



Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic – and How it Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World*. Riverhead Books, 2006, pp. xv + 299,
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Generally speaking, the subject of Victorian medical theory is an esoteric matter, handled with relish by many excellent scholars, but very rarely written about with an eye for a broad, laymen audience. Steven Johnson, on the other hand, has redressed this very gap by exploring the edges of the onset of germ theory by retelling one of Victorian history's most gruesome, yet fascinating stories. In *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic – and How it Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World*, Johnson ambitiously attempts to tell the “urban legend” of the Broadstreet cholera outbreak. Johnson's monograph is a thriller set against the backdrop of Victorian London, a famous tale of an epidemic retold again with a specific focus, and a narrative especially concerned with urbanity itself.

Johnson's work is a love letter to the metropolis. He traces the frightening newness of Victorian London, and how its particular characteristics, like overbearing smells, created ideal conditions for misguided policies that eventually encouraged the most violent cholera outbreak in history. Johnson is at his best when tracing circumstances, like the odours of London, as unlike their historical precedents, and then following the thread of action that officials took to short circuit that circumstance (in this case, dumping human waste into the Thames en masse). Johnson begins and ends this work with an appreciation for the city; he describes it first as a kind of Frankenstein, a human-made monster, beyond control, with designs and desires of its own. In the end, by drawing the work's most central figures together toward understanding how the cholera infection spread, he underscores the hopefulness of the city as a place of potential democratic entwinement, where citizens can appreciate one another despite divergent experiences.

The primary narrative of this work is the investigation that led to the “Ghost Map” referred to within the title, began by the famous anesthesiologist, Dr. John Snow, and amplified by local curate, Henry Whitehead. While tracing their journey to prove cholera is a water-borne disease, Johnson explains the dominant Victorian theory of disease, miasma theory (miasmists have also been called sanitarians or sanitationists by scholars). Johnson does a fine job of discussing the influence of miasma theory over the populace and the scientific and medical communities to illustrate why the burden of proof for the ghost map was so extraordinarily high, and its acceptance so revolutionary.

In one thing, Johnson unfortunately follows on the heels of other scholars, in that he takes care to single out Florence Nightingale as a virulent miasmist (despite her limited bearing on his narrative), and uses her as a pointed example for why the idea of infected water would have been unacceptable in explaining the cholera epidemic. While perhaps the concept of cholera as a disease specifically spread by water may have been problematic for Nightingale, in her most famous monograph, *Notes on Nursing* (1860), she also points out the necessity of pure water for tending patients, even noting that foul water and disease are linked: “when epidemic disease shows itself, persons using such water are almost sure to suffer” (15). Johnson is not the first scholar to take especial umbrage at Nightingale’s point-of-view, but she was certainly more generally interested in clean everything versus only clean air, which he suggests, while also overlooking her contributions to statistical practice.

In terms of accessibility to a wide range of readers, and a generally pleasurable narrative that traces a deeply important historical moment that created the possibility for dramatic change in medicine and in social understanding of the power of grass-roots statistics, Johnson’s admirable work is ideal for scholars, students, and history buffs alike. In writing for a broad audience, Johnson has shared this chapter of Victorian history in a way perhaps not unlike the subject of his work.

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