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# Introduction

Everyone can find dogs frightening. Almost all of us have been snapped at by a dog and many of us have crossed the road to avoid a potential confrontation with an aggressive animal. Now imagine that such dogs might be carrying a deadly disease, which, if you were bitten, might paralyse your body and unbalance your mind, before producing an inevitable agonising death. Rabies was and is such a disease. It was prevalent in Britain until its eradication in 1902, producing a regular death toll from its human form – hydrophobia. In this book, we return to the Victorian era when potentially rabid dogs lurked everywhere: at home, in the yard and on the street, in the press, in novels, in figures of speech, in popular memory, and in the imagination. The dread of rabies and hydrophobia was a constant presence and perpetual concern for the whole nineteenth century, and the threat of its re-emergence from imported animals continued throughout the twentieth century. The actual number of hydrophobia deaths was very small: only 1,225 were recorded between 1837 and 1902. But Victorians had to worry about any dog bite they received, and there were many because of the sheer number of stray and wild dogs around.<sup>1</sup>

Many commentators have observed that the public profile of rabies in Britain has been out of all proportion to its actual threat to health, but this misses the point that perceptions of risk are never rational and that, as this book will show, reactions to disease are socially and culturally revealing. In the late twentieth century, European states complained that the British government and its officials exaggerated the threat of imported rabies for political reasons, whilst the tabloids worried about foreign dog smugglers and foxes slipping into Kent through the Channel Tunnel. Indeed, Britain's rabies-free status became a feature of national identity; for example, it was used rhetorically by Margaret

Thatcher in the 1980s to exemplify the country's essential difference to Continental Europe – an island people, enjoying security and liberty behind secure borders. Yet, in popular culture the term 'Mad Dog' has become separated from rabies and associated with aggression and violence, as with the Ulster paramilitary leader Johnny 'Mad Dog' Adair, the 'bite-ye-legs' footballer Martin 'Mad Dog' Allen, and youth gangs like the Benchill Mad Dogs in south Manchester. Our medical and veterinary history of rabies is thus as much about the socio-cultural history of dogs and British identity, as it is about the understanding, prevention, and treatment of the disease.

This book is mostly about the Victorian era, with a final chapter on the twentieth century. We tell the story of how the incidence of rabies and hydrophobia waxed and waned over the nineteenth century, before their eradication in 1902.<sup>2</sup> We follow the interactions between medical, veterinary, government, and public knowledge and attitudes to rabies and hydrophobia, and explore the conflicts between these groups about how to control these diseases. Victorians were regularly reminded of the threat of rabies in popular memory, by word of mouth and through reports in newspapers. When rabies was present or feared, street posters warned of 'MAD DOGS' and 'HYDROPHOBIA', and instructed owners to keep their dog muzzled, on a lead or indoors. These notices were often posted during the Dog Days, the period from early July to early August that began with the rise of Sirius, the Dog Star, and coincided with the hottest time of the year. While rabies and hydrophobia were usually regarded as different forms of the same disease in different species, many professional and lay 'experts' held contrary views. Maybe they were quite distinct diseases, rabies in dogs being a physical disease and hydrophobia in humans being a mental disease. Or, perhaps, they were both imaginary, as many rabid dogs were assumed just to be aggressive, while many humans were thought to have the hysterical condition of spurious hydrophobia. By 1900, medical, veterinary, and lay opinion had closed around the view that rabies was a specific, contagious disease that was spread by the inoculation of a virus carried in saliva. Laboratory tests had made it possible to distinguish viral infection from spurious cases in fierce dogs and anxious people. Greater security had also been brought in 1885 by Louis Pasteur's preventive vaccine treatment for hydrophobia, which has an iconic status in medicine as being the world's first modern, medical breakthrough.<sup>3</sup>

In the twentieth century, most Britons saw rabies as a foreign, exotic disease which quarantine regulations kept out. It was associated first and foremost with dogs in Continental Europe and irresponsible owners who

might reintroduce the disease by evading quarantines. However, in the 1920s rabies was increasingly experienced as a tropical disease by doctors working in the Indian or Colonial Medical Services and by Britons serving overseas. It was, of course, in this context that Noel Coward's 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen' song, first performed in 1932, found resonance. However, rabies was not 'tropical' because of climate; rather, it was present in locations where street dogs were tolerated and where people lived close to the wild animals that could transmit the disease. By the end of the 1930s, most industrialised countries had followed Britain and had dog rabies under control, but in the 1940s a new situation emerged as rabies went 'wild'. For example, in the United States the threat came from racoons and skunks and in Europe from foxes and wolves. In the early twenty-first century rabies continues to be prevalent in many countries and is estimated to cause around 50,000 deaths worldwide each year, 44 per cent in Africa, and 56 per cent in Asia.<sup>4</sup> If treated early enough, almost of these people could be saved, but rabies remains typical of many disease problems in poor countries, where the issue is the lack of resources and infrastructure to deliver services.

What *is* rabies? Well, we would prefer not to tell you at this point. We would rather you learnt what rabies *was* and how understandings changed with our historical actors, so that you reach the current state of knowledge at the end of the book. This way you will better appreciate past ideas and actions in context, and be less likely to interpret them through today's understanding. It is a fundamental requirement of historical scholarship that we think ourselves into the mindset of past generations and understand their world in their terms. Furthermore, it is essential that we do not regard past ideas and actions that are different to ours as simply wrong or foolish. This approach has to be adopted in the history of medicine in exactly the same manner as in other areas. So, with diseases we have to approach the views of past generations as we do approach their views of politics or religion, to be understood *relative* to time and place, and to be explained in context, not judged against modern knowledge.<sup>5</sup> For example, understanding tuberculosis in the nineteenth century requires that we discuss it as the inherited affliction that Victorians knew it to be, not as the communicable disease we know today. It can be harder to be historically relativist about medicine because of the assumption that knowledge of the body and disease is cumulative and progressive; in other words, today's knowledge is 'right' and closer to the 'truth' than that of the Victorians. But remember that today's scientific experts on rabies are also 'relativists'. They accept that their knowledge of the disease is changing and will change;

indeed, most are research scientists working towards that very end! That said, if you cannot wait and want to know the current state of play with rabies in animals and humans, then this is discussed in Chapter 6. In addition, and in the spirit of historical relativism, we have included online sources for following future changes, should you be reading this book some years or decades hence.<sup>6</sup>

## **Why rabies?**

Why have we written a book on rabies? Indeed, why a book just on rabies in Britain – a country where the disease was stamped out a century ago, and where before then it was comparatively rare?<sup>7</sup> Our answer is that this narrative reveals important yet neglected features of the history of disease and medicine, and of British social and cultural history. Specifically, we highlight four themes: the relationships between human and veterinary medicine, the interactions of professional and popular understandings of disease, the role of state in controlling disease, and the changing place of the dog and dog ownership in British society.

Diseases that are communicable from animals to humans, and bridge veterinary and human medicine, have recently attracted a lot of attention, for example, Salmonella, variant CJD, and Avian influenza.<sup>8</sup> Many such conditions are emerging diseases, either truly novel or newly recognised, but infections transmitted from animals to humans also seem to be new because until recently they were not a serious danger to human health. They tended to be few in number, not transmit easily, and to be confined to certain groups. For example, anthrax was only caught by workers in the wool industry, glanders by those who spent a lot of time with horses, and psittacosis by those who sold or kept parrots.<sup>9</sup> Also, few of us worry about catching diseases from our pet cats and dogs. The great livestock diseases – rinderpest, foot-and-mouth, and pleuropneumonia – do not affect humans; indeed, the main threat was and is food poisoning from meat.

In the Victorian era the boundary between animal and human health was not so secure; indeed, the pioneering work after 1870s on how germs caused infection began with studies of diseases that crossed species barriers – anthrax, tuberculosis, and, of course, rabies.<sup>10</sup> But none of these conditions was straightforwardly ‘catching’: anthrax and rabies were spread by the inoculation of poison-germs through the skin, while tuberculosis and rabies had long, variable incubation periods. Also, such diseases often produced distinct symptoms in animals and man; for example, in rabies dogs were thirsty while in humans they were

hydrophobic. Thus, through the history of rabies we can analyse how doctors and veterinarians understood and dealt with complex problems that were at the margins of their professional practice, and to the struggles over who had reliable knowledge and hence authority.<sup>11</sup> Rabies also reveals the problems posed to public policy by diseases with variable patterns of spread and development, and where it is not always clear who has appropriate expertise. Dog fanciers and the public often presented themselves to be as 'expert' as vets, doctors, and scientists, even after Louis Pasteur showed rabies to be a germ disease and introduced an anti-rabies vaccine. This is somewhat paradoxical as Pasteur's work has been celebrated by medical scientists as revolutionary, producing the first fruits from experimental laboratory investigations of disease, the type of medical research that has dominated medical research since.<sup>12</sup>

Our second theme is the differences between professional and lay understandings of disease. Throughout the nineteenth century doctors claimed that the gap between their knowledge and popular understandings was nowhere greater than over hydrophobia. For example, doctors admitted that it was the one disease for which they could offer no useful treatment once symptoms developed, whereas the public tried all manner of therapies, from literally applying the 'hair of the dog' to taking the remedies offered by local chemists. The idea that rabies was associated with heat, thirst, and perhaps solar influences persisted amongst many social groups. One problem was that there was no medical consensus on hydrophobia until the 1890s; indeed, there were many different groups producing understandings from different starting assumptions, by different means and to different ends. For example, doctors observed, treated, and wrote about a fatal disease in individuals, which some saw as wholly physical, others psychological, and others both. Thus, rabies has much to tell us about changing ideas about the relations between body and mind, especially phobias and what we now term psychosomatic illnesses. Veterinarians saw rabies in individual dogs, and as an epizootic – an imported animal plague – in the canine population.<sup>13</sup> But rabies had other 'experts': the police who had to control dogs on the street, social reformers who saw the disease as a metaphor for the culture of the poor, animal welfare activists who were certain it was caused by cruelty, dog fanciers and owners who had their pet theories about breeds and gender, government officials who saw rabid dogs as a proxy for actual or potential social disorder, and, of course, the public who knew, it seems, a 'mad dog' when they saw one, and almost certainly knew someone who had an infallible remedy. Knowledge was often geographically or

socially specific, and meanings given to the disease and its treatments were contingent. We will use the notion that there were many 'experts' to show the social basis for the struggles over the nature of rabies and its management.

Our third theme is the role of the state in the control of animal and human diseases. The contests over the appropriate measures for rabies were part of wider public debates over the extent of government intervention in the private lives of its citizens, the values of a liberal society, and the politics of class that were taking shape in the reconfiguration of the meanings, forms, and boundaries of the nation and the polity. In the first attempts to introduce dog controls in the 1830s, legislation was rejected in part because the public saw the muzzled dog as symbolic of political oppression at the critical moment of the Reform crisis of 1830–32.<sup>14</sup> This was also a time when the English people celebrated the ferocious bull-dog as their icon.

How to control rabies was also shaped by gender politics. Rabies was typically male and associated with Englishmen rather than women – with street life, cruelty to dogs, and aggression. But at the end of the century, women led the fight against the compulsory muzzling of dogs, pointing to the innocence and passiveness of lap dogs and seeing the muzzle to be as oppressive as the corset and a symbol of male domination. They were offended that sporting dogs – in the male worlds of hunting, coursing, and dog racing – were exempt from muzzling. The taming of rabies was in part the story of the desired and idealised character and qualities of the English, as well as about individual freedoms and liberties. It reminds us how in the Georgian era Englishness was famed for its aggressiveness and tenacity – symbolised in the figure of John Bull and the blood sports enjoyed by men of all classes. Over the Victorian era this was replaced by a mild-mannered and tamed temperament, associated with the middle classes, who were proud of their sensitivity towards animal suffering and over time led the British to become a nation of dog lovers. These shifts have been discussed for the late Victorian period by John Walton in a pioneering article, which remains the best introduction to the social history of dogs and rabies.<sup>15</sup> We aim to extend his analyses both back and forward in time, and to deepen it using the tools of the social history of disease and medicine.<sup>16</sup>

Our fourth theme is the history of dogs in Britain. We cannot answer the question why and how Britain became a nation of dog lovers, but we do offer insights into changing attitudes towards dogs and the changing character of dog ownership. Throughout the nineteenth century battles

raged over the sight and treatment of animals, over the proper place, use and treatment of draught animals and livestock, and over the alleged cruelty to animals in popular culture, particularly sport and entertainment.<sup>17</sup> There are no histories of the dog and pet-keeping in Britain, though a number of studies of animals consider the subject. Keith Thomas's magisterial *Man and the Natural World* charts the development of domestic pets as part of his larger study of the waning of anthropocentrism and the growth of sentimental attitudes towards animals, for example, giving dogs names and keeping them in the home as companions. Thomas attributes this development, first seen amongst the wealthy, to the declining economic role of animals and the separation of domestic life from immediate contact with the exploitation and killing of animals. In addition, he points to the influence of radical Christian sects, natural philosophy, and the Enlightenment in general, all of which combined to open the emotional and social space for the sentimentalisation of animals. However, the extent to which any section of society was insulated from contact with working animals and livestock, even after 1800 when Thomas's study ends, is a moot point. All kinds of beast were omnipresent in Victorian cities, and links between town and country remained close. In the case of attitudes to dogs after 1830, we have found every shade of opinion from those, exemplified by owners of lapdogs, who regarded their pet as equal to or above humanity, not least through the virtues of loyalty and affection, to those, typified by owners of draught dogs, who treated their animals as mere economic assets.

Harriet Ritvo's discussion of dogs in *The Animal Estate* remains the most detailed and convincing account of the place of dogs in Victorian culture.<sup>18</sup> Sources for the history of dogs are not extensive, though Ritvo skilfully uses 'uncommon' phenomena on which documentation is rich, such as dog shows and rabies, to illuminate the 'common' and everyday. Her main point, like Thomas, is that attitudes to animals were never simply that, but were also about people and society, and hence, were shaped by, and in turn shaped, cultural ideas and actions. In the case of Victorian Britain, Ritvo highlights the link between dogs and social class, with dog shows a symbol of social divisions and distinctions, and rabies associated with the lower orders, 'unsettling social forces', and programmes of social discipline.<sup>19</sup> Rabies was also a resource for metaphorical reflection on the 'self'; Victorians, like Charles Darwin, wrote about having 'rabid' feelings, not least on matters of scientific controversy, and novelists such as George Eliot and Anthony Trollope had characters who behaved like mad dogs.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, more has been said about the rhetorical uses of rabies than on the disease itself, or

attempts at control.<sup>21</sup> We endeavour to follow Jonathan Burt's appeal to historians of animals and human–animal relations to 'move away from emphasis on the textual, metaphorical animal ... to achieve a more integrated view of the effects of the presence of the animals'.<sup>22</sup> Our approach to dogs, dog–human relations, and the management of dogs in the Victorian period stresses the materiality of dogs and their diseases, and the situatedness of knowledge and practices in time, place, and social relations.

## **Mad dogs and Englishmen**

The narrative of the book moves in broad chronological order through the prevailing understandings of rabies and the measures taken to control the disease, beginning in 1830 with the 'Era of Canine Madness' and ending in 2000 with the introduction of Pet Passports. We focus mainly on England. In fact, most rabies outbreaks and hydrophobia deaths were in London, Lancashire, and Yorkshire, though Wales, Scotland, and Ireland will figure as necessary and at certain points were critical – the last known human death in Britain from indigenous rabies was in South Wales in 1899. We identify and discuss many constructions and meanings of rabies, which can be characterised by period. In Chapter 1, *Rabies Raging*, we discuss the growing problem of rabies and hydrophobia in Britain in the 1820s and its significance in the crisis year of 1830. In Chapter 2, *Rabies at Bay*, we cover the period from 1831 to 1863 when the incidence of the diseases declined, but show how they remained important in the popular imagination, being kept there by remembered experiences, local authority dog control campaigns, and above all by the actions of animal welfare reformers. In Chapter 3, *Rabies Resurgent*, we show how the return of rabies brought tougher controls and new understandings of the disease in dogs and humans. In Chapter 4, *Rabies Cured*, we follow the development and introduction in Britain of Louis Pasteur's preventive treatment, from initial scepticism to acceptance a decade later. In Chapter 5, *Rabies Banished*, we tell the story of the control of rabies in the 1880s and 1890s, which through ever stricter measures led to its eradication in 1902. In Chapter 6, *Rabies Excluded*, we discuss how rabies was kept out of Britain in the twentieth century by the application of rigid quarantines on imported dogs, cats, and other mammals. Unbending measures remained in place until 2000, when controls were relaxed with the introduction of Pet Passports for dogs whose owners have had them tagged with a microchip, vaccinated, tested, and certificated.

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