



James le Palmer's 'Omne Bonum', from a 14th-century manuscript, depicting clerics with leprosy — Alamy

Curing society's ills

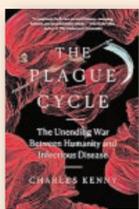
A sweeping history sheds light on the long fight against infectious disease, showing humanity at both its innovative best – and prejudiced worst. By Clive Cookson

In the midst of a devastating pandemic, it is salutary to be reminded that past plagues – usually far more deadly per head of population than Covid – provoked similar responses to what we've seen in the past year.

There is nothing new about people trying to protect themselves against transmissible diseases through masks, quarantines and social distancing. Nor, unfortunately, is there any novelty in the demonisation of groups believed responsible for spreading illness – as the development economist Charles Kenny shows in *The Plague Cycle*, his sweeping history of human infections.

Even inoculation goes back many centuries. Popular articles about the topical issue of vaccination usually start in 1796 with Edward Jenner injecting cowpox, extracted from lesions on a milkmaid, into his gardener's eight-year-old son, James Phipps. He then exposed the boy to smallpox to demonstrate that the procedure would provide immunity against that closely related disease, which had become one of the world's great killers by the 16th century.

Jenner was building on the practice of variolation, developed at least 250 years earlier in China, which originally involved blowing month-old smallpox scabs up the nose – or, if the threat of an imminent outbreak made protection more urgent, using scabs suspended in herb-scented steam. This weakened the virus (though practitioners did not know it at the time) so it conferred immunity without causing severe symptoms.



The Plague Cycle
by Charles Kenny
Simon & Schuster
\$28/£20, 320 pages

Kenny describes vividly the spread of smallpox inoculation through India and the Middle East. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, was so impressed by “the invention of ingrafting” that she had her “dear little son” inoculated in Istanbul in 1715. By then the procedure used a needle to transfer “the best form of smallpox into a vein”, as she put it in a letter.

Back home, Montagu popularised smallpox inoculation among the English upper classes. Kenny speculates that this partly accounts for the extraordinary fall in mortality of babies born into the British royal family. In the 17th century 40 per cent died before their first birthday; in the 18th century the death rate was below 3 per cent.

It took Jenner's invention of vaccination, a cheaper and more reliable procedure, to remove smallpox from the list of the western world's most feared diseases. In late 18th century London it accounted for 9 per cent of all deaths. A hundred years later that had fallen to 1 per cent, and in the 1970s smallpox became the first and still the

only human disease to be eradicated by vaccination.

Personal protection against infection dates back even further than immunisation. An early description of sanitary face coverings came from Marco Polo on his travels along Asia's Silk Road in the late 13th century, when waiters at a khan's banquet had “their mouths and noses swathed in fine napkins of silk and gold” – a practice that came back into fashion in 2020, Kenny notes.

It had been obvious since ancient times that some diseases spread between people, though the idea that germs were responsible did not triumph over the rival “miasma” theory – that the main cause was toxic or polluted air – until the end of the 19th century.

Even Florence Nightingale, nursing hero of the Crimean war, wrote in 1867: “The disease-germ fetish and the witchcraft-fetish are the produce of the same mental condition . . . The germ hypothesis, if logically followed out, must stop all human intercourse whatever, on pain or risk of disease or death.”

Kenny believes that human beings have an innate “exclusion instinct” that tends to make them avoid strangers and those outside their group. The earliest written sources suggest that people have long appreciated the risk of contagion and understood the benefits of exclusion, with the treatment of lepers a glaring example. The term “quarantine” itself originated from the 40-day (Italian *quaranta*) waiting period for ships arriving from plague areas en route to Mediterranean ports in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Proof that germs – viruses, bacteria and parasites – directly caused disease led to further quarantining of groups and isolation of infected individuals. Sometimes, however, germs were used as an excuse to exclude and maltreat particular ethnic groups, in ways that went beyond medical justification and became more like the medieval idea that Jews poisoned wells to start the Black Death.

Kenny documents several examples from the 20th century, particularly in the US, starting with the arrival of the plague from China in San Francisco in 1900. Quarantine was imposed only on Chinatown and applied only to people of Chinese descent. The city's medical staff restrained anyone who looked Chinese and tried to inoculate them with an experimental plague vaccine.

Fortunately the US then had judicial restraints. Judge William Morrow ruled that the San Francisco Board of Health's actions were “boldly directed against the Asiatic or Mongolian race as a class,

Early Christianity didn't help: it was a dirty religion, one that militated against humans' desire to be clean'

without regard to the previous condition, habits, exposure or disease, or residence of the individual” – and were therefore unconstitutional.

The ground covered by *The Plague Cycle* will be broadly familiar to those who have read earlier books analysing the history and geopolitical impact of infectious disease, such as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs & Steel* (curiously not included in Kenny's extensive bibliography). And more books on pandemics are in the works, inspired by Covid-19. But a shortage of really original ideas and research is more than mitigated by Kenny's lively writing – and the way he peppers the broad sweep of his arguments with vivid examples.

For instance his “Cleaning Up” chapter about the role of sanitation in fighting disease points out that early Christianity didn't help: it “was a dirty religion, one that militated against humans' desire to be clean”. Kenny mentions several saints including Jerome, Benedict, Agnes and Catherine of Siena, who never bathed and objected to others bathing too. The phrase “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” only emerged in the late 18th century.

By the end of *The Plague Cycle* the reader may wonder why there has been so much fuss about the current pandemic. “For much of human history it's unlikely that an illness like Covid-19 would have been recognised as a new and distinct health threat at all,” Kenny writes, because it has caused relatively little morbidity and mortality when compared with past epidemics on a per capita basis.

Even so, humanity must learn lessons from Covid-19, to be better prepared scientifically and politically for what health experts say is almost certain emergence of another pathogen that will be more lethal and/or more contagious than the virus disrupting our lives today. As Kenny concludes, the huge decline in premature deaths from infectious disease during the past two centuries “is something we should celebrate and protect as humanity's greatest triumph”.

Clive Cookson is the FT's science editor

On the shoulders of leviathans

Albrecht Dürer's trip to see a beached whale has inspired a visionary new book, writes Jonathon McAloon

Whales were hunted for generations, it seems, before people really saw them. In *Leviathan* (2008), Philip Hoare defers to the narrator of *Moby-Dick* on the subject. “These animals were seen in their entirety only when beached, he notes, and then, ‘the living Leviathan has never yet fairly floated himself for his portrait’”. It would take a further century to see them any clearer. “We knew what the world looked like” photographed from space, Hoare tells us, “before we knew what the whale looked like” photographed underwater.

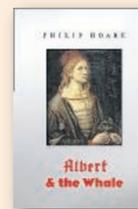
Five hundred years ago, artist Albrecht Dürer also wished to understand what whales looked like, though as was the case with his famous rhinoceros, he could sometimes even depict things accurately without seeing them. His trip to see a beached whale in the Netherlands is the jumping-off point for Hoare's book. Despite the fact Dürer didn't make it before the whale was washed out to sea.

Where the Samuel Johnson Prize-winning *Leviathan* was a genre-bending but still informative work of nonfiction, *Albert and the Whale* is yet more visionary: a tone poem put together from the lives of others, with detailed use of archives. Hoare moves nimbly between the stories of people who came before and after Dürer, but share his “unity of perception” which encompassed aspects of “art, science and natural philosophy”. We meet Albertus Magnus, the German monk who taught Thomas Aquinas; Thomas Mann, whose novel *Doctor Faustus* is full of allusions to Dürer's work and life; Mann's children and their friend Marianne Moore, the Modernist poet who loved Dürer and whales. Some stories are eerie. Wolfgang Panofsky, the son of a Dürer biographer, worked on the atomic bomb, the physics of which Dürer predicted in a watercolour of an apocalyptic dream, mushroom cloud, shockwaves and all.

This book is all about shockwaves. Patterns and themes become more radical and diffuse

as it goes. Entries from Dürer's journal, recording travel expenses, are integrated into the text without quote marks. Eventually the expenses turn into the author's as he travels America and Europe tracking down Dürer's work.

Hoare is intoxicated by Dürer's version of the natural world, which threatens to be more vivid, more essential than the real thing. According to Erasmus, he could “depict that which cannot be depicted”. For Hoare, “what Dürer drew was more rhinoceros than the rhinoceros”. In *Albert and the Whale* there is the sense he's seeing how allusive he can make his sub-



Albert and the Whale
by Philip Hoare
4th Estate £16.99, 304 pages

jects' lives – how much he can heighten them by bringing them into contact with each other and with Dürer. This harmonious and enviably conceived book manages it with full marks.

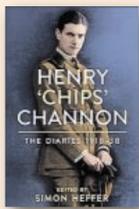
When he drew a rhino without having seen it, yet with an accuracy and reliance on heard evidence that brought his image close to the real thing, Dürer was depicting a transition from fantasy to science. A turning point in the history of art where superstition about what the natural world may contain was (almost) replaced by observation of it. But as Hoare notes, we are losing some species faster than we can observe them. In the case of animals like rhinos and the walrus, Dürer's images could “survive the things that they represent”. This book captures the wonder Dürer may have felt on his way to the whale he missed: “Something so fantastic could not survive being seen.”



Detail of Albrecht Dürer's engraving 'Melencolia' (1514) — Alamy

Well-connected, well-informed – and utterly wrong

Chips Channon's diaries recall the British establishment's misguided ways between the wars, writes Jesse Norman



Henry 'Chips' Channon: The Diaries (Volume 1): 1918-38
edited by Simon Heffer
Hutchinson £35
1,024 pages

Scandal isn't what it used to be. In these days of leaks, fake news and kiss-and-tell it is easy to forget the potentially crucifying consequences for the nobs and politicians of a really juicy revelation, even a few years ago. Marriages ended, children disowned, careers destroyed, public disgrace.

Time was when every high society family lived in fear of its own Galahad Threepenny, the PG Wodehouse character who was always threatening to publish his scandalous memoirs: “A man who should never have been taught to write and who, if unhappily gifted with that ability, should have been restrained by Act of Parliament from writing Reminiscences.”

Such a man was Sir Henry “Chips” Channon, Conservative MP, snob, bigot and social mountaineer, who perfectly embodied the qualities vital to the task: a capacious ear for gossip, a neat turn of phrase, a waspish desire to tell all, and easy access to the highest social circles across Europe. Salacious, certainly. But his unexpurgated *Diaries 1918-38* also remind us just how admiring much of the British establishment was of Nazi Germany – and what a mountain Win-

ston Churchill had to climb to prepare the country for war.

Unsurprisingly, then, that Chips' diaries were so heavily edited when they first appeared in the 1960s, with just 250,000 words culled from two million. Chips was on intimate terms with the royal family. He had married Honor, daughter of Lord Iveagh and scion of the very rich Guinness family, but also had a string of homosexual relationships, including with Jim Thomas, my predecessor as MP for Hereford. There were many secrets to be protected.

Yet even that bowdlerised edition convulsed politics and polite society. Initially denounced, the diaries were later acclaimed as a riot of revelations and a priceless insight into the social and political life of the British upper crust between the wars and after. You liked Alan Clark? This was his template.

Now, by permission of the Channon estate, at last we have the real thing: the first volume of the unexpurgated diaries, running from the end of the first world war to the eve of the second,

edited by the writer and journalist Simon Heffer. It is a mighty tome, more than 1,000 pages long, with two more to follow.

Given Channon's Olympian capacity for dropping names, one shudders to think how many hours it must have taken Heffer to gather up and make sense of them all. But by the end, the reader feels as though they had been living in Plato's cave only to emerge dazed and blinking into the harsh sunlight of Chips' true and often revolting views.

All those mentioned are dead. But it is hard to believe there is any living denier of *Burke's Peerage* who will not approach this book with concern amounting to panic as to what Chips may say about their friends and relatives. Mrs Cavendish-Bentinck is “drip-

ping with jewels . . . looks like a ferret that has got loose in Cartier's”. The future Edward VIII has a “dentist smile”.

Like many great observers, Chips himself – and it was always “Chips”, though no one quite knew why – was an “outside insider”. Born to a wealthy family in Chicago, he came to detest America and all it stood for, and to venerate European culture and civilisation, wherever they might lead.

He yearned to be English and, possessed of an easy charm, powerful allies and a great capacity to spend money, he rejoiced in his ascent into high society. He is the parvenu cuckoo in the aristocratic nest. But with his rampant snobbery comes a talent for self-mockery, an affection for his wife that survived estrangement and, later, divorce, and a

love for his son Paul that shines through the gossip.

Even early on, Chips was aware of the value of his diaries. In 1924, he could already see that they might become more than a comfort for his old age: “Although I am not Clerk of the Council like Mr Greville nor Secretary to the Admiralty like Mr Pepys, nor yet *duc et pair* as was M. de Saint-Simon, I have nevertheless had perhaps unusual opportunities for intimacy with interesting people and almost genius for ever being at centre of things.”

No small ambition; but so it proves. As his life proceeds, the effect is to give a natural flow to the book.

At the start, we have the social gadabout, blending Woosterish antics with a Lady Bracknell-esque capacity for acid comment: “Oh! Why are these minor royalties so stupid and unattractive?” But by the end, Chips is in parliament as the MP for Southend West, as awareness slowly dawns that Britain is hurtling towards a second continental, and ultimately world, conflict. Here, in Auden's “low dishonest decade”, the diaries are replete with fascinating insights: on the abdication crisis of 1936, the resignation of Anthony Eden as foreign secretary, the Berlin Olympics and much else.

Yet there is also one very striking thread: the all but unerring inaccuracy of Channon's political judgments. On virtually every major issue of the day – the Nazi threat, the need for rearmament, Mussolini, appeasement, the Anschluss of Austria, the abdication,

Churchill as potential leader – he is at once well-informed and wildly wrong.

The Nazis, whom like many he saw as the last bulwark against Bolshevism, excite his admiration with their demonic energy and flair for display. Visiting Berlin for the 1936 Olympics, he is hopelessly gulled by a visit to a Nazi labour camp full of smiling, healthy boys, and exults at the glories of the Göring party, with a full *corps de ballet* dancing in the moonlight. Hitler “is always right, the greatest diplomat of modern times”.

The diaries also bring out the true extent of Chips' hostility to Churchill. Chamberlain has saved the world at the 1938 Munich conference, while Churchill is “that fat, brilliant, unbalanced, illogical, porcine orator”, “a devil who must never be trusted” and “the most dangerous man in Europe”, whose unbridled speeches for rearmament threaten the delicate balance needed to deal with Germany.

Chips' views are his private confessional, with an eye to future publication. Yet in no way were they idiosyncratic. On the contrary, they faithfully reflected the conventional wisdom of the great majority of the Conservative parliamentary party at the time, and the distaste amounting to hatred of many of them for Churchill.

Yet it was Churchill who was right, and Churchill who made the difference.

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Henry 'Chips' Channon in court dress with wife Honor at Lord Iveagh's house