

Hercules Rollock and the Edinburgh Plague of 1585

By Karen Jillings



16th century map of Edinburgh courtesy of Peter Stubbs at EdinPhoto

Due to the overwhelming social and psychological devastation it caused, plague was an evocative subject for pre-modern writers and poets in Scotland as elsewhere. Robert Henryson's *Ane Prayer for the Pest*, in which he pleads with God to spare Dunfermline from the 'perrelus pestilens' at the turn of the sixteenth century, is perhaps one of the best known examples in poetry, while Peter Goldman's *Description of the Desolation of Dundee* has been identified as providing an eloquent description of the typhus, or spotted fever, that pre-empted the plague outbreak in that city in 1607.¹ This article discusses [*De Peste Edinburgi & reliqua late Scotia grassante anno 1585: Nania*](#), a neglected poem which focuses, as the title indicates, on an epidemic that afflicted Edinburgh and much of the rest of the country in 1585. Its author was the scholar and advocate Hercules Rollock, who gained renown as the author of some forty neo-Latin poems, virtually all of which became included posthumously in Sir John Scot and Arthur Johnston's anthology, the *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* of 1637.²

The 'journalistic' poem *De Peste Edinburgi* was written to commemorate one of the most severe if short-lived epidemics the city had experienced in almost two decades. A case of infection was detected in the port of West Wemyss in July 1584, and the spread of plague throughout Fife over the subsequent months prompted precautionary legislation to be enacted by urban authorities as far afield as Glasgow and Elgin, and caused the Privy Council to promulgate a concerted series of preventative measures 'for the inconvenient that mycht grow be the pestilence now spread'. Despite magistrates in Edinburgh almost immediately prohibiting the importation of goods from Flanders (where the infection was supposed to have originated) and subsequently restricting the movement of goods and people between the city and the infected areas across the Firth of Forth, their orders were insufficient to prevent the arrival of plague in the city at the end of April 1585. The grim discovery of two dead bodies in a house in the Fishmarket Close heralded eight months during which the epidemic decimated the city, killing perhaps ten per cent of the population,³ and dominated magistrates' regular council business. The effect of plague on Edinburgh was felt equally throughout much of Scotland at that time: such was the extent of the epidemic nationally that the parliament for the month of December that year was forced to meet in the fields outside Dunfermline, as not one of the principal burghs was then free from infection.

During the 1585 outbreak in Edinburgh Rollock was principal of the High School there, a post he had taken up the previous year, and so his description of the plague's impact was based on personal experience. He depicts a typically prosperous, virtuous and just city struck down by 'the anger of the holy divinity' as a result of the citizens' 'foul deeds' and the consequent devastation of a locality 'deprived of [its] inhabitants', whose 'cornfields are exposed to a contagious evil' and whose streets 'accustomed to be trod upon by repeated footfall grow fearful in their loneliness' due to death and desertion on a massive scale. For Rollock the 'fleeing troop of powerful citizens' is the most obvious consequence of the epidemic and the remainder of his poem denounces the foolishness of those who believe that they can escape God's retribution, because He 'will hunt [them] down with a keen-witted search'. Rollock's interpretation of the outbreak as the direct result of divine fury was an unquestioned belief that also underpinned the efforts, whether of governments, medical practitioners or Kirk authorities to combat plague. The General Assembly of February 1588 listed the sorts of behaviour that had entailed 'the wrath of God already kindled' through the disease: 'swearing,

perjury and lies [...] profaning of the Sabbath day with merkats, gluttonie, drunkenness, fighting, playing, dancing etc., with rebelling against magistrats and laws of the countrey, [...] with incest, fornication, adulteries and sacrilege, theft and oppression, with false witness, and finalie, with all kind of impiety and wrong'. In the only published plague treatise of Scottish origin, *Ane Breve Descriptioun of the Pest* (1568), the Aberdeen physician Gilbert Skene had acknowledged that since plague was 'ane scourge and punischment of the maist iust God' for sin, the singular most effective method of preventing or eliminating the disease was repentance in order to 'pacifie his wrathe aganis vs'.⁴ Meritorious works such as almsgiving and bequests to churches were commonly undertaken during outbreaks, while communal fasts and public humiliations were regularly ordered by Kirk elders and burgh councils to combat an outbreak or give thanks for its cessation.

While divine omnipotence was accepted as the overarching agent of plague, this by no means precluded concerted attempts to tackle the secondary causes of the disease. Communities in Scotland had become used to recurrent epidemics over time and, while this did not lessen the impact of each one as a lived experience, government authorities came to respond to plague in a variety of established ways which they built on (quantitatively if not qualitatively) during successive outbreaks. Skene's treatise, which was most likely published in response to a severe plague in Edinburgh and its environs in 1568, recommended measures to avoid and overcome infection which, though aimed at the individual, could equally be applied to the wider commonwealth. Indeed, his advice reflected standard legislation that had been implemented by governments throughout Scotland at both the local and national level over at least the preceding century, and which mirrored those long promulgated by continental (though seldom, at this stage, English) counterparts.

These measures were based on ideas about disease causation and transmission that had changed very little since they were first suggested by classical Greek medical writers such as Hippocrates and Galen. Plague was understood to be a particularly malevolent disease that originated in environmental corruption (in its widest sense) and spread both through polluted airborne vapours and contact (both direct and indirect) with sources of infection, be they people, animals or inanimate objects such as cloth. During the 1585 outbreak magistrates in Edinburgh tried to eliminate such sources by cleaning up communal water

supplies, by regulating the disposal of the contents of private privies, and by removing the middens that habitually piled up in the streets. Officials monitored Edinburgh's entrances at the Nether Bow and the West Port to ensure that anyone wishing to enter the city possessed a testimonial confirming they were 'clean' (that is, plague-free), and residents were banned from harbouring unlicensed travellers, vagabonds or strangers. Commerce was forbidden with infected places including Leith and Perth, and produce was only to be sold at designated areas of the city. Goods suspected of harbouring plague were disinfected by boiling or burning (hence Rollock's reference to 'averting the evil with water and flame'), while restrictions were placed on the movements of domesticated animals such as pigs, cats and dogs. Public gatherings, 'quhairby infectioun daylie aryses', were also prohibited. Those residents who did succumb to plague were segregated from healthy inhabitants by being forcibly enclosed within their houses (usually with the rest of their household, even if this effectively condemned healthy occupants to infection) or segregated in purpose-built huts outside the city boundaries. Those who were fortunate enough to recover from infection were reintroduced gradually to the community by being forced to remain housebound for a further fifteen days, after which time they were allowed to mix once again with healthy inhabitants.

Rollock acknowledges these concerted attempts of council officials to protect those they governed from plague, albeit by noting their ultimate futility: 'Nor can the daily and nightly efforts of vigilant attendants [keep the inhabitants safe], nor can the wise old age of the Elders devise any relief from public sorrows [...]' In spite of the economic dislocation occasioned by the restrictions imposed on regional and international commerce as well as on the sale of certain goods, and the destruction of suspect commodities, magistrates invested considerable sums in their frequent efforts to combat the spread of plague and the disruption and mortality it caused.⁵ They found it necessary to hire various personnel to undertake the main tasks associated with this including cleansers (procured from Dysart, Wemyss and even Flanders), watchers, guards and grave-diggers, as well as a surgeon to diagnose and treat cases using whatever 'unguents, drogs, implasteris and uther mendicaments' he required. Other purchases included a cauldron and a kiln in which to boil or burn infected goods, and new clothes to replace those destroyed in this disinfection process. 'Fyve or sex' lodges were constructed on the Boroughmuir in which to house confirmed or suspected plague victims, and a gibbet and iron shackles were installed there to deter any who tried

to escape (and the errant 'fowle hangman' found himself subjected to the latter). It was also necessary to provide for the upkeep of residents, both those left destitute within the city including homeless children and the deserving poor, and also those quarantined in the lodges, for whom a special hut was constructed in which to keep the food and drink they were given.

The devastating circumstances that occasioned these measures were exacerbated by the exodus from the city of 'the hail peipell quhilk wer abill to flee', as the diarist Robert Birrel put it.⁶ Flight from sources of infection was recommended by many physicians as a sensible (if contentious) course of action, though Gilbert Skene in his *Breve Descriptioun* disapproved of those who were 'mair studious of thair awine helthe [than that] of the commoun weilthe'.⁷ A significant number of those who fled were members of the clergy, who apparently lacked the 'Christian charitie' that Skene had noted they ought to have possessed. On 25 August the city was reported to be 'presentlie destitute of ministers', while on 15 December it was still 'destitute of eldares and deaconis'. Their absence denied sufferers spiritual ministry in their last moments, and compounded what was necessarily a lonely and fearful death occasioned by the segregation of victims from healthy family members so that, as Rollock lamented, 'neither does the wife catch her dying husband's final breath, nor does the son his dying parent's'. Even in death plague victims were mistreated by being denied a proper funeral: 'when thus finally the body lies lifeless and bloodless in ominous death, it is not then surrounded by a linen shroud, and [with] a mourning chorus following the procession'. Instead, as the poem graphically described, 'the body is committed to the urn [...] by a hook, through the shortest route and in the dark of night, a corpse-bearer drags it, boldly he thrusts it into a gaping ditch stinking with foul sulphurous vapours'. The pragmatic need to deal with mortality on a massive scale by ensuring the quick and efficient burial of bodies lay behind this crude and impersonal method, and also behind the magistrates' denouncement of illicit burials on the Boroughmuir without the use of a bier, which had been purchased so that corpses no longer had to be carried on men's backs, and the subsequent restricting of burials to a designated spot so that they could be supervised by council officials.

That Edinburgh's local government was severely disrupted by plague is attested to by the regular need throughout the epidemic to appoint council members 'in place of thame that ar deceaset and absent'. Nevertheless, the concerted

bureaucratic measures taken to combat plague show that the fundamental mechanisms of government did not fall apart, although occasionally it was necessary to admonish those in charge to accept their offices '[so] that the towne be nocht left desolatt', and a new provost was chosen on 1 December due to the absence of the previous incumbent. On 17 September eight men were appointed deacons for the year to come for their constant service in overseeing the governance of Edinburgh even though their colleagues had fled, a selfless act lauded by Rollock: 'Behold four men and as many counsellors directing the city, zealously have they taken a solemn oath on behalf of the public health'. Although the poet lamented that such 'truly human effort is, and always will be pointless to an unwilling God', this fatalistic attitude was not shared by those who tackled plague in practical ways and perhaps serves rather to emphasise the overarching message of the poem, that flight from the source of infection—the temporal manifestation of divine wrath—is ultimately futile because 'no one wicked and insolent escapes [God's] retribution'. But the poem is not entirely pessimistic; indeed, it ends on a wholly positive note with the plague conquered, evidence of divine benevolence following eventual communal repentance, with the city restored once more to the prosperous, virtuous and just state for which it was praised in the opening verses. This gives the poem a cyclical feel, mirroring the cyclical nature of plague: the disease arises within a community and throws it into sustained and devastating chaos until eventually the affliction ends and the proud city is restored to order, as indeed occurred in Edinburgh by early 1586. Hercules Rollock's *De Peste Edinburgi* is, ultimately, a reminder to contemporaries that avenging plague is ever poised to strike but that with due repentance and deference to God it can be alleviated. Further, though it provides modern readers with an insight into the devastation the disease could cause, it also indicates that while an outbreak might initially have appeared to an afflicted community to be an unmitigated disaster, those whom the disease threatened could demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity and, whether through providence or the best efforts of medical, bureaucratic and Kirk personnel, episodic plague could apparently be vanquished.

References & Further Information

¹ R.C. B[ui]st], 'Peter Goldman's Description of the Desolation of Dundee', in *British Medical Journal* vol. I, no. 3453 (1927), p.478.

² Rollock's poem has recently been resurrected by its inclusion in the ongoing ARHC-funded digitisation project of the *Delitiae*, based at Glasgow University, and all quotes in this article from the poem are taken from [the project's English translation](#).

³ J.R.D. Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.259. The diarist Robert Birrell believed it to have killed '14 hundredth and some odd'; 'The Diarey of Robert Birrel, Burges of Edinburghe', in *Fragments of Scottish History* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1798), p.23.

⁴ Gilbert Skene, *Ane Breve Descriptioun of the Pest, Quhair in the Causis, Signis and sum speciall preseruatioun and cure thair of ar contenit* (Edinburgh, 1568), pp. 5, 17.

⁵ The council found it necessary in June to levy an emergency tax of 1,000 pounds to combat the epidemic, as its finances were exhausted, and the rates and customs did not yield any revenue.

⁶ 'The Diarey of Robert Birrel', p.23.

⁷ Skene, *Breve Descriptioun*, p.15.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*