

BOOK REVIEW

Investigating Cholera in Broad Street: A History in Documents *by Peter Vinten-Johansen*

Digital (PDF) Edition, 288 pages
Broadview Press
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The topic of this book is the cholera outbreak in London in the summer of 1854, the Broad Street Pump episode, that killed over 500 people and the events and attitudes leading up to this and its control. It is one of the most widely known and celebrated examples of epidemiology and public health.

The book adopts a different format to standard medical history texts and is primarily intended for history students and staff. It consists of a considerable introductory text followed by 31 relevant, contemporary reports, which have been mildly modernised, along with clarifications and critical questions to consider in their interpretation. It contains many black and white illustrations, a chronology, glossary, select bibliography, and comprehensive index.

Vinten-Johansen is the co-founder and content manager of the online resource *John Snow Archive and Research Companion*. He commences with an account of the origins of the cholera pandemic that swept around the world from 1817, arriving in Sunderland in 1831, christened the Asiatic Cholera by Thomas Wakley of *The Lancet*. The various theories of aetiology, including miasma, non-contagion, contagion, and contingent contagion, are presented. The author then discusses the reports that are included and analyses the central epidemiological role of John Snow, leading to the removal of the pump handle, even though cases had declined before this action.

The documents include General Board of Health guidelines for managing cholera, Sewer Commission reports, reviews of Snow's pamphlets, Westminster Medical Society cholera discussions, and a wide selection of other relevant publications that present various contemporary points of view. These are followed by Questions to Consider for the student.

Investigating Cholera in Broad Street is well written and demands the reader's attention. It needed my concentration and I found it made me think. The book provides a useful exercise in historical methodology and interpretation. As such, it may not suit all who are interested in the history of medicine, but it could encourage and develop critical thought. Students, even mature ones, would find it a useful training.

Moreover, it's example could help us to move away from the hagiographic approach, which many medically-qualified historians are tempted to use, to a more nuanced understanding of the slower, complex multi-person and multi-factorial processes that underlay many major medical discoveries and interventions.

Bill Dobb
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