



Preface

England's pandemic of the 1600s in light of COVID-19:

Based on the memoirs written by Daniel Defoe

Minoru Oda (Ex-Kansai University, Japan)

The world is still in turmoil over the outbreak of COVID-19. The news announces daily the number of infected cases and deaths, and many cities in various countries have also implemented lockdowns. It is gaining momentum throughout the world, in the United States, China, Brazil, and even in Africa. COVID-19 is terrible, but if this pandemic was cholera or the plague, which have an even higher mortality rate, it would be an even worse disaster.

Although Daniel Defoe is best known for his book, “*Robinson Crusoe*”, he wrote another masterpiece that deals with the plague pandemic titled, “*Journal of the Plague Year*”. Defoe’s name would have remained in the history of English literature even if he had not written the highly praised “*Robinson Crusoe*”.

The Plague Year, with the definite article, refers to the year 1665 in London, when the plague was rampant. Defoe published his work, “*Journal of the Plague Year*” on March 17, 1722, a month after publishing, “*Due Preparations for the Plague as Well for Soul as Body*”, a book of household lessons mainly in the form of dialogues. It was inspired by the news of the plague in southern France, especially in Marseille. Although it was a publication with a commercial motive to increase sales by taking advantage of the situation, it was also a publication with good intentions to provide necessary information to Londoners who were frightened by news of the plague.

In 1664, the Privy Council and the City of London authorities were carrying out a waterfront strategy to prevent the plague from coming ashore, including strict quarantine measures. In May, plague deaths were reported in the *Weekly Bulletin of Deaths*, however no appropriate action was taken.

Even in June, the court and the city were slow to act to stop the plague pandemic. The spread of the plague had already begun, and the delay in initial action should have been obvious to them. However, on June 27, the King, nobles, and the court were the first to flee London after the Great Victory Thanksgiving Day on June 20. The only thing on their minds was escaping the plague rather than stopping it. The sharp increase in the number of deaths from the plague in June in the weekly death

report was enough to chill their hearts. No wonder they were in a panic.

In the midst of all this, the Privy Council Rules and Orders were promulgated, albeit as an ill-timed measure to evade responsibility. The content of the ordinance was merely an affirmation of what was already set in many places, but it ordered all magistrates and chiefs to comply. The contents of the rules and orders were as follows.

- Prohibit the influx of outsiders without proof of health and the delivery of goods to each municipality.
- Prohibit vagrants and beggars from roaming the streets.
- Prohibit all gatherings in suspected plague-contaminated areas (This includes funeral and wake gatherings).
- At necessary and unavoidable gatherings, fires must be built in large pots.
- Public places and houses must be clean.
- Pigs, dogs, cats, and pigeons are not allowed to roam free. However, no killing is required.
- The burial of plague victims in churches and churchyards is strictly forbidden if there is not enough land to enclose them with a 10-foot high fence.
- Strengthen laws against inn-keepers and tavern workers.
- Each municipality should set up an isolation camp for plague patients. After quarantine, the houses will be closed for 40 days. This is a response to public opinion against the simultaneous confinement of patients and healthy people.

However, it is said that the plague bacteria can live for up to a year in rags and feces, and the best way to prevent the spread of the plague is to isolate the patient and separate them from the rest of their family if there is a family member infected with the plague, and if there is a death, to bury the body as quickly and properly as possible. If there is a plague case or death, the house should be closed and isolated from the surrounding houses to prevent the spread of the plague bacteria. If houses continue to be contaminated by the plague, it will be necessary to seal off the area to prevent further contamination spreading to the sur-

rounding areas.

However, in Eyam, Derbyshire, the dreaded plague came to an abrupt end on October 11, 1666, after a second outbreak in July and August. A year earlier, the London plague, after raging with unprecedented ferocity from August to October 1665, rapidly lost momentum, and by December the death toll had dropped to more than 200 each week, ending at the beginning of the year. After spreading at a furious pace for more than four months, it suddenly came to an end.

Then, why did the plague, which had been raging at an unprecedented rate, suddenly come to an end in this way? The reasons for this are often cited as the extermination of house mice by wild rats, the spread of sanitary facilities, and thorough health care, however, all of these are due to the gradual improvement of living conditions in later periods, and do not explain the sudden and dramatic end of the plague in London and Eyam in 1665-1666.

In fact, London had not seen a plague outbreak since 1665. Where did that terrible plague go? Some people attribute the end of the plague to the wiping out of house mice in the Great Fire of London in 1666, but Henry Foe's opinion in the "*Journal of the Plague Year*" does not take that view. The City was the central part of London that was destroyed by the Great Fire, and St. Giles Cripplegate, St. Botolph's Allgate and St. Botolph's Bishopsgate, where the plague raged the most, were not hit by the Great Fire. The same is true for Southwark on the other side of the River Thames. If the Great Fire had wiped out the contamination of the plague, it would not explain why the danger of the plague disappeared in these areas as well.

This is just an intuitive guess on my part as a layman without any scientific basis, but I believe that things that grow abnormally in large numbers in a favorable environment, whether they are plague bacteria, locusts, or dinosaurs, will cause a rapid deterioration and contraction of their own living environment due to their overly extreme proliferation, and after a certain point, they will head for an avalanche of mutual decline, and as the momentum accelerates no one will be able to stop it. Massive abnormal outbreaks may only end with mass sudden deaths due to abnormal growth beyond what the environment can tolerate. If things continue to proliferate two, four, or eight times, the field of proliferation will rapidly compress to 1/2, 1/4, or 1/8 of its original size, and the natural order of things is for decline and death at once under the pressure of suffocation. The same is probably true for the plague bacteria, and I have a feeling that we humans are no exception to this rule.

We know from later generations that the plague disappeared from London after 1665. In many parts of the country, the outbreak and spread of the plague did not begin until 1666, and on the other side of the continent, the plague continued to rage, and by the time Defoe wrote "*Journal of the Plague Year*" and "*Due Preparations for the Plague as Well for Soul as Body*" in 1722, news of the plague raging in Marseilles had spread the year before, and London was in a state of trepidation. The end of the plague in 1665 was, of course, due to the efforts of the en-

tire city of London, but ironically, the Great Fire of London the following year saved the city the trouble of cleaning up the remnants and disasters of the plague. It should be kept in mind that the plague was never contained, defeated, or killed off, it just went away. We did not strike it, nor did we lead it to extinction. The plague simply retreated on its own without suffering any fatal blows. It was not defeated, or contained- it departed. The plague may come back at any time if the environment is favorable to it. It may take on a different form and attack humanity in a false sense of security. In fact, this reality is being keenly felt in the face of the global domination by COVID-19.

For Further information on this topic, please refer to the author's book, "*Danieru Defoe no Syougai to Jidai* [The life and times of Daniel Defoe]" (in Japanese) by Union Press.

About the author

Minoru Oda is a Doctor of Letters. He graduated from Kyoto University in 1954 with a B.A. in Literature and received his M.A. from the same university in 1957, majoring in English Language and Literature. After working as a teacher at a high-school attached to Osaka Gakugei University, assistant and lecturer at Wakayama University, and lecturer and professor at Osaka University of Education, he became a professor at the Faculty of Letters, Kansai University in 1985 and retired in 2002.