

## Book Reviews

the learned societies in towns like Spalding, Derby, and Birmingham that began as domestic gatherings. The chapter on Dissenting academies notes how influential were the works of such writers as Joseph Priestley, Isaac Watts, and Philip Doddridge, whose pedagogical ideas were shaped by their experience in those institutions; and in two chapters on botanical gardens, Elliott links European-wide debates about classification and nomenclature to the horticultural practices adopted in particular English towns.

At several points, Elliott uses his own archival research to add detail to the overall picture. His previous book on Derby informs the chapter on Erasmus Darwin's botanical gardens, and that on the significance of county towns. Another chapter presents a case study of Nottingham, describing the importance of learned societies, visiting lecturers, and local Dissenting clergy in sustaining the scientific culture of that town. The final chapter sketches the career of Abraham Bennet, a Derbyshire clergyman, electrician, and meteorologist. Elliott shows that Bennet's scientific work was nurtured by connections to the aristocratic Cavendish and Russell families, and to experimenters in Birmingham, Manchester, and London. At the same time, it was specifically rooted in the climatic and geological peculiarities of the Peak District, and in the concerns of the local lead-mining industry.

The book is enriched by nearly fifty illustrations, including maps and plans, though one wishes for more originality in the choice of a cover image. (The over-familiar Joseph Wright, again!) Strong as it is on specific information, it is weaker on the level of interpretation. The passages in which Elliott summarises the perspectives of other historians are hampered by a wooden prose style and a tendency to avoid taking sides on contentious issues; for example the role of freemasonry in Enlightenment scientific institutions. This limits the book's analytical bite. There are also too many sentences that cry out for the attention of a rigorous copyeditor, which it seems the publisher did not provide.

Nonetheless, the book will be valued for its coverage of recent scholarship, its original contributions to the field, and its stimulus to further thought about the geography of science in Enlightenment England.

**Jan Golinski,**

University of New Hampshire

**Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Louis Landa and David Roberts (eds), Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. xxxvii + 265, £8.99, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-19-957283-0.**

'Oh! Death, Death, Death!' screams a woman from the window of a house near Cornhill. No neighbours stir and the street is deserted save for the book's narrator. What does he do? Noting a chill in his blood, the man then simply continues his journey through the City of London streets. This book is a fascinating record of trying to cope during the capital's last plague epidemic of 1665.

Daniel Defoe was only around five years old during the Great Plague that claimed nearly 100,000 lives. This makes *A Journal of the Plague Year*, originally published in 1722, an imaginative reconstruction. Its shadowy narrator, known only as 'H.F.', seeks to record the terrifying progress of a disease that had no known cause and therefore no known cure. Defoe uses his skills as a journalist, novelist and Londoner to knit together evidence with storytelling. In doing so, he presents a vivid picture of a plague epidemic, but also the mean streets of seventeenth-century London. Some inhabitants are shown to be brave and caring, but many are understandably plain scared, confused and desperate. The most sensational and wicked acts tend to be reported as hearsay with the weekly bills of mortality acting as sobering anchors of evidence.

It ought to be noted that 'H.F.' is not the easiest of companions. 'As I said before,' 'I

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mentioned above' and 'as I have observed' are common phrases for a narrator who thinks nothing of digression and repetition.

Obsessively noting down the exact route of his journeys is another characteristic. These most human of idiosyncrasies should not detract from the fact that *A Journal* is the most comprehensive account of plague we have. Defoe had done his homework, and the most likely printed sources he used for the novel are listed in the explanatory notes.

This edition has a new introduction by Professor David Roberts, Head of English at Birmingham City University. Roberts is particularly interesting when considering the publishing environment of Defoe's time. As a new plague epidemic threatened Europe, books on the theme became increasingly popular. Roberts identifies Richard Bradley's *The Plague at Marseilles Consider'd* as the subject's bestseller for the period. During 1721, Bradley's book went into five editions. *A Journal* did not do nearly as well, with a second reprint only appearing in 1755. In contrast, four editions of *Robinson Crusoe* were published in about as many months when it first appeared. Concentrating on *Moll Flanders* first may have cost Defoe and his publishers dearly. Roberts wonders whether they were a few months too late with *A Journal* to fully capitalise on the market. It is perhaps significant that Defoe's book was the last substantial title to appear on plague during this period. Whether the swine flu epidemic of 2009–10 inspired this new edition from OUP is unclear.

*A Journal* is perhaps Defoe's most undervalued novel and it is heartening to see *Oxford World's Classics* repackage it. Whether the indistinct photograph of a sixteenth-century charnel house door from France used for the front cover will stand the test of time is a small detail. The compact font sizes are perhaps more troublesome. Aside from Roberts's introduction, this edition's value lies in largely retaining Louis Landa's exhaustive notes from the 1969 edition. A four-page appendix

includes a succinct 'A Medical Note' of the plague, with an analysis of Defoe's understanding of the disease. The topographical index will be sufficient for many, but Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert's *The London Encyclopaedia* (London: Macmillan, 2008) is recommended. A screen with Google Maps or a hardcopy street atlas may also be wise as Defoe's London is still largely there for the walking.

Alice Ford-Smith,  
Dr Williams's Library

**Maurits H. van den Boogert**, *Aleppo Observed: Ottoman Syria Through the Eyes of Two Scottish Doctors, Alexander and Patrick Russell*, The Arcadian Library (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 256, £120.00, hardback, ISBN: 978-0-19-95885-5.

The Russell brothers wrote their book *The Natural History of Aleppo* as the result of their passion for knowledge, their natural curiosity, and their experiences accumulated in the long years they lived and worked in the Ottoman Syrian city of Aleppo. Therefore, very soon after the initial one volume edition, written by the Scottish physician Alexander Russell, was published in 1756, this work became an important milestone of scientific and practical knowledge of the Near East. The second, a two volume edition, expanded and published by Patrick in 1794, was based on further scientific and practical knowledge that was acquired by him while serving as a physician in Aleppo, after his half-brother Alexander and following in his footsteps.

Many issues are the subject of Maurits H. van den Boogert's book *Aleppo Observed*; the most important are: the Russells' book; the scientific information it contains; the authors and their unique life stories; the period of scientific study; and research of remote lands and other religions and societies. Maurits van