

A Review of Literature Published:
The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1920

HIST 297

Marianne E. Brokaw

Professor Ferrell

2 December 2016

Abstract

The Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 left millions of people dead world- wide with more than half a million of those mortalities in the United States. This tragedy provided historians with a never ending opportunity for research and further writing. As medical technology evolved, so did the interpretations of this technology. Scholars were able to readdress the pandemic which allowed for further understanding of the fatal virus and its cause.

Monographs pertaining to the Spanish flu pandemic changed in part due to medical technology and investigative work. Two of the works reviewed in this essay were published during the swine flu scare of 1976.

Of the other works reviewed, three gave a complete historiography of the pandemic. The authors of these works varied in background; one a journalist, one a graduate school dropout and the co-authors medical professionals. All three works were well researched, using a variety of primary and secondary sources. One of the monographs varied from the others in that it was written like a modern-day thriller. All the works however, provided information to the reader that overlapped, thus giving the reader the most complete story of the Spanish influenza pandemic possible.

The Spanish influenza pandemic that swept through the United States in 1918 lasted two years and killed more than a half a million Americans. World-wide, the numbers were even more staggering. Medical professionals estimated that fifty to one hundred-million people were killed by this horrific plague. According to Gina Kolata, *New York Times* staff journalist and author of *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It* (1999), if a deadly virus such as the Spanish influenza of 1918 attacked today, in one year it would kill more people than AIDS, heart disease, all cancers, strokes, Alzheimer's disease, and chronic pulmonary disease combined.¹ The monographs that addressed this deadly plagued varied in one distinct manner. The three monographs published before 1980 took a medical approach. The monographs written after 1980 used new medical technology to address the Spanish influenza, but these monographs provided more historical information regarding the Spanish influenza, its social origins and spread, and the outcome of the pandemic.

Works that addressed the Spanish influenza pandemic in the earlier part of twentieth-century referenced the Spanish influenza pandemic in support of other events in history such as World War I. In addition to these works that supported other historical events referencing the Spanish influenza, were works that included the Spanish influenza to support the history of other diseases specifically. These works referenced the Spanish influenza from a medical perspective and linked its history to the history of other diseases and medical practices.

¹ Gina Kolata, *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), ix.

One such work was Geddes Smith's, *A Plague On Us*, published in 1941. In addition to the Spanish influenza,² this monograph gave a history of the black death,³ Asiatic cholera,⁴ and yellow fever.⁵ After giving a history of each of these four diseases, Smith focused on other outbreaks of each disease throughout history. She focused on the causes and effects of each disease in correlation to each other. Smith used the Spanish influenza as a supportive role to each of the other three diseases.

Unlike Smith's monograph that used the history of the Spanish influenza along with the histories of other diseases to support each other, Alfred Crosby's *Epidemic and Peace, 1918* published in 1976 focused on the spread of the flu throughout the United States. Crosby, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Texas, Austin, used his expertise in history and American studies to provide the reader with a well-researched and well-presented history of the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918. Crosby chronicled the rapid spread of the flu marking its start at the Army training center at Camp Devens, Massachusetts in 1918 and its spread westward.⁶ Crosby made note of the social ramifications and disruption caused by the outbreak when he wrote of the closings of churches and schools.⁷ Crosby included in his writing various charts and statistics that supported his research.

² Geddes Smith, *A Plague On Us* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1941), 24-31.

³ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20-23.

⁶ Alfred W. Crosby Jr., *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*. (West Port, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

A text published just one year after Crosby's *Epidemic and Peace*, was W.I.B. Beveridge's *Influenza: The Last Great Plague* (1977). Beveridge, an animal pathologist was born in Australia in 1908. He served as the director of the Institute of Animal Pathology at Cambridge University in England. Beveridge wrote his monograph on influenza in a strikingly different manner and methodology than Crosby. Beveridge investigated the pandemic from the medical perspective of an animal pathologist. He inquired into how the influenza virus worked and what has made one influenza virus stronger than another throughout recent history. This inquiry led him to investigate the link between animal flus and human infection.⁸ Beveridge's monograph was written from the perspective of a medical professional while Crosby's was written from the perspective of a historian. Even though these monographs differ in methodology, they were published at approximately the same time. The publication of these two monographs occurred as the United States encountered another influenza scare: the swine flu.

The swine flu of 1976 sent the United States into a panic. It was speculated by medical professionals that the virus attacking America had the potential to kill a million citizens. This theory was based on the statistical data regarding the 1918 flu pandemic. If half a million American people died between 1918 and 1920 and the U.S. population had since doubled, the only conclusion was a catastrophic mortality rate.⁹ The Centers for Disease Control quickly developed a flu vaccine. President Gerald Ford urged all Americans to be inoculated against the flu. President Ford was photographed being vaccinated himself in support of the vaccine even

⁸ W.I.B. Beveridge, *Influenza: The Last Great Plague* (New York: Prodist, 1977), 84.

⁹ Kolata, *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza*, 146.

after several patients died post-vaccination.¹⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that Beveridge, an animal pathologist and Crosby, a historian, published works about the Spanish influenza pandemic around the same time as the swine flu medical crisis of 1976.

Beveridge did not cite outside sources in a bibliography or in notes. His work as an animal pathologist was the source used for his monograph. In addition to his own work, he incorporated archived photographs and charts, giving credit to the sources from which he obtained them. Crosby, on the other hand, cited a variety of sources. Crosby had an impressive bibliography. Like Beveridge, he also included statistical charts.

Crosby republished *Epidemic and Peace* in 1989 under a new title, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, and used a different publisher. Considering that a new and, at the time, almost always deadly virus, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), was on the rise this republication was not a surprise to this reader. Many works written regarding HIV included the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 for statistical and medical comparisons.

A Cruel Wind: Pandemic Flu in America, 1918-1920, published in 2008, was authored by Dorothy Pettit and Janice Bailie. This work structured the historiography of the Spanish influenza pandemic in chronological order based on the timing of the events. This organizational method was helpful to this student making it a simpler read than Beveridge's work which was written as a strict, medical structured text. It was probably for that reason that Esylit W. Jones stated in her review of the book published in the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, "It will be

¹⁰ Ibid., This information was published as a caption of a photo. There is no page number, but the photo's location is in a gallery of photos between pages 176 and 177.

of interest to a general audience and perhaps slightly less interest to academic historians. . .¹¹

Considering that Bailie studied Molecular Biology at Queen's University in Belfast¹² a more rigid writing style of writing was expected by this student. This style could have been the influence of her co-author, Pettit, a historian. Additionally, what set this monograph apart from the previously mentioned works by Crosby and Beveridge was its bibliography and historical timeline.

A Cruel Wind had a bibliography that contained an unbelievable variety of sources. Pettit and Bailey used primary sources such as diaries, letters, memoirs, and newspapers. Their secondary source list, which included monographs, government documents and periodicals, was equally impressive.

This monograph covered not only the outbreak of the Spanish influenza at Fort Devins, Massachusetts, as did Crosby's, but it took advantage of years of scientific research and historical fact-finding that occurred since the initial publication of *Epidemic and Peace* (1976). Using the large number of sources that they did, Pettit and Bailie introduced documentation of a soldier's illness in Kansas that may have established the source of the influenza outbreak as more likely to be soldiers in Kansas and not those at Fort Devins.¹³ *A Cruel Wind* not only presented

¹¹ Esylit W. Jones, review of *Cruel Wind: Pandemic Flu in America, 1918-1920*, by Janice Bailie and Dorothy A. Pettit, *Bulletin of History of Medicine* 83, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 631-632.

¹² Janice Bailie. Linked in, accessed 13 November 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/janice-bailie-328a3434>

¹³ Janice Bailie and Dorothy A. Pettit, *A Cruel Wind: Pandemic Flu in America, 1918-1920* (Murfreesboro, TN: Timberlake Books, 2008), 54.

new information, but expanded on the causation of the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 and remarked on the more recent medical progress that was made in disease prevention.

Gina Kolata, a *New York Times* staff writer, felt compelled to write her book, *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It* (1999) after writing an article for the *Times* in 1997 about a scholarly paper published in the journal *Science*.¹⁴ The article, according to the prologue in Kolata's book, was about an attempt to decipher the genetic code of the virus that was responsible for the 1918 epidemic. Kolata, who was a biology major in college, had never heard of the Spanish Influenza of 1918 in neither her virology class nor her history class that covered the twentieth-century. After writing her article for the *Times*, thus learning about the Spanish influenza pandemic, she found this omission baffling.

Kolata wrote her book very much in the same way as Pettit and Bailie wrote theirs. Like Pettit and Bailie, Kolata used a historical timeline that discussed the same movement of the virus across the United States from east to west from the beginning of the outbreak to the end making it repetitious. Kolata's book also mirrored Crosby's by putting the outbreak epicenter in Massachusetts. Kolata also referenced medical breakthroughs and events in *Flu*, such as the swine flu that effected the United States in 1976. She was able to do this because the new information was available to her at the time she researched her monograph and then published it.

Two additional monographs about the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 were Pete Davies', *Devil's Flu: The World's Deadliest Influenza Epidemic and the Scientific Hunt for the Virus That Caused It* (2000) and John M. Barry's *The Great Influenza* (2004). Published within

¹⁴ Kolata, *Flu*, ix.

four years of each other, these two works differed greatly in style and in background of the authors which was evident to the reader.

Devil's Flu, a monograph, was written in the style of a modern day thriller. Davies incorporated a timeline that began in 1997 when Hong Kong was struck by the bird flu and ended in 1998 with the International Symposium on Influenza that took place in Hawaii. Davies chronicled the bird flu and the struggle faced by government and medical agencies to contain it through story telling that contained flashbacks in time and personal narratives. Although promoted as a work about the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918, this student did not interpret the monograph as such. This student read *Devil's Flu* and saw it as not solely written about the Spanish flu of the early twentieth century, but as a monograph that intertwined the history of the Spanish flu with the need to stop the bird flu, making each inseparable one from the other. Although not citing any sources, Davies, offered the reader suggestions for additional reading such as the article in *Science* (1997)¹⁵ that motivated Kolata to write her monograph. Davies acknowledged Crosby's work regarding the Spanish flu pandemic. Davies also recommended *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939)¹⁶ an autobiographical work by Katherine Anne Porter.

The final work on the Spanish influenza pandemic was *The Great Influenza* (2004) by John M. Barry. Barry, like most authors, used a variety of primary sources including newspapers and journal articles to complete his work. Barry also acknowledged the use of unpublished materials, such as dissertations. Collecting and using numerous and various sources gave credibility to his work as a historian and a scholar.

¹⁵ Pete Davies, *The Devil's Flu: The World's Deadliest Influenza Epidemic and the Scientific Hunt for the Virus That Caused It* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), **PAGE**

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 305.

The Great Influenza also used a timeline when producing and documenting the history of the Spanish influenza in the United States. What was unique about Barry's timeline was that its first historical marker was the founding of Johns Hopkins University in 1876.¹⁷ Barry used this event to draw the reader to the attention of the established medical system that was existent at the time of the pandemic. This viewpoint presented by Barry, offered the reader insight into the medical advancements of the time-period. For the reader, having been given this history was a welcomed change from the timelines in the previous monographs.

Barry also set himself apart from the other authors and scholars previously mentioned by not having a medical background. Barry is an award-winning author. His books include *The Great Influenza*, *The Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (1998) and *Power Plays: Politics, Football, and Other Blood Sports* (2001).

The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1920 was presented in these seven works in some similar ways and in some very different ways. Smith's *Plague On Us* and Beveridge's *Influenza the Last Great Plague* were written almost exclusively from the medical perspective. These books were very detail and fact oriented. Smith and Beveridge both used the history of the Spanish influenza to offer evidence in support of other diseases and vice versa. Beveridge presented the history in an antiseptic manner. Beveridge focused his writing on the causes of the flu and its spread. He reported on the research that was conducted with little regard to the social ramifications of the pandemic.

Other than Beveridge's and Davies' works, the monographs share the commonality of extensive sources. Although, Davies does mention Crosby and the article that Kolata reviewed

¹⁷ John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Viking, 2004), 11.

for the *New York Times*. Additionally, the monographs all, in one manner or another, offer a chronological history of the Spanish influenza pandemic.

Davies' book is least like any of the others based on the style that it is written. Smith, Beveridge, and Crosby focused their works on the medical background of the Spanish influenza and subsequent research where as Kolata and Pettit and Bailie presented more historiographical texts. For this reader, Davies' book, *Devil's Flu*, was in a unique category of its own. It contained the historical elements of the other monographs. However, it read like a suspense thriller, making it difficult for this reader to enjoy as a scholarly work.

Collectively, these seven monographs provided a complete history of the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918. Most of the information contained within each overlapped the others. Additionally, all used a time-line of events to organize the historical information. The different styles used, such as medical information being the sole template for three of these monographs, set these works apart from each other.

"I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work." My daughter, Marie, proofread this paper and gave limited feedback regarding verb tense and punctuation. Enclosed is the copy she edited.

Marianne E. Brokaw

Bibliography

- Bailie, Janice and Dorothy A. Pettit. *Cruel Wind: Pandemic Flu in America, 1918-1920*. Murfreesboro, TN: Timberlake Books, 2008.
- Barry, John A. *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*. New York: Viking, 2004.
- Beveridge, W.I.B. *Influenza: The Last Great Plague*. New York. Prodist, 1977.
- Crosby, Alfred W., Jr. *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Crosby, Alfred W., Jr. *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*. West Port, CT. Greenwood Press, 1976.
- Davies, Pete. *The Devil's Flu: The World's Deadliest Influenza Epidemic and the Scientific Hunt for the Virus That Caused It*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000.
- Jones, Esylit W. Review of *Cruel Wind: Pandemic Flu in America*, by Janice Bailie and Dorothy A. Pettit. *Bulletin of History of Medicine* 83, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 631-632.
- Kolata, Gina. *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999.
- Linked in. Linked in. Accessed 13 November 2016. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/janice-bailie-328a3434>
- University of Texas. The University of Texas at Austin. Accessed 12 November 2016. <http://www.utexas.edu>