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Daniel Defoe  
A Journal of the  
Plague Year





IT WAS about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbours, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland; for it had been very violent there, and particularly at Amsterdam and Rotterdam, in the year 1663, whither, they say, it was brought, some said from Italy, others from the Levant, among some goods which were brought home by their Turkey fleet; others said it was brought from Candia; others from Cyprus. It mattered not from whence it came; but all agreed it was come into Holland again.

We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumours and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men, as I have lived to see practised since. But such things as these were gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth only; so that things did not spread instantly over the whole nation, as they do now. But it seems that the Government had a true account of it, and several councils were held about ways to prevent its coming over; but all was kept very private. Hence it was that this rumour died off again, and people began to forget it as a thing we were very little concerned in, and that we hoped was not true; till the latter end of November or the beginning of December 1664 when two men, said to be Frenchmen, died of the plague in Long Acre, or rather at the upper end of Drury Lane. The family they were in endeavoured to conceal it as much as possible, but as it had gotten some vent in the discourse of the neighbourhood, the Secretaries of State got knowledge of it; and concerning themselves to inquire about it, in order to be certain of the truth, two physicians and a surgeon were ordered to go to the house and make inspection. This they did; and finding evident tokens of the sickness upon both the bodies that were dead, they gave their opinions publicly that they died of the plague. Whereupon it was given in to the parish clerk, and he also returned them to the Hall; and it was printed in the weekly bill of mortality in the usual manner, thus—

## Plague, 2. Parishes infected, 1.

The people showed a great concern at this, and began to be alarmed all over the town, and the more, because in the last week in December 1664 another man died in the same house, and of the same distemper. And then we were easy again for about six weeks, when none having died with any marks of infection, it was said the distemper was gone; but after that, I think it was about the 12th of February, another died in another house, but in the same parish and in the same manner.

This turned the people's eyes pretty much towards that end of the town, and the weekly bills showing an increase of burials in St Giles's parish more than usual, it began to be suspected that the plague was among the people at that end of the town, and that many had died of it, though they had taken care to keep it as much from the knowledge of the public as possible. This possessed the heads of the people very much, and few cared to go through Drury Lane, or the other streets suspected, unless they had extraordinary business that obliged them to it.

This increase of the bills stood thus: the usual number of burials in a week, in the parishes of St Giles-in-the-Fields and St Andrew's, Holborn, were from twelve to seventeen or nineteen each, few more or less; but from the time that the plague first began in St Giles's parish, it was observed that the ordinary burials increased in number considerably. For example:—

From December 27 to January	3	{	St Giles's	16
		{	St Andrew's	17
„ January 3 „ „	10	{	St Giles's	12
		{	St Andrew's	25
„ January 10 „ „	17	{	St Giles's	18
		{	St Andrew's	18
„ January 17 „ „	24	{	St Giles's	23
		{	St Andrew's	16
„ January 24 „ „	31	{	St Giles's	24
		{	St Andrew's	15
„ January 30 „ February	7	{	St Giles's	21
		{	St Andrew's	23
„ February 7 „ „	14		St Giles's	24

Whereof one of the plague.



The like increase of the bills was observed in the parishes of St Bride's, adjoining on one side of Holborn parish, and in the parish of St James, Clerkenwell, adjoining on the other side of Holborn; in both which parishes the usual numbers that died weekly were from four to six or eight, whereas at that time they were increased as follows:—

From December 20 to December 27	{	St Bride's	0
	{	St James's	8
„ December 27 to January 3	{	St Bride's	6
	{	St James's	9
„ January 3 „ „ 10	{	St Bride's	11
	{	St James's	7
„ January 10 „ „ 17	{	St Bride's	12
	{	St James's	9
„ January 17 „ „ 24	{	St Bride's	9
	{	St James's	15
„ January 24 „ „ 31	{	St Bride's	8
	{	St James's	12
„ January 31 „ February 7	{	St Bride's	13
	{	St James's	5
„ February 7 „ „ 14	{	St Bride's	12
	{	St James's	6

Besides this, it was observed with great uneasiness by the people that the weekly bills in general increased very much during these weeks, although it was at a time of the year when usually the bills are very moderate.

The usual number of burials within the bills of mortality for a week was from about 240 or thereabouts to 300. The last was esteemed a pretty high bill; but after this we found the bills successively increasing as follows:—

	<i>Buried.</i>	<i>Increased.</i>
December the 20th to the 27th	291	...
„ 27th „ 3rd January	349	58
January the 3rd „ 10th „	394	45
„ 10th „ 17th „	415	21
„ 17th „ 24th „	474	59



# Daniel Defoe

## A Journal of the Plague Year

The haunting cry of "Bring out your dead!" by a bell-ringing collector of 17th-century plague victims has filled readers across the centuries with cold terror. The chilling cry survives in historical consciousness largely as a result of this classic 1722 account of the epidemic of bubonic plague—known as the Black Death—that ravaged England in 1664–1665.

Actually written nearly 60 years later by Daniel Defoe, the *Journal* is narrated by a Londoner named "H. F.," who allegedly lived through the devastating effects of the pestilence and produced this eyewitness account. Drawing on his considerable talents as both journalist and novelist, Defoe reconstructed events both historically and fictionally, incorporating realistic, memorable details that enable the novel to surpass even firsthand accounts in its air of authenticity. This verisimilitude is all the more remarkable since Defoe was only five years old when the actual events took place.

Long a staple of college literature courses, *A Journal of the Plague Year* will fascinate students, teachers, and general readers alike.

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