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*Mad Dogs and Englishmen: Rabies in Britain, 1830–2000*

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Although it is normally classified as a zoonotic infection (that is, primarily an animal disease), rabies has a long and distressing human history. Records from several Mediterranean cultures provide evidence of its ancient ravages. Its etymology also suggests protracted exposure. The English word “rabies” descends from the Latin word for frenzy or madness (also applied to afflicted dogs), as does “rage,” an obsolete term for the disease. But rabies is also a quintessentially—even diagnostically—modern complaint, as Neil Pemberton and Michael Worboys argue in *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*. In nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain rabies attracted more than its share of popular and expert attention, at least in relation to the total number of human cases or the likelihood of any individual contracting it; indeed public and official reaction to outbreaks were often themselves characterized in terms of frenzy and mania. It is easy to speculate about the reasons for this heightened—even obsessive—interest. The symptoms of rabies were horrifying, and once they appeared, death was inevitable. Further, the disease was most frequently transmitted to humans by dogs, at least some of whom were understood as family members in the nineteenth century, when modern sentimental modes of pet keeping became established.

For this reason, as Pemberton and Worboys persuasively demonstrate in their exhaustively researched survey, the cultural history of rabies embraces not only changes in medical and veterinary practices, in epidemiology, and in public health policy, but also in the role of dogs and dog ownership. Their account is based on an impressive range of

materials, from parliamentary reports and scientific papers, to daily journalism and popular fiction. One side effect of the intense fascination with rabies is the rich vein of retrievable sources. The authors are therefore able to punctuate their general narrative with detailed discussions of particular outbreaks, effectively juxtaposing the perspectives of different stakeholders, or self-perceived stakeholders.

Pemberton and Worboys begin their story with the rabies panic of 1830, which they associate with larger fears about social disorder in London and other cities. In addition to raising issues of public discipline, this panic also provided opportunity for doctors and veterinarians to air disputes about the diagnosis and treatment of the disease (or diseases—the human version was usually called hydrophobia at that period). It is not completely clear whether this heightened concern reflected a real increase in human or canine cases; especially since the rarity of the human disease and the peripatetic inclinations of aggressive canines meant that incidents might be either overreported or underreported. Acute concern soon subsided, and there followed several decades in which the number of rabies cases decreased and the humane movement blossomed. In consequence, dogs subjected to rabies control could be understood as victims of official persecution, especially if they were beloved pets or valuable sporting animals. This perception was confirmed by the frequently brutal official response to the spike in rabies in the 1860s and 1870s, decades that also saw the nineteenth-century high water mark of the antivivisection movement.

Both public policy and medical practice had developed in the absence of robust or persistent consensus about the source of rabies, its transmission, or, in many cases, its diagnosis. In 1885 the options available for treating people who had been bitten by rabid

dogs expanded dramatically with the news of Louis Pasteur's successful treatment of Joseph Meister. Pasteur's vaccine also suggested answers to at least some questions about the nature of the disease, but neither the answers nor the treatment proved universally compelling. In 1890, for example, a single mad dog bit people in two adjoining northern towns. In one, where officials had connections with the Manchester scientific establishment, the victims were immediately packed off to Paris, while in the other the less fortunate victims were offered a popular remedy called Hydrophobine. Pemberton and Worboys explain that in the course of a three-mile journey between the towns, the dog traversed a distance of "over two centuries in medical culture, from one still in the eighteenth century to one anticipating the twentieth." (p. 128)

Individual British citizens who feared that they had been exposed to rabies increasingly chose Pasteur's treatment, but the national policy that led to the initial elimination of the disease in 1902 was not based on inoculation. Pasteur himself had suggested that quarantine made more sense for the island nation, and this policy, in conjunction with the enhanced surveillance and control of indigenous canine populations, was successfully adopted. There were occasional recurrences, which led to lurid posters and intermittently draconian enforcement at ports of entry from the European continent. It was, however, impossible to police the entire coastline, and standards at quarantine kennels could be lax. Along with many of the other examples in *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, the confident assumption that the quarantine was nevertheless effective in keeping Britain free from this alien menace illustrates the gap between the disease and its interpretation. Ultimately, pressure from the European Union rather than any change in scientific understanding, led to the current regime of inoculation, microchipping, and pet

passports. In 2000 properly certified animals from the EU and a few islands were admitted without quarantine; if the time frame of the book had been extended a few years, it would also have encompassed the inclusion of dogs, cats, and ferrets from the wilds of North America in the new scheme.

Pemberton and Worboys have written a fascinating chronicle of the vicissitudes in the understanding and treatment of rabies over the last two centuries. And since rabies loomed large in British consciousness, even when it was rare on the ground, they have also illuminated a range of larger issues in the history of medicine, public health, and the relation of people to other animals.

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