

A
Journal of the
PLAGUE
YEAR

by DANIEL DEFOE

With a Foreword by
J. H. Plumb

A SIGNET CLASSIC

Published by The New American Library,
New York and Toronto
The New English Library Limited, London



DANIEL DEFOE was born in St. Giles, Cripplegate, London about 1660. His father, a London butcher, sent him to Charles Morton's academy to study for the ministry, but Defoe entered the business world instead and achieved some initial success as a commission agent. In 1684, he married Mary Tuffley, a prosperous merchant's daughter. The following year, stirred by the spirit of adventure, he took part in Monmouth's rebellion; and in 1688 he joined a volunteer regiment that acted as William III's escort into London. By 1692 Defoe's business affairs had floundered and his creditors filed suit against him. He talked his way out of debtors' prison and took up manufacturing, eventually becoming the owner of some tile works at Tilbury. About this time, he started to write. His poem *A True-Born Englishman*, published in 1701, met with resounding success. In 1702, he attacked the Tories in a pamphlet, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*. This work enraged the government and Defoe was imprisoned. Released in November, 1704, he became a secret agent for the government, working in favor of the union. Defoe continued to write pamphlets, and it was not until some years later that he turned to fiction. Between 1718 and 1723 he published *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*. He lived for a time in style, but gradually the creditors crept back. Forced to go into hiding, Defoe died, a lonely and hunted man, in Ropemaker's Alley, Moorfields, on April 26, 1731.

A
Journal of the
PLAGUE
YEAR

by DANIEL DEFOE

With a Foreword by
J. H. Plumb

A SIGNET CLASSIC

Published by The New American Library,
New York and Toronto
The New English Library Limited, London

CAREFULLY SELECTED, EDITED, AND PRINTED,
SIGNET CLASSICS PROVIDE A TREASURY OF THE WORLD'S GREAT
WRITINGS IN HANDSOMELY DESIGNED VOLUMES.

FOREWORD © 1960 BY
THE NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY OF WORLD LITERATURE, INC.

Fourth Printing

SIGNET TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES
REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA
HECHO EN CHICAGO, U.S.A.

SIGNET CLASSICS are published *in the United States* by
The New American Library, Inc.,
1301 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019,
in Canada by The New American Library of Canada Limited,
295 King Street East, Toronto 2, Ontario,
in the United Kingdom by The New English Library Limited,
Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London, E.C. 1, England

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

friendly with the great, and he revelled in a new world. He started to write pamphlets during this period, some for government pay, some to release the teeming ideas that his excited imagination threw off like fireworks. He was a natural writer, fluent and direct. He discovered too that he had a happy turn for doggerel. Sneers from the Tories about William III's Dutch birth led him to write *The True-Born Englishman*, whose vigour may be judged by this description of England:

We have been Europe's sink, the jakes where she
Voids all her offal outcast progeny.

His satiric poem achieved fabulous success, quickly running through twelve authorized and nine pirated editions. For a time, with his brick works thriving and his sales soaring, Defoe lived high. But his ebullience soon proved his undoing. William III died; Queen Anne succeeded, and with her the High-Church Tories came to power. Defoe pulled their leg. He wrote a masterpiece of irony—*The Shortest Way with Dissenters*. Written as if by a Tory, it solemnly recommended that nonconformists be exterminated. At first people were taken in; then a gale of laughter swept the country. The infuriated government ordered Defoe's arrest. They caught him and put him in the pillory where the public treated him like a hero. But jail followed, and to avoid serving his sentence, he sold himself to the government and became a sort of spy. He travelled up and down England, reporting all that his sharp, observant eye and quick intelligence seized upon. Later he used these experiences to create one of the greatest travel books written about England—*A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*.

Spying was not Defoe's sole task for the ministry; his pen too had been bought. As well as pamphlets, he wrote a newspaper, *The Review*. This he wrote almost entirely single-handed, often in impossible conditions, three times a week for seven years—a truly astounding achievement. This alone would have given Defoe an immortal place in English letters, even had he never written a novel, for *The Review* can be compared without disadvantage to Addison's *Spectator*.

Governments fell, the dynasty changed, the years passed, and Defoe lived a hand-to-mouth existence. He dodged creditors for a time, deceived both the government and the opposition, and received pay from both.

Then suddenly, around the age of sixty, his genius flowered. Between 1718 and 1723 he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, all works of great and enduring quality, as well as several others that were almost as fine. And the flame died as quickly as it had flared. He lived for a time rather grandly in Stoke Newington, but soon the creditors crept back, old quarrels were resumed, new ones flourished. He had to go into hiding, a pathetic old man dodging from attic to attic. And he died on April 26, 1731, alone, without friends or relatives. He had lived a strange life at variance with the principles which he professed, overwhelmed by instincts he could not resist, but endowed with such talent that his name will live as long as the English language lasts.

II

Defoe did not achieve acceptance among the writers of his day. Addison called him "a false, shuffling, prevaricating rascal"; Swift sneered at him. Pope scorned him; the majority ignored him. His work was alien to the polished elegance that they admired. His literary gifts were as great as theirs, if not greater; certainly they were more original, but he wrote for a different public. He did not write for a coterie, for the fashionable, polished upper middle class or for the aristocracy. He wrote, like Bunyan before him, for shopkeepers, artisans, clerks, yeomen, for ordinary men and women, and he wrote as one of them. *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the saddler in the *Journal of the Plague Year* are all drawn from this class. Defoe was sensitive to their experience; he knew the horrors of poverty, the terrors of sickness, the joy of a windfall, the wonder of luck. He had known the frightening insecurity of those who had to work to live. There is little romance in Defoe's world, little affection and less love; pity there is and charity, but the excitement, the tension in his writing, springs from his concern with success. Will Robinson

Crusoe survive? Will Moll Flanders achieve respectability? How will the saddler live through the plague? Cheating fate, getting the better of circumstances, surviving, these are the major preoccupations of Defoe's characters. And it is these natural concerns of ordinary men and women that give such exceptional verisimilitude to his characters whether they are pitched on a desert island, shipped to Virginia, or caught in a plague. Defoe's eye was quick and observant; the human scene entranced him and he could report it in direct, vivid prose. Such a natural realist often used real events and historical material so that it is at times difficult to distinguish fact from fiction in Defoe's work.

This is particularly true of his *Journal of the Plague Year*. Some of his sources have been traced with certainty—*The Weekly Bills of Mortality*; *A Collection of Very Valuable and Scarce Pieces Relating to the late Plague in the Year 1665*; Dr. Nathaniel Hodges' *Loimologia, an Historical Account of the Plague*. These were all republished in 1720 or 1721 and must have been on Defoe's desk as he wrote. And it is almost equally certain that he made considerable use of an old pamphlet, *God's Terrible Voice in the City* by Thomas Vincent, printed in 1666.* From these Defoe built up the main structure of his narrative and the general outline of the plague—the way it swept from west to east; how many people took to living in ships moored downstream in the Thames to avoid contact with the city; the desertion of their town houses by the rich and the flight of the poor to the woods and forests about London; the alarm of the country folk; the emptiness of the city streets; the shut houses marked with a great red cross; the terrible carts of the dead; the yawning grave-pits; the bells that never ceased to toll. These things he learned, but on them his imagination worked, stimulating, perhaps, recollections of his remote childhood or recalling tales told him by his elders long ago. On this material, whether true or invented, his creative genius got to work and peopled plague-stricken London with intensely human characters, ordinary men and women caught in a tragedy

* See Watson Nicholson, *The Historical Sources of Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year*, Boston, 1919.

they could scarcely comprehend. We hear again the shrieks of the dying and the lamentations of the living, witness the chicanery, the twists and cheats of men desperate for life, and the heroism, the calm acceptance of fate, of the few ennobled by suffering. For the Londoners of Georgian England, waiting for the plague, Defoe's book must have been terrifying reading. But the plague never came and instead of a caution for the present, Defoe's *Journal* became a memorial to the past.

No one knows why London was not attacked by bubonic plague after 1665. This scourge had swept England repeatedly since the Black Death; after the Great Plague of London only small and isolated outbreaks occurred. The disease can be transmitted by the flea of the black rat, which was being driven out of London by the brown or Hanoverian rat. Some scientists believe this to be the reason for the plague's disappearance; others will not accept it, for it took generations for the brown rat to become dominant. A few historians believe that the Great Fire of 1666 cleansed London, but this did not touch the worst plague spots—St. Giles or Whitechapel. Modern parasitologists incline to the view that, after three centuries, human beings acquired some immunity and that the bacillus itself became less virulent. Certainly the plague of 1665 was both less violent and less widespread than many other visitations. Whatever the reason, it never returned.

From the hygienic comfort of the twentieth century, the terrible calamity which Defoe described with such accurate, vivid realism seems remote, an experience that never can be repeated. But such suffering can still visit mankind—the great influenza epidemic of 1919 killed far more people. The terror for Defoe's London lay in the awful concentration of the disease. In his pages a metropolis dies before our eyes; the streets empty; grass grows where life reigned. *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a tale of horror, told by one of the great masters of realism.

—J. H. PLUMB
Cambridge University

May, 1960

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 those 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 enquire 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 shewed 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 shewing 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 publick 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 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, 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 mor-

tality 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:

				Buried.	Increased.
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

This last bill was really frightful, being a higher number than had been known to have been buried in one week since the preceding visitation of 1656.

However, all this went off again, and the weather proving cold, and the frost, which began in December, still continuing very severe, even till near the end of February, attended with sharp though moderate winds, the bills decreased again, and the city grew healthy, and everybody began to look upon the danger as good as over; only that still the burials in St Giles's continued high. From the beginning of April especially they stood at twenty-five each week, till the week from the 18th to the 25th, when there was buried in St Giles's parish thirty, whereof two of the plague and eight of the spotted fever, which was looked upon as the same thing; likewise the number that died of the spotted fever in the whole increased, being eight the week before, and twelve the week above named.

This alarmed us all again, and terrible apprehensions were among the people, especially the weather being now changed and growing warm, and the summer being at hand. However, the next week there seemed to be some hopes again; the bills were low, the number of the dead in all was but 388, there was none of the plague, and but four of the spotted fever.

But the following week it returned again, and the distemper was spread into two or three other parishes, viz., St Andrew's Holborn; St Clement Danes; and, to the great affliction of the city, one died within the walls, in the parish of St Mary Woolchurch, that is to say, in Bearbinder Lane, near Stocks Market; in all there were nine of the plague and six of the spotted fever. It was, however, upon enquiry, found that this Frenchman who died in

Bearbinder Lane was one who, having lived in Long Acre, near the infected houses, had removed for fear of the distemper, not knowing that he was already infected.

This was the beginning of May, yet the weather was temperate, variable, and cool enough, and people had still some hopes. That which encouraged them was that the city was healthy, the whole ninety-seven parishes buried but fifty-four, and we began to hope, that as it was chiefly among the people at that end of the town, it might go no farther; and the rather, because the next week, which was from the 9th of May to the 16th, there died but three, of which not one within the whole city or liberties; and St Andrew's buried but fifteen, which was very low. 'Tis true St Giles's buried two-and-thirty, but still, as there was but one of the plague, people began to be easy. The whole bill also was very low, for the week before the bill was but 347, and the week above mentioned but 343. We continued in these hopes for a few days. But it was but for a few, for the people were no more to be deceived thus; they searched the houses, and found that the plague was really spread every way, and that many died of it every day. So that now all our extenuations abated, and it was no more to be concealed; nay, it quickly appeared that the infection had spread itself beyond all hopes of abatement; that in the parish of St Giles it was gotten into several streets, and several families lay all sick together. And, accordingly, in the weekly bill for the next week the thing began to shew itself; there was indeed but fourteen set down of the plague, but this was all knavery and collusion, for [in] St Giles's parish they buried forty in all, whereof it was certain most of them died of the plague, though they were set down of other distempers; and though the number of all the burials were not increased above thirty-two, and the whole bill being but 385, yet there was fourteen of the spotted fever, as well as fourteen of the plague; and we took it for granted upon the whole that there were fifty died that week of the plague.

The next bill was from the 23rd of May to the 30th, when the number of the plague was seventeen. But the burials in St Giles's were fifty-three—a frightful number!—of whom they set down but nine of the plague. But on an examination more strictly by the justices of the peace, and at the Lord Mayor's request, it was found there were

twenty more who were really dead of the plague in that parish, but had been set down of the spotted fever or other distempers, besides others concealed.

But those were trifling things to what followed immediately after; for now the weather set in hot, and from the first week in June the infection spread in a dreadful manner, and the bills rose high; the articles of the fever, spotted fever, and teeth began to swell; for all that could conceal their distempers did it, to prevent their neighbours shunning and refusing to converse with them, and also to prevent authority shutting up their houses, which though it was not yet practised, yet was threatened, and people were extremely terrified at the thoughts of it.

The second week in June, the parish of St Giles, where still the weight of the infection lay, buried 120, whereof, though the bills said but 68 of the plague, everybody said there had been 100 at least, calculating it from the usual number of funerals in that parish, as above.

Till this week the city continued free, there having never any died, except that one Frenchman who I mentioned before, within the whole ninety-seven parishes. Now there died four within the city, one in Wood Street, one in Fenchurch Street, and two in Crooked Lane. Southwark was entirely free, having not one yet died on that side of the water.

I lived without Aldgate, about midway between Aldgate Church and Whitechapel Bars, on the left hand or north side of the street; and as the distemper had not reached to that side of the city, our neighbourhood continued very easy. But at the other end of the town their consternation was very great; and the richer sort of people, especially the nobility and gentry from the west part of the city, thronged out of town with their families and servants in an unusual manner; and this was more particularly seen in Whitechapel; that is to say, the broad street where I lived; indeed, nothing was to be seen but waggons and carts, with goods, women, servants, children, &c.; coaches filled with people of the better sort, and horsemen attending them, and all hurrying away; then empty waggons and carts appeared, and spare horses with servants, who, it was apparent, were returning or sent from the countries to fetch more people; besides innumerable numbers of men on horseback, some alone,