was likewise noted by Hodges – ‘Remembrance of former Pestilence’ – convincing everyone that ‘Devastations’ were inevitable (Rideal, 2017, p. 29).

Pepys tried to cheer himself with the thought that it was a ‘poores plague’ and he was rich – and getting richer courtesy of his position as surveyor-general of victualling to the navy, negotiating procurement contracts. Every plague has its profiteers.<sup>19</sup> He was certainly right in his assumption that the poor suffered most, the necessary consequence of living and working in close quarters. And he was very aware of the risks attendant to staying in the city. The same dilemma faced Henry Foe, walking the same streets, drinking in the same taverns, if any could be found that were still open, negotiating contracts with living, breathing people and sharing that breath. The idea that the pestilence was passed ‘miasmically’ in the air was central to Galenist medicine and still, to all intents and purposes, the ‘authorised version’ for the Royal College of Physicians.

Something which brings us to the matter of treatment and health care. There were no hospitals as such, just two ‘pest-houses’ – sheds in effect for storing the dying. A first at St Margaret’s in Westminster and another at St Thomas’s in Southwark. Nowhere near enough, as John Evelyn warned his superiors at the Navy Board.<sup>20</sup> As the plague took hold, three more pest-houses would be furnished.<sup>21</sup> There were no staff, though, and some peculiarly unconvincing statistics: just seven fatalities at St Margaret’s ‘pest-house’ in June and 340 across the rest of the parish – knavery perhaps, or

<sup>17</sup>The fifteenth to afflict England in the previous century and a half.

<sup>18</sup>Commonly thought, in government at least, to be amongst the most recalcitrant of dissenting sects, along with the Fifth Monarchists, who had been recently suppressed in the aftermath of the Venner ‘conspiracy’. Measures taken against the Fifth Monarchists were broadly applied to the Quakers too.

<sup>19</sup>Pepys concluded a late-April entry with the observation that he had made £100 profit that month alone and now had assets totalling £14,000: ‘the greatest sum I ever was worth’ (1993, pp. 485–486). Note of Pepys’s salary, itself handsome, as surveyor-general, lends perspective: £350 per annum. Amongst the most significant ‘gratuities’ of the summer of 1665 might be counted as the £200 received from Sir William Warren for renegotiating a timber concession, the £120 he received from a Captain Taylor for a six-month shipbuilding contract and a staggering £500 from his friend, Denis Gauden, ‘head’ victualler to the navy, for reimbursement of an Exchequer debt of £125,000. The average household income in England before the plague was £7 per annum, not that anyone was complaining in regard to Pepys’s ‘gratuities’. He was the ‘right hand of the navy’, according to Albemarle – a ‘critical’ worker, ensuring that the critical work of the navy, selectively enforcing international quarantine and harassing Dutch fishing boats, could go on. Moote and Moote (2004, pp. 172–174) concludes that Pepys might be supposed the ‘ultimate entrepreneur of the Great Plague’.

<sup>20</sup>Colleague of Pepys, of course. Recently appointed King’s Commissioner, with a specific responsibility for assessing health provision in the navy.

<sup>21</sup>At St Giles in the Fields, Clay Field and, towards autumn, at Stepney.

just evidence of a facility quickly overwhelmed and losing track. We will return to the numbers and the empty hospitals.

As for treatment, the Galenists stuck with the received wisdom for treating malignant ‘humours’: lots of bleeding, sweating and purging.<sup>22</sup> Others, notably in the recently established Royal Society, wondered whether there was something a bit more modern, more scientific. One of its members, George Thompson, controversially started cutting up the bodies of plague victims to see whether there were any clues, publishing the results in his own *Loimotomia* and stimulating an increasingly bitter pamphlet war between the rival institutions.<sup>23</sup> And a growing uncertainty in his king: so many clever scientists, so many different opinions.

And then there were the apothecaries, by law only permitted to prescribe rather than treat: a very fuzzy margin. Unable to sell a ‘humour’, they stocked tinctures instead – the familiar mix of alchemical oddities, along with the traditional herbal remedies that could be concocted by the same ‘cunning’ women who, a generation earlier, were being ‘pricked’ by witch-hunters and ‘swum’ in the village pond. The king ordered the College of Physicians to publish a revised edition of its *Necessary Directions for the Preservation and Cure of the Plague*, identifying some of the more egregious ‘quacks’ and reinforcing its particular recommendations. In time, the Lord Mayor would introduce price controls. It is difficult to buck a market, though. The price of garlic went through the roof, and nutmeg and vinegar.<sup>24</sup> There was a vibrant market in amulets too, with quicksilver and toad-poison proving especially popular, available at all good alchemists. Allin made a tidy sum selling both, along with copious amounts of theriac or ‘Venice treacle’, in its original form comprising viper’s flesh, vinegar, walnut, onion and opium, plus the garlic and nutmeg. Pepys was mildly addicted, as he was to tobacco – another widely approved remedy, chewed as well as smoked.<sup>25</sup>

The familiar regulatory response was quarantine and lockdown. The latter was ordered by the Lord Chief Justice following a meeting of the Privy Council on 27 April. The statutory authority was found in the 1603 Act for the Charitable Relief and Ordering of Persons infected with the plague. It was distant, but sufficient – the tincture of legality, permitting local authorities to issue, at their discretion, various orders to restrain people ‘from resorting into the company of others’ and for the ‘shutting up of houses’, and to ‘use’, moreover, whatever ‘violence’ is necessary ‘to keep household members shut up, to hang anyone with plague sores found outside communing with others, and to whip anyone else who escaped household quarantine’ (Wagner, 2017, p. 506). The same orders had been disinterred during the previous plagues of the 1620s and 1630s, and were amended again in 1646. Whilst the orders were not put into full force until the beginning of July, by the end of 1665, it has been estimated that 50 per cent of residents in seriously afflicted parishes might have been locked down at some point (Newman, 2012, pp. 813–814, 817).

There was nothing surprising in the idea that local authorities might be best placed to tackle an epidemic. Experience proved that. Governance in early modern England was anyway devolved – the commonwealth of ‘little commonwealths’ so admired by the likes of Richard Hooker and Robert Filmer. The king kept a watching brief from a safe distance; anyway, more bothered, in the moment, by pesky Europeans invading his coastal waters and nicking his fish.<sup>26</sup> He delegated his authority, at first instance, to the Duke of Albemarle, who remained resident at Whitehall, and his deputy Lord Craven. Their immediate concern was to ensure order, chiefly to prevent too many ‘dissenters’ gathering in the streets proclaiming the Destroying Angel, a recurrent visitor to the

<sup>22</sup>The four ‘humours’ being black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm. An imbalance in the humours exhibited itself in a particular illness.

<sup>23</sup>A ‘boiling cauldron of acidic dispute’, as Moote and Moote put it (2004, p. 148).

<sup>24</sup>All effective flea repellents, not that anyone, at the time, was fully versant of the fact that the bacteria were flea-borne.

<sup>25</sup>Smoking was made compulsory at Eton, until the schools were shut in July.

<sup>26</sup>Pepys dropped by Hampton Court in spring to discover a ‘fearful’ court, assailed by the aligned crisis of dealing with the plague and the Dutch. The reasons for the dispute with the Dutch were various, mostly trade-related. Brushes between rival fishing fleets were just one of many. Towards the end of his ‘journal’, HF casts a barely veiled aspersion towards a court that ‘concerned’ itself ‘so little’ (Pepys, 1993, p. 243).

imaginings of the plague-ridden. Albemarle issued orders prohibiting large gatherings on the grounds of sedition and social distancing.<sup>27</sup> There would be no ‘mingling’ on the duke’s watch. Just to be sure, he stationed troops at checkpoints around the city.

Pepys approved, as he did the duke’s decision, later in the summer, to order mass bonfires in the streets, partly to fumigate and partly to raise morale.<sup>28</sup> Otherwise, though, he was less convinced of the duke’s role or that of his ‘council’: too much ‘silly talk’ and overpromising. This was a perception shared by Evelyn, too (Moote and Moote, 2004, pp. 217, 225–227, 238). The only way to combat a plague, they both agreed, was at ground level, which, in London, meant the Lord Mayor and a diminishing number of aldermen, to provide overarching strategic guidance and targeted financial support,<sup>29</sup> along with various parish officers and local justices tasked with grittier matters of policing, deciding which taverns to shut, where to dig the plague-pits, punishing quarantine-breakers, distributing relief and so on.

These were supported, in turn, by an array of ‘front-line workers’: constables to clear the streets and knife stray pets, nurses and reskilled midwives to tend to the sick. St Margaret’s Westminster paid 5s a week to anyone prepared to tend to an adult, not that many survived a week. This was an attractive wage for very unattractive employment. Albeit with an uncertain reputation. Hodges suspected many of strangling patients and then putting it down to ‘distemper in their throats’, and some even conveying the infection ‘secretly’ in order to secure ongoing employment (Rideal, 2017, p. 49). Few things were more terrifying than the sight of a nurse approaching the front door.

Unless it was the sight of a ‘watcher’ posted outside, complete with halberd and paintbrush – the former to ensure that the incarcerated stayed where they were, the latter to paint a red cross on the door with the subscript ‘The Lord of Mercy Upon Us’: the poetics of plague. The next unwelcome guest would be the ‘Searcher’, a multiskilled boil-detector, tasked with discovering who was dying of what<sup>30</sup> – the nearest early modern England came to a ‘test-and-trace’ system. Hardly ‘world-beating’, sadly. And then, finally in every sense of the word, there was a motley crew of ‘bearers’ manning the plague-carts and shouting ‘Bring Out Your Dead’; ‘bellmen’ to provide some musical accompaniment; and ‘diggers’ waiting at the local plague-pit to help tip in the bodies.<sup>31</sup>

Back to the chronology. ‘The town grows very sickly,’ Pepys wrote at the end of June (1993, p. 500), the lockdown orders of late April having come, historians now surmise, too late. There was some rioting when they tried to shut the Ship Tavern in St Giles and reports of people wandering ‘promiscuously’ in defiance of regulations. The king ordered strict enforcement of the orders so far as ‘the right of the law will allow’ (Rideal, 2017, p. 32) – something for Albemarle’s guards to do, also posted along various parish bounds to restrict movement. The mortality bills continued to make for grim reading insofar as they might be trusted. L’Estrange’s in-house court journal, the *Intelligencer*, tried to calm anxieties by suggesting that lots of the deaths had been mis-recorded, which was hardly calming in truth, though quite possibly true. The early-day statistical ‘modeller’ John Graunt suspected an undercount of around a quarter, most likely designed to stem the mid-summer panic.<sup>32</sup>

But also, very likely, a genuine consequence of confusion. By mid-summer, as the local economy collapsed, the supply of fresh water dried up, which meant dysentery, to which might be added pleurisy and flu, still lingering from the previous summer; ‘spotted fever’; smallpox; malaria; dropsy; and

<sup>27</sup>The fear that the plague might create conditions in which a revived puritan radicalism could flourish was very real, intensified not least by Venner’s ‘uprising’ in early 1661.

<sup>28</sup>The Lord Mayor had been ordering localised fumigations since spring.

<sup>29</sup>The City Council effectively ceased in June, but the Court of Alderman kept going, albeit there were only eight attendees for its second September meeting.

<sup>30</sup>Many, having served apprenticeships as assistant ‘prickers’, trained to detect signs of the Devil on the bodies of suspected witches – a key transferable skill.

<sup>31</sup>Generally operating at night, for reasons of public morale, provided there were enough candles, and tallow-chandlers – no funeral rites, of course, no mourners. When the Broadstreet pit was excavated in 1863, hundreds of skeletons were discovered, many still partially shod, clearly just thrown in (Hutton, 1987, pp. 227–229).

<sup>32</sup>A number later attested by Albemarle (Moote and Moote, 2004, p. 131; Rideal, 2017, p. 47).

tuberculosis.<sup>33</sup> There were lots from which the ‘searchers’ could draw a guess, of an obliging kind, for the right price.<sup>34</sup> In his journal, Ralph Josselin switched to an ‘excess deaths’ model in order to better estimate the situation. Whether anyone starved to death remains moot.<sup>35</sup> The spring harvest was good, but the shortage of ‘carters’ was a genuine concern, exacerbated by restrictions on the movement of migrant workers. Money was scarce too, not that there was much to buy. There was plenty of grain for making bread, but a diminishing number of bakers. The Bakers Hall shut in August.

By this time, the situation had become critical. The ‘plague increases mightily,’ Pepys reported grimly (1993, p. 500). There were 1,000 deaths per week in some parishes by mid-July, which meant mass evacuation. ‘All doors and passages are thronged for escape,’ Hodges reported. Graunt calculated an exodus of 200,000 by the end of the summer. If so, this was not far short of half the city: mainly the wealthier half, the ‘gentry and the better sort’, as the rector of Covent Garden, Symon Patrick, put it (Moote and Moote, 2004, p. 89). The rest stayed, including HF, of course, and Josselin, intermittently, chronicling an increasingly strange London.<sup>36</sup> ‘Persons’ were setting off from home apparently well and then, half an hour later, falling dead ‘in the streets’ (*ibid.*, p. 113) – the familiar hazard of the asymptomatic. Josselin practised social distancing, preferring to walk down the middle of the street, as there were fewer rats and falling bodies to trip over. And it was grassier too, with untrodden streets starting to resemble meadows.

In the meantime, the authorities had decided to tighten quarantine further, putting in place a ‘passport’ system for anyone who wished to leave London, limited to the boil-free and wealthier. Outdoor sport was suspended and penalties for blasphemy were toughened. London, and its gravediggers, dug in. Most of the taverns closed, save for takeaways.<sup>37</sup> There were a few exceptions, at the discretion of the vestry. St Giles Cripplegate kept one open ‘for the use of the parish’ (*ibid.*, p. 134). There was no more ‘entertainment’ inside coffee houses either, although Pepys managed to find one or two that stayed open in defiance. The theatres were shut and maypole-dancing was criminalised, along with puppet shows, rope-dancing and cherry-bobbing.

The peak months were August and September: ‘violent and terrible,’ HF records (Defoe, 1986, p. 95). Shown the figures by Albemarle, ‘contrary to all our hope and expectations’, Pepys went home and rewrote his will (Pepys, 1993, p. 513). The duke apparently sat in stunned silence. Mortality bills for mid-August to mid-September registered 38,000 dead, even though no one was quite sure who was dying of what. Numbers became ever sketchier, as parish clerks buckled under the pressure or simply died themselves.<sup>38</sup> Many stopped registering names, or even hazarding causes of death. In mid-October, Pepys heard rumour that in Westminster, ‘there is never a physician and but one apothecary left, all being dead’. All they can do his hope for relief, if ‘God send it’ (*ibid.*, p. 543), which He did, eventually, along with some sharp frosts.

We will end our brief history of the ‘great plague’ at the close of 1665, partly because, as we will see, Defoe does much the same. The death rate declines dramatically in November and then rises again a month later – a second wave. Predictable, not least because the cold had persuaded many to return to the city from their makeshift camps in the countryside, where the plague was now rampant. And the shops had started to open again. Mortality bills for early 1666 would make for sober reading – another

<sup>33</sup>It is thought that a number of early plague-deaths were ascribed to ‘spotted fever’, now more familiar as typhus, including the early deaths in St Giles Cripplegate.

<sup>34</sup>To which might be added a ‘surfeit’ of eating – an oddly prevalent cause of death listed in some of the spring bills. The thought that many ‘searchers’ might be readily bribed into recording a cause other than the ‘plague’ was widely shared. For a considered commentary on the difficulties of interpreting mortality figures, see Moote and Moote (2004, pp. 63–67, 81).

<sup>35</sup>L’Estrange intimated the possibility (Rideal, 2017, p. 48).

<sup>36</sup>Josselin was vicar of Earls Colne in Essex. His trips up to London became less frequent as the summer drew on, understandably.

<sup>37</sup>Taverns were allowed to take orders and deliver ale to private residences.

<sup>38</sup>As happened at St Botolph Bishopgate, where the replacement clerk limited himself, in the parish register, to baptisms and marriages, and there were not many of those. And they just provided numbers, more likely estimates, for the weekly mortality bills.

2,000 casualties – and then would finally fall away again, leaving an official death toll for the year, in the capital, of 97,306, of which 68,596 were listed as plague. This figure is probably out by around a half again, which, if so, suggests that roughly a quarter of the population had died.

Not that He seemed ready to forgive just yet, not entirely. Spring brought a significant naval reversal – the so-called ‘Four Days Battle’<sup>39</sup> – and then, in September, a ‘great’ fire, which would destroy much of what was left of the city of ‘sticks’, as King James I had dismissively termed his new capital in 1604. As a tinderbox, all it would take was an angry God and a very hot summer. And it was, after all, 1666 – the number of the Beast. At least the theatres opened again at the end of November for a while.<sup>40</sup> Spring 1667 brought another smallpox epidemic and another humiliating reversal at the hands of the perfidious Dutch, sailing up the Medway to destroy thirteen ships-of-the-line sat in dock, which was easy enough to model, for Pepys at least – no money, no sailors.

The ‘great plague’, though, was passed, and the time had come for judgment. In late summer 1667, King Charles fired his Chancellor, Lord Clarendon, at the rumoured behest of his principle mistress, Barbara Villiers. Charles was anyway bored of Clarendon, who had repeatedly tried to stop him doing all things he most enjoyed, such as cavorting about with Barbara.<sup>41</sup> Someone else who did not much like Clarendon, and who was inclined to blame him for pretty much everything that had gone wrong, was Andrew Marvell.<sup>42</sup> He put his mind to composing a savage poetic testament, entitled *Clarendon’s Housewarming*:

And hence like Pharaoh, that Israel pressed  
To make mortar and brick, yet allowed them no straw,  
He cared not though Egypt’s ten plagues distressed,  
So he could to build but make policy law. (ll.37–40)<sup>43</sup>

It is often said that Clarendon’s fall brought the Restoration to a close – and, in terms of political consequence, the ‘great’ plague, too. The politics of a pandemic always lingers a little longer than the disease.

After which, there is just the remembrance. The song ‘Ring Around the Roses’ is commonly dated to the ‘great’ plague,<sup>44</sup> or indeed the forgetting. Towards the end of 1666, John Dryden would publish *Annus Mirabilis* – an account of the ‘wonders’ of the previous year, despite all appearances, preferring to focus on some earlier victories over the Dutch and reworking the fire as a gift from God that showed the English just how brilliant the king and his brother were at ordering firefighters about. As for the plague, there was just a passing allusion in an accompanying address to the City of London, having endured a ‘consuming pestilence and a more consuming fire’ – nothing more.

<sup>39</sup>One of the longest-running engagements in naval history that started along the Flemish coast on 1 June, and finished at the mouth of the Thames Estuary four days later, where the Royal Navy was in full flight, saved only by thick fog. A later engagement at the end of July, the Battle of St James, was less conclusive, allowing both sides to claim victory.

<sup>40</sup>Pepys records his first visit to the theatre since ‘before the great plague’ in early December 1666 (1993, p. 700).

<sup>41</sup>An ‘easy sacrifice’, as Mark Kishlansky notes (1997, pp. 238–239).

<sup>42</sup>Pepys was more impressed with Clarendon, ‘mad in love’. Predictably enough, he was besotted with Barbara, recording a mid-August wet dream in which he ‘was admitted to use all his dalliance’ with ‘my Lady Castlemaine’ – a pleasing distraction, in ‘this plague-time’ (1993, pp. 515, 681).

<sup>43</sup>In Kermode and Walker (1990, p. 121). The poem alludes to Clarendon’s new house, built on the edge of St James Park. Pepys records it being ‘called Dunkirke house’ by the ‘common people’, from ‘their opinion of his having a good bribe for the selling of that towne’ (1993, p. 470).

<sup>44</sup>The ‘ring’ referring to the appearance of buboes on the body. The Victorians would later adjust the final verse: from ‘we all fall down dead’ to ‘we all fall down’. There is some debate as to when precisely the rhyme originated. It certainly gained in familiarity after 1665. Earlier plague epidemics tended to attract a greater weight of poetic contemplation, especially during the 1590s: Thomas Nashe’s *Litany in the Time of Plague*, for example, and John Davies’s *Triumph of Death*.



### 3 Very, very dreadful

Memory is selective, which brings us to Defoe and his *Journal* – and the question of sources. What we know of the ‘great’ plague of 1665 is informed by a mixture of government materials, regulations and statistics, together with various contemporary narratives – the same sources, in the main, that Defoe had to hand. Needless to say, insofar as he discusses sources, Defoe is allusive, at the start supposing that there was ‘no such thing as newspapers in those days to spread rumours and report of things’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 23). In the narrower sense, perhaps. L’Estrange’s *Oxford Gazette*, often supposed to be the first modern newspaper, appeared in November 1665.<sup>45</sup> But there was plenty else, as a later passage in the *Journal* implies, such as lurid broadsheets, replete with woodcuts of carts and pits and wakes, and grinning skeletons. Early attempts to suppress publications that ‘terrified the people’ were later abandoned when it became apparent that the absence of information merely served to ‘exasperate’ public anxiety (pp. 45–46). The fragility of trust, once lost, is gone.

The newspapers might have been erratic. The diarists too, with Pepys as much concerned with securing ‘gratuities’ and seducing barmaids as he was with telling ‘sad stories’ (1993, p. 513). But there was no shortage of more concentrated reflection. As we have already noted, no previous generation had ever written quite so much about their ‘great’ plague, or so variously.<sup>46</sup> For the puritan reader, there was William Winstanley’s *The Christians Refuge* and Thomas Vincent’s *God’s Terrible Voice in the City* and, for the ‘new scientist’, there was William Austin’s *Epiloimic Epe, or the Anatomy of Pestilence*, Thompson’s tract and Nathaniel Hodges’s *Loimologia* (Miller, 2009; 2011). Each positioning itself along the critical fault line of the emergent Enlightenment, where reason and revelation scraped together.

No one doubted that He was instrumental. If ‘pestilence’ was coming, Thomas Rugge observed, ‘So pleaseth him, it pleaseth me’ (Moote and Moote, 2004, p. 21). The English, as the later Fast Day sermons would confirm, were an ‘incorrigible nation’ deserving of punishment (Williams, 2017, p. 201). The apothecary William Boghurst, author of his own *Loimographia*, spotted the biblical parallels – not just the comets, but ‘the multitude of croaking frogs’ hopping about the streets, and the swarms of ants everywhere. Boghurst knew that the plague was providential. He also knew that there was money to be made from his shop in St Giles selling all the amulets and herbal tinctures. Boghurst’s Almighty expected his ‘chosen’ people to help themselves: ‘trust in God’ and use more toad-poison.

It was between these same polarities that Defoe had to situate his *Journal*. Half a century on, of course, we might, briefly, pause to consider the author, in his moment. He was lucky to be alive, in a statistical sense. Male life expectancy in early eighteenth-century England was around forty. Defoe was sixty-two when his *Journal* appeared in 1722. He was evidently a survivor, living through the ‘great plague’ itself and then managing to emerge relatively unscathed from a first career as the paid hack and personal agent of Lord Harley.<sup>47</sup> Novel-writing was his second career, starting with the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 – the moment when, many critics suppose, the modern novel was birthed. 1722 was a particularly prolific year, as *Moll Flanders* appeared a couple of months after the *Journal*. A couple of months beforehand, Defoe had published his *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, another ‘novel’ that pretended to be something it was not – not being anyone’s memoirs and not being written by a ‘cavalier’.

Again, little that Defoe wrote, as hack or novelist, is quite what it seems. *A Journal of the Plague Year* is no exception, as the supposed testament of the saddler from ‘without Aldgate’, HF (Defoe, 1986, p. 28).<sup>48</sup> It was drawn in part from the various contemporary sources that we have just surveyed, with the rest, as Anthony Burgess put it, being ‘cunning’. Making for a *Journal* that is less a reliable chronicle of the plague and more ‘a confidence trick of the imagination’ (*ibid.*, p. 6). A ‘novelistic

<sup>45</sup>It would later become the *London Gazette*.

<sup>46</sup>Paul Slack counts ‘at least’ forty-six treatises published within the first twenty-four months (1990, p. 244).

<sup>47</sup>Editing Harley’s *Review* between 1704 and 1713, becoming his ‘Man Friday’, as Trevelyan famously suggested.

<sup>48</sup>The thought that the *Journal* may have been a genuinely authentic testament, written by a contemporary, lingered through into the early twentieth century. See Bastian, ‘*Journal*’, pp. 151–153.

dream', it has been suggested, at a gentle tangent (Wagner, 2017, p. 503), a book of 'imaginative truth' at another (Ogg, 1984, p. 294) The sort of thing, we might conjecture, that would come easily to an experienced hack, writing around the edges,<sup>49</sup> appreciating the commercial dynamics, an evolving audience and the enhancing facility of print. We should not be deterred by any of this. All writing displays a bit of 'cunning'. And we can appreciate the attraction – an event so obviously lending itself to the full horror of a 'gothic drama' (Moote and Moote, 2004, p. xv).

With that said, we should, as historical and literary 'modellers', keep caution in mind. It 'mattered not from whence it came', HF supposes, concluding his introductory muse on sources (Defoe, 1986, p. 23). In a sense, after all it was a journalist's 'journal' rather than a judicial inquiry. Seasoned by documentary sources, perhaps, but the narrative meat is in the 'rumour' and the anecdote – all the 'fears and struggles' (Moote and Moote, 2004, p. xvii).<sup>50</sup> It is, ultimately, a human story, the truth of which is discovered not in the acuity of mortality bills or the authenticity of government regulations, but in the interpretive space that lies between text and reader – the 'cunning' that finishes any history.

Especially the truly 'dreadful', such as *A Journal of the Plague Year* – Dantean in its poetic horror. The physical agonies are graphically, and repeatedly, described: the 'exquisite torture' of the buboes, babies covered in 'gangrene', the 'incessant roarings' of the afflicted (Defoe, 1986, p. 94); and the mental, the 'shrieks of women and children' that could 'pierce the stoutest heart in the world', the 'tears and lamentation' (*ibid.*, p. 37); the witnessing and the 'horrible' anticipation; the reported suicides, those beyond hope throwing themselves out of 'windows' or into plague-pits, 'discovered quite dead, though not cold' (*ibid.*, p. 79). HF's visit to the Aldgate plague-pit is amongst the most renowned anecdotes in the *Journal*: so 'very, very, very dreadful, and such as no tongue can express' (*ibid.*, p. 79).<sup>51</sup> So many images of a London 'strangely altered', the streets 'desolate', save for the rats, and the occasional furtive shopper, with 'sorrow and sadness upon every face' (*ibid.*, pp. 36–37, 117). HF is another startled to witness 'persons falling dead in the streets' (*ibid.*, p. 98), for 'oftentimes they would go about the streets to the last, till on a sudden they would sweat, grown faint, sit down at a door and die' (*ibid.*, p. 203). The anecdotes pile up.

As do the 'rumours'. At the close, HF concludes that whilst the 'plague was itself very terrible ... the rumour was infinitely greater' (*ibid.*, p. 225). The 'great uneasiness' which makes, indeed, for a 'great plague' (*ibid.*, p. 25). The dodgy statistics, the dodgy weather, too much sun or maybe too much damp (*ibid.*, pp. 26–27) The astrologers and their almanacs, all the different comets that 'appeared for several months before the plague', those of a 'dull, languid colour' being the scariest, invariably heralding a 'pestilence' (*ibid.*, pp. 40–41).<sup>52</sup> Which 'predictors' should one believe, and which doctors? And what should one buy, with all the 'amulets' and 'exorcisms', and the difficulty of trying to distinguish the skilled herbalists from the 'quacks and mountebanks, wizards and fortune-tellers' (*ibid.*, pp. 52–53, 55)? Along with all those rumours of murderous nurses putting their 'patients' out of their misery, body-stripping 'searchers' and sociopathic 'watchers', waiting to mug any of the demented who try to escape into the streets. A city, as if possessed by 'an evil spirit', slipping into 'madness' (*ibid.*, p. 53).

And then turning on itself. The greatest fear was other people<sup>53</sup> – the fear of the 'walking destroyer', the asymptomatic, the most 'dangerous' of all, precisely because they were 'impossible to know' (*ibid.*, pp. 172, 203, 213). When his servant Will complains of a 'headache', Pepys's immediate response is to 'get him out of the house' (1993, p. 507). An informal habit of social distancing quickly emerges. HF is another who takes to walking up the middle of streets so as not to 'mingle with anybody that came out of houses' (Defoe, 1986, p. 38). Scapegoats take a familiar shape: the poor, the weak, the Jewish. Bringing with them a similar predictability: incidents of vigilante violence and ghosts. A 'poor man' terrifying everyone with the story of a spectral modeller painting the sign of the plague on

<sup>49</sup>The first 'tabloid' journalist, according to West (1997, p. xvi).

<sup>50</sup>Richetti puts it nicely: 'a slice of life rather than a full report' (2017, p. 312).

<sup>51</sup>Nine feet deep when he had visited previously, but now, in the September, 'near twenty', stopping only when they hit the water table. Any further digging would have threatened the water supply.

<sup>52</sup>As opposed to the 'bright and sparkling' kind of comet that usually heralded a fire. That came the next year.

<sup>53</sup>A familiar theme in Defoe novels, of course (Richetti, 2015, pp. 302–305).

various doors. HF assumes a lofty scepticism. The rest depart ‘trembling and frightened’ (*ibid.*, p. 45). Desperate moments can bring out the worst in people.

But also the best. The physicians who stick around, such as HF’s ‘good friend’ Dr Heath, and the braver ministers, dissenting in the main.<sup>54</sup> The ‘fearless’ front-line workers, sleepy maybe, murderous occasionally, but mostly courageous. Many of them would ‘lose their lives on that sad occasion’ (*ibid.*, p. 245). The ‘prudence’ of the Lord Mayor and his diminishing set of aldermen, striving to maintain order and bring charitable relief, organising country markets outside the city walls, capping prices on ‘approved’ remedies (*ibid.*, pp. 55, 113, 169–170, 220–221).<sup>55</sup> There may have been ‘some stupidity and dullness of the mind’ in summer 1665, and ‘there was so, a great deal’, but so too was there much to admire:

‘Many consciences were awakened, many hard hearts melted into tears, many a penitent confession was made of crimes long concealed .... People might be heard, even into the streets as we passed along, calling upon God to have mercy through Jesus Christ.’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 54)

Charity and the consolations of faith were all that was left – a pilgrim’s progress across a hellish landscape.

It was a familiar enough journey for men like Henry Foe and his nephew, scion of Dr Martin’s renowned Presbyterian Academy in Newington Green.<sup>56</sup> HF spends a lot of time contemplating the ‘Almighty’, wondering where His Finger might point. It is a reading of the 91st Psalm that, as we have already noted, persuades him to stay in London in spring 1665. It was not an easy moment in which to be a dissenter, with the restoration of the established Church and the rigours of the Clarendon ‘code’. There would, in time, be another revolution – the ‘great and glorious’ of 1688. But consciences would remain ‘tender’. In 1703, Defoe would find himself pilloried for publishing a brilliant satirical assault on High Church Anglicanism in the *Shortest Way with Dissenters*. A still angry God, it seems, and a still falling people.

Defoe might have come to doubt the stricter tenets of his Presbyterian upbringing, tempted perhaps by the lures of the ‘new science’. But there is no evidence that he lost his faith. And thus no reason to doubt that Defoe, like his creation, imagined the plague to have been brought down by His ‘terrible judgement’ on the ‘crying vices’ of the Restoration (Defoe, 1986, p. 37). Later in the *Journal*, he records the ‘impudence’ of some tavern-drinkers who suggest that the plague has nothing to do with providence: ‘scoffing and mocking’ (*ibid.*, p. 85). God strikes them down within days. At the same time, it is, of course, never too late to repent; to make a sacrifice, perhaps a wicked counsellor or declare another Fast Day. And make an effort. HF is another who disdains supine fatalism – ‘Turkish predestinarianism’, as he calls it. God acts by ‘natural causes’ and He expects his wayward children to help themselves (*ibid.*, pp. 204–205). Thus, the practical measures which were intended to dispense with the ‘sluttishness’ that, as L’Estrange’s readers had discovered, lay at the root of all their miseries (Moote and Moote, 2004, p. 186) – orders prohibiting ‘gaming-tables, public dancing-rooms and public-houses’. Virtue-signalling, of course, the ‘face of just concern for the public danger’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 49). But still with purpose: for purging the body politic.

Which brings us to our third animating theme: governance – a mixture, again, of anecdotal impression and public documentation. The Lord Mayor’s *Orders Concerning the Infection of the Plague* and *Orders Concerning Infected Houses and Persons*, issued in late June, are printed in full, along with those *Concerning Loose Persons and Idle Assemblies*. The regular appearance throughout the text of mortality bills too, which is no surprise on any account, as most contemporary treatises liked to

<sup>54</sup>An understandable prejudice, given Defoe’s religious affinities – probably true and necessarily ironic, given that many had been disbarred just three years earlier under the Act of Uniformity.

<sup>55</sup>The country ‘markets’ were increasingly vital. Produce would be left at certain locations outside the walls or brought up river to the docks, negotiations shouted across a suitably social distance. The largest was situated at Hyde Park Corner.

<sup>56</sup>Where Defoe was sent, aged fifteen, to finish his education – a period in his life that he would recall fondly.

play with the numbers.<sup>57</sup> The bills were, of course, reactive; modelling the future was left to the astrologers and the ghost-hunters. For this reason, the accounting should have been reliable, a simply tally of the dead – except that HF harbours the familiar doubts. A degree of discrepancy is understandable given that the numbers are not ‘exact’, but the margins are huge: official numbers total around 68,000 against rumours of ‘near twice as many in reality’ (*ibid.*, pp. 115, 144). Harassed ‘parish clerks’ encouraged to fiddle the figures, HF suspects, the politics of ‘terrible apprehensions’, of ‘knavery and collusion’ (*ibid.*, pp. 26–27). Trust, again, draining away. Other criticisms too, most obviously the ‘great mistake’ of not having enough pest-houses (*ibid.*, p. 92). How, knowing that the plague arrives at least once a generation, could the city find itself so desperately unprepared? Doubts too in regard to the core strategy of lockdown. The play of principle and efficacy, of ‘private morality’ and ‘public good’. It was so ‘very cruel and unchristian’ a response, and so desperate the ‘lamentations’, that many simply ignored the orders. It ‘would fill a little volume to set down the arts used by people of such houses to shut the eyes of watchmen who were employed, to deceive them and to escape or break out from them’. Sending them off on ‘errands’ appears to have been the simplest ruse, or just waiting until they fell asleep, or beating them up. Nothing like enough of them anyway. Quarantine-breakers scatter the text, much as they appear to have scattered the city.

HF is hardly approving. Stories of ‘infected’ breakers alighting on friends and family cannot be ‘reconciled to religion and principle’, nor indeed ‘generosity and humanity’. But they can be understood in a situation ‘so desperate’. Which leads to a notable ‘doubt’:

‘I believed then, and do believe still, that the shutting up houses thus by force, and restraining, or rather imprisoning, people in their own houses, as I said above, was of little or no service in the whole. Nay, I am of the opinion it was rather hurtful, having forced those desperate people to wander abroad with the plague upon them, who would otherwise have died quietly in their beds.’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 89)<sup>58</sup>

Boghurst wondered the same: ‘enough tried and always found ineffectual’ (Rideal, 2017, p. 55). A collateral surmise occurs. Absent much of a test-and-trace system, HF wonders how many ‘perished in these miserable confinements’ who were not hitherto ‘distempered’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 67). There is the lingering suspicion that lockdown might in fact have killed more people than it saved – something else that will never be known, that must be left to rumour and ‘scandal’ (*ibid.*, pp. 75–76). Thomas Clarke surmised similarly, whilst confessing that he could think of no alternative, just like HF in the end, even though the experience of lockdown is enough to ‘sink the spirit, make the heart to bleed’ (Rideal, 2017, pp. 54–55). Whatever the justification, however efficacious, lockdown in 1665 was a horrific experience, for all concerned.

Defoe ends his *Journal* as the new year arrives. The plague appears to abate ‘almost to nothing’, as Pepys confirmed. Christmas brings shops and shoppers, then the sales: a ‘delightful thing to see the town so full of people again’, going about ‘boldly into company’, a ‘precipitant courage’, too precipitant (1993, pp. 565, 569). The College of Physicians gives out ‘printed directions’ urging ‘the utmost caution’. There will be a ‘relapse’, a second wave, potentially ‘more fatal and dangerous than the whole visitation that had been already’ (Defoe, 1986, pp. 235–236). But no one really listens. Up go the infection rates – the ‘price’ of ‘audacious boldness’ (*ibid.*, p. 239). A bitter January helps and finally the plague appears to be ‘ceased’ in the February, celebrated by the return of the king and his court on the first of the month. In the end, it is ‘remarkable’. With no ‘new medicine’, the physicians are baffled.

<sup>57</sup>Plenty in Winstanley’s *Christian’s Refuge*, for example.

<sup>58</sup>A conclusion affirmed later in the *Journal*: ‘doubtful’ that lockdown can ‘run with greater fury and rage than the infection’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 171). And, again, concluding that the ‘shutting up of houses’ could do little, especially if people were determined to break out (p. 182). For a comment on Defoe’s narrative, and the extent to which it might be interpreted as being sceptical of lockdown strategies, see Wagner (2017, pp. 507–508).

A few hard frosts are reported, but still: ‘Nothing but the immediate finger of God, nothing but omnipotent power, could have done it’ (*ibid.*, pp. 252, 254).

#### 4 The great scare

Four years after the appearance of his *Journal*, Defoe published another less well-known essay entitled *The Political History of the Devil*, within which could be found a famous aphorism: ‘Things as certain as death and taxes can be more firmly believed’<sup>59</sup> That, and the inevitability of another plague. We have already alluded to the many that lie between 1665 and 2020. But it is, of course, the latter which looms largest in our comprehension. There will, in time, be a public inquiry into the ‘great plague’ of 2020, and the ‘great scare’ that, to a considerable extent, came to define it. There will be narratives too, ‘journals’, perhaps, and then some longer histories. All we can presently do is chronicle a shorter version, sufficient to allow us to discern some resonances, to begin to do what Defoe would have us do.

It started somewhere in China in late 2019, probably around the city of Wuhan.<sup>60</sup> We cannot be much more precise. A new strain of coronavirus starts to spread through Asia and then beyond, with an alarming rapidity, arriving in Europe at some time in early January. Despite evidence of the chaos that engulfed other European countries over the coming weeks, the British government seemed relatively relaxed. Rumour supposes that the initial response was to go for what is termed ‘herd immunity’, ‘take it on the chin’ and ‘protect the economy’,<sup>61</sup> at least until a particular ‘predictor’ presented a very scary set of figures of possible casualties if such a policy was pursued: half a million, a quarter of a million in the event of reactive measures short of a full ‘lockdown’. It is not the veracity of these figures that interests us – the ‘most wrong’ in the history of statistical modelling, some have suggested.<sup>62</sup> It is their effect – a freaked prime minister persuaded, over the course of a dramatic few days, to lurch into a draconian ‘lockdown’.

It was announced on 23 March 2020 and given legal force under the provisions of two principle statutes:<sup>63</sup> a pre-existing Public Health Act of 1984 and a newly purposed Coronavirus Act – that thin veneer of legality. The former provided a range of powers to be used in a public health emergency, the most serviceable of which are found in section 45, subsection C(4)(d) which permit the Secretary of State to exercise any ‘special restriction or requirement’. The Coronavirus Act was intended to provide supplementary powers in the present circumstance, many to bolster public health services.<sup>64</sup> Lockdown ‘law’ would be articulated in hundreds of executive regulations, enacted under the terms, chiefly, of the 1984 Act. Not that everything was quite what it seemed: so many of the ‘laws’ turned out, on closer inspection, to be mere ‘guidance’.

<sup>59</sup>The phrase is more commonly associated with Thomas Jefferson, reworking it in correspondence to read that ‘nothing is more certain in life, than death and taxes’.

<sup>60</sup>It was initially thought that the virus might have originated in a so-called ‘wet-market’ and then crossed species when someone ate a bat – a premise founded, to an extent, on the fact that previous coronaviruses had been found to have crossed species via fruit bats. An alternative marginally more digestible perhaps, certainly more exciting, is the possibility that it originated in a secret government laboratory, with some very careless scientists. We may never know.

<sup>61</sup>The ‘take it on the chin’ strategy was initially suggested by the prime minister, Boris Johnson. The government’s Chief Scientific Officer, Sir Patrick Vallance, conjectured the kinds of figures necessary to attain ‘herd immunity’. How seriously the strategy was countenanced, and however briefly, remains uncertain.

<sup>62</sup>The scientist in question was Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College. We will catch up with the professor in a later footnote. Brought down, in the end, by lust and irony. We do not need to pile in too hard, because so many others have, save to note a longer history of making unconvincing guesses (Magness, 2020). History might be kind; unlikely though. A more recent survey has confirmed that the Imperial ‘modelling’ was far and away the most error-strewn of all such exercises conducted during the spring and summer of 2020 by a factor of at least five (Friedman *et al.*, 2021).

<sup>63</sup>For a critical overview of the statutory regime, see Sumption (2021, pp. 220–221). Sumption adds a third constitutive statute: the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act, useful by reason of its powers to detain healthy people who might be deemed disruptive during an ‘emergency’.

<sup>64</sup>Most notable, in passing, being Schedule 21, which permits the detention of ‘potentially infected persons’; Schedule 22, which prohibits ‘mass gatherings’; and Schedule 23, which permits a wider range of surveillance powers.

A poetic complement too A new iteration of ‘Lord Have Mercy’ in the shape of ‘Follow the Science’. It was all anyone could do, as well as ‘Stay at Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives’ – a mantra that would mutate later in the summer to ‘Stay Alert. Control the Virus. Save Lives’ and then mutate back again at the end of the year as the inevitable ‘relapse’ arrived. There was a repeat chorus of ‘Clap for Carers’ every Thursday night too, for a while.<sup>65</sup> Simple scansion, always – further evidence, perhaps, that poetry and plague is a difficult mix.

Much like policing and plague, especially where the law is so vague and the situation so desperate. All too easy, it proved, to make the mistake of trying to enforce ministerial preference rather than the law, as the recently retired Supreme Court judge, Lord Sumption, observed.<sup>66</sup> Chief constables threatening to peer into supermarket trolleys to check that items being purchased were really ‘essential’; drones despatched over remote hills to photo-shame elderly dog-walkers who had strayed too far from home; the Metropolitan Police Commissioner kettling dozens of her own officers on Westminster Bridge to join a ‘Clap for Carers’ session, laughable in a different moment.<sup>67</sup> These were early mistakes, it might be supposed, although not nine months on as the Much Wenlock division of the West Mercia Police felt moved to confirm that snowball fights did not count as ‘reasonable exercise’. Policing is never easy, certainly not during a pandemic. It is always best, though, to try not to look like an ‘ass’, as Mr Bumble famously appreciated (Dickens, 2002, p. 436).<sup>68</sup> Something just as readily appreciated by HF. Regulations might be enforced with ‘violence or terror’, which can work for a while, usually short. Or they can be cajoled, with ‘lenity and compassion’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 195). The better constable knows which, instinctively; the worse keeps fining.<sup>69</sup>

Back to the chronology. News on 6 April that the prime minister had been hospitalised was followed two days later by a warning from the Royal College of Nurses regarding the lack of ‘personal protective equipment’. Seven pop-up Nightingale hospitals opened, although there were no staff, so no patients. A first easing of restrictions arrived on 10 May, along with some prospectively useful numbers. The Office of National Statistics suggested that around 50 per cent of all COVID-19-related deaths were occurring in care homes, whilst 90 per cent of victims were over eighty years old or had a ‘pre-existing condition’.<sup>70</sup>

Intelligence which should have made targeting resources easier and militated against the idea of removing thousands of elderly patients with the virus out of hospital and back into care homes, likened, by one doctor, to catapulting medieval plague victims over the walls of besieged towns. The treatment of the elderly, along with procurement failures, would become definitive of an error-strewn summer. It might also have cautioned against overpromising on a ‘world-beating’ test-and-trace system that would, in the end, turn out to be anything but. Operation ‘Moonshot’

<sup>65</sup>Ending in summer, and then reinvested the following January, as ‘Clap for Heroes’, only briefly, though, with public interest, and support, notably waning.

<sup>66</sup>Sumption would become one of the most consistent and acerbic critics of lockdown ‘law’, the inadequacies of which find a now eerie prescience in his Reith Lectures of the previous year, published as *Trials of the State* (2020).

<sup>67</sup>The photo-shaming incident attracted particular criticism: ‘Badly misjudged’, according to the former Lord Chancellor, David Gauke; ‘Disgraceful’, according to Sumption (comments reported by the BBC on 27 and 30 March 2020). The same Derbyshire constabulary seemed peculiarly prone to marketing disasters. Shortly after retrieving its toy planes, it was out with the paint set and up to a local beauty spot to pour in some black paint and then, needless to say, take a celebratory ‘selfie’. A year on, during the January 2021 lockdown, it was a couple of walkers who had journeyed five miles for a walk in the country, their mistake having been to drink some coffee, thus falling under the category of ‘picnickers’ – not ‘in the spirit’ of lockdown, it was argued, and not unlawful either, as was quickly pointed out. There was an apology a couple of days later on the same day as the prime minister admitted to having gone on a seven-mile bike ride. The prospectively prurient chief constable of Northamptonshire was another who liked to play with toy planes, this time having his drones fly around blaring out Covid ‘rules’, whatever they were.

<sup>68</sup>Worth noting Mr Bumble’s following observation: the importance of optics, the ‘eye of the law’.

<sup>69</sup>Thirty-two thousand new quasi-criminals by the end of the calendar year, varying from rave organisers to careless bench sitters. Shoplifting was down though, with all the shops being shut, as were burglaries, with everyone staying at home – consolations.

<sup>70</sup>Most commonly dementia and Alzheimer’s.

was what the prime minister called the prospectively ‘ramped-up’ version in early summer; moonshine by September.<sup>71</sup>

We might, as we proceed, note the fall of a couple of wicked counsellors. Professor ‘Lockdown’ himself, author of the April ‘model’ that freaked the prime minister, so desperate for a cuddle with some else’s wife that he was caught breaking quarantine. Most spectacularly of all, the prime minister’s chief counsellor drove the length of the country to County Durham, where his in-laws lived, worried that he might not be able to look after his child. This was just about permissible under the guidelines if someone had no friends nearby or at all, unlike a subsequent jaunt to visit the bluebell fields of Barnard Castle to test his eyesight.<sup>72</sup> The counsellor in question would manage to ride out the summer storm, only to be despatched the following autumn at the behest, it was rumoured, of the prime minister’s principle mistress. The measure of fools and knaves.

Returning to the history, the beginning of June saw a partial reopening of schools, accompanied by a sage warning from the prime minister: do not ‘take liberties’, said, seemingly, with no sense of irony – a little disappointing for a man who made his name in light entertainment. And apparently ignored, at least in Leicester, where the first local ‘lockdown’ was declared 29 June, with provisions limiting gatherings across the country. A third national easing began on 31 July, followed by a public exams fiasco through August. At the end of the month, a new set of regulations confirmed a range of additional penalties for those who organised ‘gatherings’. Otherwise, it was a case of get back to work and ‘eat out’ for a short while, until the infection rates started rising again, at which point it was back to ‘stay home’ and order in a takeaway.

Schools started in September, universities in October, and localised ‘lockdowns’ occurred across the north of England and the West Midlands, termed ‘whack-a-mole’, to sound a little jollier than ‘whack-a-student’, it having been discovered that sending tens of thousands of bored teenagers about the country had done little to suppress transmission rates. The familiar descent into ‘sluttishness’, but at least there were some fresh scapegoats to sustain the habit of ‘complaint’ that HF kept spotting (*ibid.*, p. 168). And some more modelling, from the Chief Scientific Officer, this time supposing that there would be 50,000 infections a day unless something was done about all the fun.

Thus, another set of national regulations appeared, including a ‘rule of six’ and a sort-of curfew at 10 p.m.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, the ‘world-beating’ test-and-trace system crashed, again.<sup>74</sup> The proscription of ‘gatherings’ under the terms of the Coronavirus Act mutated into a sort-of law against ‘mingling’ – a term that had rather faded from English law, last seen in 1337.<sup>75</sup> When asked to clarify, the Home Secretary gamely suggested that it was a ‘coming together’ of seven or more, best policed on this occasion by an army of dedicated curtain-twitchers – the ‘watchers’ of their moment. A new ‘traffic-light’ system arrived in October, at which point the prime minister confessed to having little clue about what the law was in regard to any of his metaphors.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Abandoned in October. At least it saved a further £100 billion, the estimated cost.

<sup>72</sup>Said child strapped into the back of the car.

<sup>73</sup>The curfew proving to be a predictable mistake – a measure that simply encouraged thousands of tipsy revellers to pile out onto the streets at the same time, early and together.

<sup>74</sup>Space precludes a longer account. Established in July under the guidance of the interim chair of the National Institute for Health Protection, Lady Dido Harding, the operation farmed out to thirty-five mainly private organisations. The first glitch came in September, with a serious lack of testing capacity. The second was a data crash in October and the loss of tens of thousands of COVID-19 test records – a consequence of using an outdated Excel, with limited data capacity. Not that data crashes were entirely unfamiliar to the hapless ‘Queen of Carnage’, as the more classically savvy sections of the media took to calling Lady Dido, who was previously the CEO of TalkTalk, which experienced a similar data breach in late 2015, resulting in losses of £60 million.

<sup>75</sup>In the Cloth Act, purposed to protect the English cloth industry from Flemish imports, and, before that, in *Leviticus* 19:19: ‘neither shall garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee.’

<sup>76</sup>A well-reported incident in a news conference in Exeter on 29 September. Earlier in the day, two government ministers had expressed similar confusion in regard to the ‘rule of six’ and where it might apply. Asked to clarify, the prime minister guessed wrong.

There was no time to rest though; another lockdown arrived in November as the mystic R started to rise again and winter approached – the saviour in 1665, but terrifying in 2020 and the season during which the NHS is always at risk of being ‘overwhelmed’. Another lockdown came in December in the guise of a new ‘Tier 4’, as the second wave segued into a third. It was announced just before Christmas, which was pretty much cancelled. London was evacuated, pubs and schools shut. And, amidst news of a worrying mutation, the UK was placed in international isolation. It was hardly a happy New Year, or an old, celebrated with yet another lockdown, the fourth or maybe the fifth. The numbers again no one really knew. It seemed to depend on how a ‘lockdown’ might be distinguished from a ‘tier’ – a bit like a Covid ‘death’ from a death ‘with’ a Covid-positive test, or indeed a Covid-positive test from a Covid ‘case’. Great plagues might be visited by God, as Defoe resolved, but their confusions are ‘invented by men’ (*ibid.*, p. 23).

2021 looked brighter. A promising conjunction in the night skies on the Winter Solstice – Jupiter and Saturn, the likely ‘Star of Wonder’ identified by Gadbury’s more famous contemporary, Johannes Kepler. Surely it was no coincidence. The prospect of vaccines provided some hope too. But still the statisticians kept muttering darkly about the rising R-rate and the hospital beds kept filling, and the mortuaries. A tightening of international quarantine came in the first week of January and, finally, a ratcheting of ‘stay-at-home’ orders.<sup>77</sup> Schools opened for a day but then shut again, along with pretty much everything else, until the spring. There was the occasional lighter moment. Another grand wizard, the Health Secretary Matt Hancock, was discovered groping an aide in his ministerial office. Nothing unusual in evil sorcerers bewitching fair maidens, as every devotee of the classic fairy tale knows, but, amidst a pandemic, they are supposed to do so at a distance of two metres. A couple of days later, Hancock found that all his magical powers were gone, along with his wife and his house.

We could go on, charting the ‘end’ of lockdown in summer 2021, the gradual dissipation of public faith, the realisation that various government ministers seemed to have given up too, the cabinet minister preferring to take part in an ‘experimental’ testing regime rather than isolate, the prime minister simply refusing.<sup>78</sup> A special mention must also be made of the government’s so-called ‘climate Tsar’ busy touring the red-list countries of the world during the spring and summer on a private jet and a ‘ministerial exemption’.<sup>79</sup> ‘Freedom Day’ arrived on 19 July with a partial ‘unlocking’, and rising infection rates – a suitable place to stop, for now at least, and anyway we have come far enough.

## 5 Resonances

Enough, certainly, to spot the resonances, and some dissonances – and perhaps to venture some larger contentions. We have already encountered many of the former, not least the passage of the given plague from central Asia, across into eastern Europe and then on finally to Britain. A peculiar advantage especially for an island nation. Wasted on both occasions. Towards the end of the *Journal*, HF reflects on what might be learnt. Nothing matters more than acting quickly. The fatal dither, the ‘want of timely entering into measures’ (*ibid.*, p. 137). It might be said that it is the indecision that makes a plague ‘great’, in numbers at least. This brings us, of course, to the place where plagues are prescribed – in the tables, astronomical or algorithmic; falling stars and rising R-rates; shifting providences. HF, if we recall, suspected the numbers were fiddled; and he was right.

<sup>77</sup>From mid-January, all passengers arriving at UK airports would be required to show a negative Covid test. Hitherto, there was no testing, just the hope that anyone feeling a bit dodgy might self-isolate for a couple of weeks. Or not.

<sup>78</sup>Both having been alerted by test-and-trace to the fact that they had been in close contact with an infected person – the prime minister following a visit to Scotland in early August and the cabinet minister, Michael Gove, following a trip to Portugal to watch the European Cup Final in May. The option of an ‘experimental’ testing regime was not offered to anyone else who had made the trip, as an increasingly hostile press observed.

<sup>79</sup>Alok Sharma, the president of Cop26, the UN Climate Change Conference, visited thirty countries between February and August 2021, six ‘red-listed’, and failed to isolate on return from any. It is difficult to know which is the greater hypocrisy: the refusal to isolate or the fact that he flew around the globe time and again with the purpose of trying to convince everyone else to fly around less. If only he had heard of Zoom.



What else? A merry monarch struggling in a less-than-merry moment; the shifting rhetoric, the shifting science; the profiteers, the dodgy contracts; the fall of great men, the sacrifice of wicked counsellors; the lack of preparation, the lack of pest-houses, the lack of trained staff; the ‘watchers’, the ‘Covid-marshals’ of their moment; the ‘searchers’ worrying about their personal protective equipment; the peculiar ‘distresses’ of the ‘poorer sort’, living in closer quarters, locked in, food running out, and money (*ibid.*, p. 130); quarantine and quarantine-breakers; the dilemma that constantly haunts Pepys: to stay locked down in ‘melancholy’ or to take the risk and make ‘merry’, taking a trip to the Angell Tavern at Tower Hill in mid-September 1665, skipping through the weeping and wailing, only to find it shut (Pepys, 1993, pp. 526–527); the London exoduses: July 1665, December 2020. No one wants to be stuck in Tier 4, with all the other plague-carriers, and the pubs shut. Provincial hostilities; police cars setting up roadblocks; vigilantes fingering their pitchforks; a commonwealth of bitter little commonwealths.

It is what fear does. The return to the ‘state of nature’ famously described in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, another text of the ‘moment’, to which we will return very shortly. As noted by Pepys too: desperation makes people ‘cruel’. Social distancing, suspicion and blame. It is easy enough to spot those falling down dead in the streets, but not so easy otherwise. The asymptomatic again always present in an epidemic, somewhere, along with the ‘dissenters’ and the scapegoats. Every crisis-ridden government needs some of each: the asymptomatic to terrorise, the dissenters to distract, the scapegoats to blame – Jews, immigrants and Quakers in 1665; students, ravers and lockdown ‘sceptics’ in 2020. Was COVID-19 really an unprecedented crisis, the social and political consequences of which could not have been predicted? We could go on, but again there is no need.

There will, as we surmised, be a public inquiry at some point in 2022. Remit will be hotly contested: to learn certainly, to attribute responsibilities, perhaps. We can predict the cast list: lots of civil servants and their ministers, wicked counsellors and their lawyers, the profiteers and theirs, some modellers of course, a scattering of ‘front-line’ heroes, NHS executives and brilliant virologists, but not so many historians, we might surmise, or poets, hardly the fashion these days in a world in which the quantity of things seems to matter so much more than the quality – the laws of ‘bare life’, as the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has recently put it (1998). Another species unlikely to make much of an appearance at the inquiry, philosophers.

Which is a matter of regret, for the reason we have already advanced. The supposition is that a crisis can, as Martha Nussbaum has confirmed, serve to refine our ‘human literacy’, our ‘ability’ to be an ‘intelligent reader’ of the suffering of others (1995, pp. 78–79, 90–91, 115–120; 1997, pp. 101–111). Something to ponder as we start pick up the pieces and set ourselves for the next pandemic. A ‘Journal of the Plague Year 2020’ would make much of the need to build more hospitals, train more staff, put in place an effective international quarantine and an effective ‘test-and-trace’ system, refine procurement processes more generally, concentrate resources on those in greatest need, work with local authorities and strip out the petty politics – things that probably should be obvious. But it would also tell a human story, of suffering and endurance and compassion – a story, too, of terrible choices, of which lives should be prioritised and which not, and on what basis. Solomonic judgments; what price of a Covid-death against a missed cancer diagnosis or a teenage suicide or 1,000 lost futures. It is difficult enough to quantify, impossible to qualify. Algorithms will not help here. This is ethics, at its deepest and most distressing.

Which brings us to the aligned matter of political morality. We might start in a discomfiting place with the first line of Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, published in 1922: ‘Sovereign is he who decides upon the exception’ (1985, p. 5). History tells against Schmitt, but not against his premise. Government matters most in a crisis. The moment which, as it sharpens our ‘human literacy’, also tests the integrity of our political institutions, and their underlying moral principles. It was different, of course, in Weimar Germany in 1922, as it was in England in 1665 – a people living their lives ‘in the pages of the Bible’, as Patrick Collinson famously described the Reformation English (1988, p. 10). When politics really was a theology. Ten years before Schmitt foretold the dreadful march of totalitarianism, Thomas Hardy attended the ‘funeral’ of the God ‘we were tempted to create’. ‘Whither,’ he

wondered, ‘will wanderers turn distracted eyes/ For some fixed star to stimulate their pace?’ He already knew – to a new faith: ‘Follow the science’, and the scientists. ‘Mechanically I followed’ (Wilson, 1999, pp. 3–4).

So must we; so indeed we have. But warily, for, yet again, all is not quite what it seems. First glance would suppose this to be the sharpest dissonance between our two great plagues – the best part of four centuries of scientific growth. True in natural science perhaps, but not in the science of government. The fact that the defining regulatory response would be a ‘lockdown’ was entirely predictable. HF, as we noted, wondered the efficacy, but could venture no alternative. The same is true of 2020 as it was of 1665 – too late, HF suspected, to make that much difference, at least in saving lives, or to save the pest-houses from being ‘overwhelmed’: evidently ‘insufficient’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 178). But a lockdown is not imposed to inhibit infection, at least not directly. It is there to lend assurance when society starts to fray, so that people can be ‘encouraged’ (*ibid.*, p. 195) to sustain what the nineteenth-century jurist John Austin famously termed the ‘habit of obedience’ (1995, p. 166). The ‘dismal’ sight of hundreds of the ‘distempered’ running around the streets naked, covered in boils and screaming in agony is hardly conducive to civil order (*ibid.*, p. 175), thus, as HF concedes, the need for a lockdown, however futile it might prove to be (Wagner, 2017, pp. 510–513).

Other jurists might shudder a little, startled by the easy abrogation of supposed civil liberties, even in a country that has never really had a constitution or, for that reason, a constitutional court. Not Austin though, in whose ‘province of jurisprudence’ there was little space for the ‘senseless fictions’ of liberty (1995, p. 55). It might be thought that Austin would be the jurist for the Covid moment. Not entirely, for he also knew that the ‘habit of obedience’ was mutable, and fragile. Liberty might be a ‘pothole’ for the good times, but legality is a jurisprudence for all times (*ibid.*, pp. 223–224, 285). Positive law is clearly commanded, properly enacted and consistently enforced. Lockdown ‘law’ was none of this; not much of it, on closer inspection, was even law. Hundreds of shifting regulations and ‘guidance’ notes, of varying ‘legality’, passed under the auspices of a bygone Public Health Act. By the end of 2020, the ‘rules’ had gone through sixty-five iterations. No wonder everyone was confused, the prime minister included – and tempted to play the margins.

There are always margins. At the centre of his *Journal*, Defoe wrote an extended anecdote of three men, two brothers and a ‘joiner’, who ponder the familiar dilemma: whether or not to stay in the city – and whether, indeed, it is lawful to do so. One of the brothers, a former soldier, thinks it is legal to leave and is anyway prepared to brave any constables or vigilantes they might encounter. No one has the ‘right to starve me to death’ (Defoe, 1986, p. 138). The other brother is not so sure, on either part. Do the provisions of the poor law apply or are they now overridden, and what of ordinary common-law ‘rights’ of movement? In the end, necessity overcomes jurisprudential nicety and they go in search of ‘victuals’ and a tavern in Walthamstow. With HF’s tacit approval: a ‘good pattern for any poor man to follow’ (*ibid.*, p. 153).

The ‘habit of obedience’ anyway dissipates. The people become ‘hardened’ to the moment, hungry, restless, bored (*ibid.*, p. 93). Eventually, they ‘despair’ and give up (*ibid.*, pp. 183–185). The fires burn out and no one can be bothered to clap any more. A process that can be slowed or quickened, dependent on certain familiar factors, such as where policing seems capricious, where government seems slippery, where ‘rule’ becomes characterised by ‘occasional’ command rather than positive law (Austin, 1995, pp. 25–26). Even Schmitt agreed with this: better a dictatorship that is stable and consistent than one which comes and goes.<sup>80</sup> The ‘state of nature’ again, in a land where the law is, quite literally, unknown.

It is interesting again to ponder what Defoe might have thought of the principle as well as the practice of lockdown. Champion of the ‘great and glorious’ revolution of 1688 and its Bill of Rights, drafted precisely to check executive overreach? Disappointed in the reluctance of the lawyers to get involved?<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup>The distinction between ‘sovereign’ and ‘commissarial’ species of dictatorship.

<sup>81</sup>The absence of significant legal action is notable. One case, *R (Dolan) v. Secretary of State for Health* [2020] EWCA Civ 1605, did make it up to the Appeal Court, losing at successive stages and then being refused further appeal to the Supreme

Maybe. The ghost of Sir Edward Coke still flitting about in the jurisprudential imagination, with memories of *Fuller's Case*, *Hampden's Case*, the *Petition of Right* and, more latterly, the *Seven Bishops*.<sup>82</sup> But, again, not that much surprised, enough of a Hobbesian to know that when push comes to shove, written rights are barely worth the paper: 'Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words' (Hobbes, 1985, p. 223). Dryden, also, curiously enough, supposing that the 'greatness of arms is only real'.<sup>83</sup>

Published in 1650, Hobbes's *Leviathan* did not have anything explicit to say about the plague. But it had plenty to intimate about the merits of lockdown, and a very intriguing frontispiece designed by the engraver Abraham Bosse. An image of enduring perplexity: the massive king-like figure, sword in one hand, sceptre in the other, looming over the strangely becalmed landscape, an even more strangely deserted city in the foreground. Save for two plague-doctors wandering around in front of the cathedral. A city in lockdown. The image, as Agamben has recently inferred, of life at its barest (2015, pp. 37–39).<sup>84</sup>

We return, though, to England and its 'great' plagues. What finally does Defoe's *Journal* tell us about their shared experience? Little that is new, everything that matters. The human suffering would be immense, and differentiated. And, in the moment, it would be largely lost, buried beneath the numbers. In time, a latter-day HF will hope to capture the living testament.<sup>85</sup> The response of government would be instinctively authoritarian, evasive and messy: crisis management, whilst waiting on providence or a vaccine. Most of all, perhaps, is the sheer predictability. Time and again, HF comes back to the lack of provision. 'Surely' was never a city 'taken in a condition so perfectly unprepared for such a dreadful visitation', as if it had 'no warning, no expectation, no apprehensions, and consequently, the least provision imaginable' (Defoe, 1986, p. 108). A natural catastrophe made 'prodigious' by human negligence. Never again: 'if posterity think fit, they may take a caution from' (*ibid.*, p. 137). Maybe.

Maybe not. COVID-19 was a pandemic that everyone knew would come, in one form or another. It was even 'gamed' a couple of years ago<sup>86</sup> which confirmed what was anyway suspected: that the 'national' health service would be easily 'overcome' in a pandemic. So many distractions though: pesky neighbours again, nicking our fish, another break with Rome to 'get done'. In October 1665, Evelyn had journeyed to Oxford to attend the first session of the reconvened parliament. He expected to hear of new measures to target the plague in the capital, then at its height. He heard Lord Craven advise council on the merits of building a vast hospital, much like that recently constructed in Paris. Evelyn had seen similar in Italy, and been impressed.

Council, however, was not. Continental affectations. What little money might be raised should be used to refit the navy for another go at the Dutch. Parliament agreed, approving a subsidy of £1.25 million for the 'honour of the nation'.<sup>87</sup> Evelyn was stunned. Another little resonance, as we go.

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Court. Regardless of the substantive merits of the action, the latter refusal, given the broader circumstance, seems remarkable. If ever the 'legality' of executive measures might have seemed worthy of consideration at the very highest judicial level, this was surely it.

<sup>82</sup>For a discussion of Coke and what he might have thought of the 'great plague' of 2020, see Ward (2021).

<sup>83</sup>Preface to *Annus Mirabilis* (Dryden, 1987, p. 26).

<sup>84</sup>There has been much speculation as to whether Bosse might have had a particular plague in mind, some surmising a Tuscan landscape as a homage to Macchiavelli or perhaps his native central France. Both were ravaged with plague in 1648–1649.

<sup>85</sup>For a shrewd comment on Defoe's working of statistics with the human narrative, see Richetti (2015, pp. 320–321). It is interesting to speculate when a distinctive genre of Covid-writing will begin to take shape. The nearest comparator is, perhaps, the emergence of a post-9/11 genre, which took a couple of years.

<sup>86</sup>Exercise Cygnus, as it was called, revealed a series of prospective shortcomings should a flu pandemic break out in the UK. The government strenuously attempted to block the release of the resultant report in spring 2020, eventually leaked to *The Guardian* and published on 7 May. One anonymous source confessed that the evident shortcomings were truly 'terrifying'. Interestingly, a similar gaming exercise was carried out in the US by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in October 2019. The results were no less sobering.

<sup>87</sup>For a comment on Craven's despairing missions to court, see Moote and Moote (2004, pp. 254–255).

The decision was made in November 2020 to boost UK defence spending by an extra £14.5 billion a year up to an estimated £51.7 billion in 2025, along with the announcement that there would be no repeat of the ‘free school lunches’ offered the previous summer, at a cost of £170 million.<sup>88</sup> Craven would reiterate his case the following spring as the prospect of the plague returned, and would be met with the same response: no spare money. His Lordship pointed out that the cost of not investing in adequate health services could, in the likely event of another pandemic, be vastly greater. But still no one was listening. Maybe next year, it was ventured. But then the Dutch pitched up in the Medway. Defoe’s darker fear, that there would always be distractions.

Leaving a plague-ridden people to sit at home, fingers crossed, watching for portents, studying the stats, praying for providence. Whilst the mortality rates mount up, the economy eviscerates and the country wracks up a debt of around £300 billion. If only we had seen it coming, we might say. There is a final set of numbers of the more discordant kind. As we have already noted, it is thought that roughly 100,000 died from the bubonic plague in London in 1665, representing somewhere around a quarter of the population. The figure for those who died within twenty-eight days of testing positive for COVID-19 in London in 2020 is a shade over 8,000, representing around 0.09 per cent of its population.<sup>89</sup> To wonder the statistics is not to diminish the suffering – no less hideous a death for being so rare. But it does reinforce what is, perhaps, the most unsettling conclusion – to wonder why we were so easily ‘overwhelmed’ by a plague that, in the colder light of historical reflection, might seem greater in the apprehension.

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<sup>88</sup>The latter decision reversed following public outcry. Absent any tangible enemies, the extra defence budget will be spent on establishing a Space Command and a National Cyber Force.

<sup>89</sup>Calculated at 8,090 deaths recorded in a metropolitan population of 9.3 million. Similar figures can be extrapolated nationwide.

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