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The *Illustrated London News* and Public Health

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Various source media, *Illustrated London News* Historical Archive 1842-2003



Introduction

The Victorian periodical press enabled contemporary readers to access the 'code' by which people made sense of the reality of urban living. With rapid growth and urbanization came new hazards and competing bodies of knowledge (Kent, 1989, p.5). This was particularly evident within the field of public health, as different diseases emerged requiring regulation. The most virulent of these diseases, prompting widespread fear, was cholera. Cholera's return in 1849 challenged existing beliefs about the transmission of the disease that had continued to circulate since the first epidemic of 1832. Newspapers and magazine were actively engaged in campaigning for reform throughout the 1840s and 1850s, though their lack of complete success was evident with the return of cholera in 1854 and, though on a smaller scale, in 1866. *The Illustrated London News* captured the breadth of debates through a variety of articles, images, advertisements and reports. A 'Basic Search' on 'public health' in the 'entire document' from 1842 through to December 1901 returns over 500 hits, with 44 being lead 'keywords'. However, a more specific search on 'cholera' for the same period returns 2562 hits. Therefore whilst there are advantages to broader searches, the full benefits of *The Illustrated London News* Historical Archive cannot be unlocked in one sitting. The researcher must familiarise themselves not only with the breadth of the themes addressed under their topic but also the full range of facilities that the archive offers.

Two Distinct Phases of Public Health Reform

A range of narrative frameworks for discussing sanitary reform evolved in the 1840s, including the verbal and

visual rhetoric developed by magazines and newspapers like *Punch* and *The Illustrated London News*. As the style and character of the newspaper evolved so too did the public's knowledge of public health resulting in two clearly discernible phases of reform. Published in the same year as *The Illustrated London News*, Chadwick's 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* heralded a sanitary revolution. Chadwick's Report marked the beginning of the first phase of reform. The second phase of sanitary reform from 1849 was characterised by a more systematic development of specific welfare services to promote health and prevent disease. Though the first phase of reform's key principles are frequently associated with Chadwick, they were not so different from those theories about squalor and disease that had emerged in the 1830s. Many of the early entries on 'Public Health' and 'Cholera' in *The Illustrated London News* were not accompanied by images and were similar to *The Times*' style of reportage, focusing on facts, figures and legislation. "Public Health" Saturday, 11 December, 1847 for example not only draws directly from material in *The Times* but also uses statistics from the Registrar-General's office to speculate on the imminent return of cholera. It was not until the second era of reform that the topic of Public Health received a higher profile in the news, moving onto the front pages of *The Illustrated London News* (to only search for a specific section of the newspaper, use the 'Advanced Search' box and select from the categories listed at the bottom of the page).

Underpinning the two phases of reform was the acknowledgement that routine inspection was central to the project of improving the social conditions of the

poor (Yeo, 1996, p.96). John Simon, a leading figure in the second phase of reform, brought the medical knowledge and rhetoric that was lacking in Chadwick's approach and the second phase of reform was characterised by a discourse of sanitary science. In 1854 Chadwick left the General Board of Health and Simon established a medical "Commission for Scientific Inquiry" in which a new union was formed between medicine and public health. This unification brought completion, with the ideologies of both approaches to reform being conjoined by the formation of the Association of Metropolitan Medical Officers of Health in 1856. However, the rhetoric of sanitary science can be traced before this period in Simon's appointment as first Medical Officer of Health for the City of London. His first Medical Report on the City of London published in 1849, marked the beginning of the second phase of reform. However, a 'Basic Search' for 'John Simon' is surprisingly limited in its returns. A more specific 'Advanced Search' using 'Medical Officer' AND 'City of London' however demonstrates that there were many reports on his work in the 'Metropolitan News' section (for example, "Metropolitan News", Saturday, 10 November, 1949). Reading through a selection of these reports, it becomes evident that John Simon is referred to as 'Mr. Simon'. A renewed 'Basic Search' for 'Mr. Simon' does indeed then return many of the same entries listed under "Metropolitan News". The key to success with *The Illustrated London News* Historical Archive is therefore having the time to take advantage of the many search features that are available; if at first you don't succeed, try again!

Theories of Disease

The 'contagionist' theory, that disease was transmitted through physical contact, originated from the period of the bubonic plague in the Middle Ages. However, in contrast, cholera was scattered across different districts of the Metropolis, rich and poor, and this cast doubt on the theories of the contagionists. This is made apparent from a refined search within the results for 'cholera' looking specifically at 'People' which will further narrow the search into four categories; 'Births, Deaths and Marriages', 'Obituaries', 'Royalty' and 'Appointments and Notices'. There are 110 Death announcements and 47 Obituaries revealing the different social classes of people who were affected by the disease. Interestingly, the 'Death' column was also where the 'State of the Public Health' was occasionally discussed ("Births, Marriages, and Deaths in England", Saturday, 5 May, 1849). Though without a trademark image, the belief that cholera mortality returns "should stimulate all sanitary improvements" confirms the importance of reading even the smallest columns and commentaries in order to understand how the press was used as an agent to urge for sanitary reform. Anti-contagionists located the origin of disease in the atmosphere, carried by poisonous vapours or miasma (Williams, 1987). It was a hypothesis which led reformers like Edwin Chadwick to make fatal errors, namely supporting the evacuation of sewage into the Thames to prevent miasma thereby actually spreading infection through the water. For an overview of his work and career, see "Edwin Chadwick, Esq", Saturday, 22 January, 1848. Such confusion and anxiety about the propagation of disease is evident from the range of perspectives offered in *The Illustrated London News* as the paper sought to mediate the social crisis for its readers.

As reformers debated these different approaches, it became apparent that there was no clear distinction between the two schools and the doctrines of contagion and miasma were actually fused. It was not until the work of Robert Koch in 1883 when the cholera bacillus was discovered, that direct advances could be made in implementing a specific system of prevention against the disease (Morris, 1976, p.14). During the 1890s public interest in the advancement of scientific knowledge was further stimulated by Koch's work on consumption ("Professor Koch's Cure for Consumption", Saturday, 29 November, 1890). Featuring a large image of Koch, the article went on to review the Professor's report on his findings to the International Medical Congress, establishing Berlin as a centre of excellence for medical research. Alongside the overview of Koch's theories were three images which sought to visually explicate the science of his discoveries through an examination of the "bacilli of tubercular phthisis, seen through microscope" in a variety of stages of development. The use of such images facilitated a further level of comprehension beyond the text and opened up the possibility of a wider range of readers understanding the implications of Koch's work. Making such a topic accessible to their readers paved the way for a more enlightened public and in this way *The Illustrated London News* should be seen as playing a crucial role in the network of periodicals and newspapers that sought to advance public health reform.

Social Networks of Artists and Writers

As Brian Maidment and Patrick Leary have demonstrated (essays available under 'Essays') there were a broad range of artists and illustrators working

on *The Illustrated London News*. Many of them had worked, or continued to work, for a range of other contemporary periodicals and newspapers. The result was an acute awareness of the periodical market and the newspaper's competitors. However, it was also an arrangement which placed the writers and artists in a privileged and informed position and therefore able to represent the range of voices campaigning for reform. In the realisation that "steps had to be taken to promote health and to combat disease" it was acknowledged "that the measures involved in such action must be social as well as medical" (Rosen, 1974, p.67). Such 'social measures' were nowhere more discernible than in the periodical press, the pamphlets, letters, reports, works of fiction. Networks of communication were formed across different social groups which generated new ways of 'seeing' the city. Therefore, another distinctive feature of *The Illustrated London News Historical Archive* is the option to browse by 'Contributor'. This facilitates the researcher to identify who may be writing on the same theme for different newspapers and periodicals in order to further comprehend the breadth of the campaign for public health reform. However, it is a search facility that a specific level of knowledge should be brought to in order to achieve optimum results. Knowing that Mark Lemon was also the editor of *Punch* for example and creator of the *Christmas Almanack* provides a broader context from which to appreciate the eleven entries he has recorded for *The Illustrated London News*.

Conclusion

Throughout the nineteenth century and through into the twentieth century, *The Illustrated London News* mediated social crisis and health concerns

through both text and image. From the cholera epidemics of the 1840s, through to the flu crisis of the 1970s (“War on Flu”, Saturday, 10 January, 1970) and the AIDS moral panics of the 1980s (“Breaking the AIDS Taboo”, Saturday, 24 September, 1988), *The Illustrated London News* Historical Archive provides a valuable insight into the health of the nation and indeed the world.

FURTHER READING

Christopher Hamlin, *Cholera: The Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Christopher A. Kent, “The Construction of Victorian Reality” in J. Donn Vann and R. T. Van Arsdel (eds.), *Victorian Periodicals: A Guide to Research* Volume Two (New York: MLA, 1989)

R. J. Morris, *Cholera 1832: The Social Response to An Epidemic* (London: Croom Helm, 1976)

George Rosen, *From Medical Police to Social Medicine: Essays on the History of Health Care* (New York; Science History Publications, 1974)

A. Susan Williams, *The Rich Man and the Diseased Poor in Early Victorian Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1987)

Eileen Janes Yeo, *The Context for Social Science: Relations and Representations of Gender and Class* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996)

CITATION

Horrocks, Clare: "The *Illustrated London News* and Public Health." *Illustrated London News Historical Archive 1842-2003*: Cengage Learning, 2011

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