

PLAGUE LETTERS

Donna Lee Brien

History takes the past and wraps it in gauze. This translucent layer of interpretation compresses the myriad moments of by-gone lives and events, forcing them into a seductively compact shape. We can see the past's movement and shadows through the fine wrapping, but because the package is always just out of our reach we are forever alienated from any sense of what the past really was or what it means. It is only when we begin to strip back the binding layers of constricting interpretation, and explore the unsaid and the unknown, that history (and the past itself) can arise from its shroud and begin to really inform our present and the future.

John Power, expatriate Australian artist and benefactor, has been tantalisingly ignored by history. In writing his fictionalised biography I have proposed a story as narrated by two women, Power's mother Mary and his wife Edith. This extract comes from a series of letters Mary writes to her sister, Catherine, in Melbourne - letters which do not exist but which are based, I believe, as closely on the historical evidence as any biographical narrative.

50 Hyde Park,
29th January 1900,

Dearest Katie,

I write to you in haste as I ready the family for our departure to the mountains. Everyone is frantic to escape the city as our fine new century is marked by the most horrendous outbreak of Bubonic Plague. How can this happen in the Modern Age, I ask you? I suppose we should not be surprised, as the general filth of Sydney is almost unimaginable, and the warnings of those who were aware of this appalling state have fallen on deaf ears. Even now, when the Enemy has breached the gate, people are slow to begin to repent their past apathy. There are still open cesspits in plain view of the main business areas, and rubbish and even the vilest sewerage is dumped out onto the laneway at the back of our house. The water supply is an absolute disgrace. Privies are connected to open drains which flow down through the middle of the streets and faulty cisterns allow filth to mix into the general water supply. Factory waste ends up in our drinking water and, if you can bear to imagine it, even seepage from the overcrowded cemeteries! Sludges of offal from the slaughterhouses pollute our much vaunted Harbour, and deaths from Typhoid are so common in the Summer that the papers barely bother to report them. The Government, as usual, does absolutely nothing.

Of course, my dear husband insisted on inoculating us all straight away, household servants included. Free public vaccinations were actually

offered in the early days of the epidemic, but these were ignored. After a fortnight of deaths, however, everyone wanted them, and the demanding crowds grew so hysterical that the doctors had to be moved to the Exhibition Building in the Gardens where they work under police guard.

So, as I write we are packed ready to join the rest who are abandoning their homes and taking the afternoon train to Katoomba.

I will write again from there. Pray for the children, although they are all as healthy as can be.

Love, etc.
Mary

The Carrington, Katoomba, The Blue Mountains

26th February 1900,

Dear Katie,

Here we are, taking healthful walks in the coolness of the mountains, admiring the mists and the waterfalls and the sublime views, trusting these healthy glens will shelter us from the disease that continues to horrify Sydney.

We are staying at the Carrington which has extremely comfortable rooms and the best cookery in the mountains. This is fortunate as away from the city's heat the children possess the appetite of wolves! The music-room contains one of the finest grand pianos I have ever seen, the largest I am told out here in the Colonies, and John plays for us most evenings. I've also been around the shops in Katoomba and seen all the pretty Churches, and there is plenty in the way of company with the many other refugees from the city.

I have made the acquaintance of a lady from Woollahra with whom I have struck up a particular friendship. She has first-hand experience of the plague and told me the harrowing story of her maid's poor sister, one of the disease's early victims. The maid's family live near the Argyle Cut in the Rocks district which is infamous for its Appalling Squalor. There are no gutters and the drainage from each house simply runs down the hill and into the next lower neighbour's yard. It was the maid Polly's Sunday afternoon off and she went, as usual, to visit her family. There, she found her sister so ill that she sent word that she would stay the night. Apparently the infected girl had awoken that morning with a high temperature. She was shivering and her head ached, her eyes were inflamed and her tongue swollen. Polly stayed and watched over her as the fever waxed and waned for three days, while awful painful swellings rose up in her sister's abdomen and armpit. Horrible pustules formed all over her body and when these burst open they released the most foul and disgusting discharge. Then on the third night she died, but that wasn't the end of this sad tale. She had a small baby and this Innocent Little Soul was taken the Very Day his mother was buried. Polly has had to remain in the quarantine area, but so far seems well enough.

When I heard all this I looked over my own little lambs and praised God's mercy in preserving my family from harm. Not that we haven't had our scares. John, my most darling son (who you should know is over six feet tall now) came down with a fever last week. I was, of course, paralysed with fear and his father came straight up from the City. Fortunately, though, all our worry was in vain for his indisposition only lasted the day and he is as right as rain now, and having a wonderful holiday with his sisters. They take daily walks and drives and there are dances and balls many evenings. My boy has filled two sketchbooks already and has made a very fetching drawing of three of the girls in front of the Three Sisters rock formation! John is also preparing for his first year up at the University with a pile of his father's medical books but, of course, none of us will return home until the Disease has run its Terrible Course.

Up here the mountains really are Blue. Sometimes I find myself with the bliss of nothing else to do but read, and although I miss my dear home at least I am away from that dreaded Assurance Company which I loathe almost as much as the Plague!

Love, etc

As fear of the plague gripped Sydney, the Sydney Morning Herald devoted an increasing amount of space to the disease, tracing its route from China to Australia. Ironically, on the very day the pestilence reached Sydney the newspaper published a long article featuring the local sanitary expert's opinion that there was not the slightest occasion for alarm.

Official reaction was criminally slow. Although the first plague victims and their near neighbours had been quarantined by February, no plan for eradicating the plague was put into action until later that month, and hence the Summer was almost over when cleaning crews began to wash down backyards and streets, whitewash and fumigate houses, and the rat killers with their poisons and intrepid terriers swept through large areas of the city. Under sanitary inspector supervision, dredges began to excavate the putrid harbour bed and clear the stinking waste under bridges and around the wharves. Debris was burned in the streets or punted off into the ocean and the vaccination program continued. The final death toll was calculated to be in excess of 100, but many people believed the government hid a much greater fatality count from the distressed citizenry.

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