

THE RECORD OF AN EPIDEMIC

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WHEN Simeon Perkins of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, wrote in his diary¹ on December 10, 1800, "the *Small Pox* is broke out among us", he initiated one of the few non-technical records of a smallpox epidemic in Canada and of the progress of efforts to combat it by inoculation. Though Jenner's great work, publishing to the world his discovery of the relation between cow pox and smallpox and his successful methods of vaccination had appeared less than two years before, inoculation had been known for the better part of a century. The first account published in England by Dr. Kennedy in 1715 related how in Constantinople a "fresh and kindly Pock" taken from a person suffering from the disease was introduced into incisions on the wrists or legs of the patient, and eight or ten days later the symptoms appeared. The patient during the period of incubation must keep his room and live on water gruel, for "malignancy is augmented" by irregularities in diet. A few years later Lady Mary Wortley Montague made inoculation fashionable in England, and in 1721 it was employed in Boston by Dr. Boylston whose efforts met with serious opposition. By the middle of the eighteenth century inoculation was practised in every country in Europe.

In Canada smallpox was not only a periodic scourge but a continual danger. The disease was always present, killing numbers every year, and in times of epidemic it became not only more widespread but more virulent, showing many cases of "purpura", hemorrhagic smallpox. The severe epidemic of 1702 was fatal to one-fourth of the population of Quebec, and the years 1731-3 1755-7, 1769 and 1783 were marked by high mortality. In 1732, 900 died in the district of Montreal and between 500 and 600 in the district of Quebec and Three Rivers, while in the city of Quebec at one time 2000 lay ill of the disease. As in all these epidemics, most of the dead were children.

The practice of inoculation, introduced into Canada early in the sixties, advanced slowly. The *Quebec Gazette* observed in the issue of May 4, 1769, "The French Inhabitants, seeing the many Advantages arising from Inoculation, have at last followed the Example of the English; and we hear that Mr. Latham has at present some of the first French Families under Inoculation, who are all doing extremely well."

¹ Mss. in the Archives at Ottawa.

In the winter of 1797 inoculation was practised successfully in Queenston in Upper Canada, and editorials urged that it should be made compulsory. The *Upper Canada Gazette* announced on June 21, 1800, "We are informed that the smallpox has been very general (by inoculation) at Queenston, Niagara, and the head of the lake for some time past, without proving mortal to any, which has induced several families in the town and neighbourhood York to cause their children to undergo a like operation." In the winter of that year there was a serious epidemic at Halifax where, of a population of 7000, 970 persons suffered from the disease between September 1800 and February 1801 and 182 died of it.

The first case recorded by Mr. Perkins that winter in Liverpool was of a coloured woman who was at once removed to a house at the end of John Robert's fish lot, and as other cases developed, several of which were fatal, more effective means of quarantine were seriously considered. A smallpox hospital was built on "ye road below Birch Point, a considerable number of people are at work getting the Timber, and Clearing the place." The house was begun on December 30 on land owned by Mr. Perkins which he presented to the town, "the Subscription to be repaid if the Town pleases," and was to be taken care of by the overseers of the poor. While it was building, inoculation was begun.

Major Tupper wished to have his family inoculated, and the town agreed that a small house near the river might be used for the purpose. Twelve persons were inoculated and established there on the last day of December. On January 6, 1801, one of these had developed symptoms of smallpox, and three days later several others were "sickly".

The disease continued to spread, and on January 20 when the new hospital back of Birch Point was finished, 39 persons entered it and were inoculated. Two days later they were all inoculated again as the doctor "was a little fearfull of the virtue of that Matter he first used". On the same day

A Number of Gentlemen assembled at my store. It Seems to be their Opinion that the Small Pox will spread, and that in the present mode of Innoculation, it will be a Long Time gitting thro.

It was accordingly agreed that, as town clerk, Mr. Perkins should call a meeting at the Court House for the next day.

Mr. Perkins was chosen chairman of the meeting. "Many people spoke on the Subject, Some for a general Innoculation, in peoples houses, Some against it." A proposal to inoculate under the direction of a committee in hospitals or isolation houses was

carried "by a great Majority". A committee of eighteen was selected to regulate the hospitals and choose suitable pest houses. It was agreed that persons going into infected houses might be inoculated at their homes and kept under observation until it became apparent whether the disease had been contracted, and that a white flag should be hung out at all houses where the disease was present or where inoculation had been given.

"Much perturbation and Great Anxiety about the Small Pox" wrote Mr. Perkins on January 30. The Health Committee met nearly every day to arrange the inoculations, prepare the pest houses and engage nurses. A dozen houses were made ready, and a boy sent to Shelburne for some "Medicine for Inoculation" needed by the doctor. On February 3 Mrs. Perkins and seven children, a married daughter and a granddaughter "begin a course of Physick for Inoculation". A friend had offered to inoculate them, and a number of patients were under the care of the schoolmaster, for "there is now Such a Number of Pest Houses, & So many people going under the operation that it would be difficult for Doc. Woodberry to attend them all."

Three days later the Perkins family "take the second portion of Physick for Inoculation, Rhubarb & Calomel," and two days later another dose "to be taken this evening, and an other in the morning, which, I suppose, is Salts." The inoculation was carried out on February 10, after a week of preparatory treatment. The operation was performed "in the left hand, between the thumb, & forefinger, tho not in that Loose Skin, but on the Hand, by making a Small Incision, and Laying an Infected thread into it about three eights of an Inch in Length, he then put a Small Square rag, doubled, and over that a bandage, to Keep it in place."

Symptoms began to appear within two days, and the family proceeded "to Divert themselves in walking and riding". "I take a walk with my Inoculated Family." The system of pest houses for inoculations had by this time broken down. "When my Family were Inoculated, I expected they would remove to the House of John Thomas, Esq., but as Some in my Neighbourhood have come home from the Pest House, and Others are Inoculated near me, and in many parts of the Town, I have determined to remain in my Own House."

"Some of the people at Birch Point Hospital are very bad, others have done very well and are come out." On the seventeenth of February four hundred had been inoculated. The Perkins family continued to develop symptoms of the disease, "they continue the prescribed regimen, and Drink plentiful of cold water, and also water with a Tea Spoonfull of Cream of Tartar dissolved

in a Quart of water, or a little more." On the tenth day after inoculation, "Lucy and Eunice are Light headed in the evening. All the rest pritty comfortable.—Some eruption is perceived on most of them." There continued to be frequent deaths from the disease; on February 24 there had been four deaths "under Innoculation". On March 4 it was reported from Lunenburg that there were "many people dying of that disorder there."

"It is now the request of the Magistrates and other principal Inhabitants of this place, that the Innoculation Should Stop, and I have understood that the Innoculators are willing to give it over." They may have been alarmed by the deaths of inoculated persons, or possibly by the other disorders which inoculation left behind it. The use of a crude virus brought a series of foreign infections. Many who had been inoculated and returned to their houses "are in a poor State, and much exercised with Boyles". "Several people are Sickly. After the Small Pox is over, they have had sore arms, and some have swellings." "A boy of Eben. Harrington, that was Inoculated, is afflicted with Ulcers." "David Barss's wife is also very ill. She had a swelling in one of her Thyghs,—She now has another Swelling on her Shoulder. Suppose in consequence of Innoculation."

The effect of the inoculation might be delayed, or there might be a relapse. A boy who had recovered from the inoculation "went hunting Rabbits, and wet himself, viz. his feet, and kept wet Several hours"; he became very ill and died two days later. Mr. Perkins' daughter Mary was inoculated with the rest and "had but a very little of it". A month after the inoculation she had a rather severe case of smallpox. "The poison matter had layn dormant about 30 days, or she must have taken it in the natural way." William Chadsey who died of smallpox on March 17 "had been Innoculated, I believe, more than once, but whether it ever took, or whether he had taken it in the natural way, it is said to be uncertain". "Daniel Collins, Blockmaker, was Innoculated when about 10 or 11 Years of Age. He has been frequently among it, and is now Broke out." A child who died had "never well recovered of the Small Pox by Innoculation, the disorder settled on her Vitals."

In view of the uncertain and occasionally fatal results attending inoculation, as it was then practised, the eagerness of popular resort to the measure is an index of the terror inspired by the disease itself. By the middle of April, when the ravages of the disease were declining in Liverpool, more than 700 persons had ben inoculated and fifteen of them had died, a lower mortality rate than that of Halifax for inoculations in the same epidemic.

In Halifax, of 1,466 inoculated persons, 44 had died. The death rate at Liverpool was thus 2% and at Halifax 3%, but at Halifax the death rate among those who contracted the disease naturally was 14%.

The effect of the epidemic upon public business is apparent in Mr. Perkins's entry for April 14:

The General Sessions, and the Inferiour Court of Common Pleas are opened. The Grand and Petit Jurors are deficient on acct. of the Small Pox, as those that have not had that disease are afraid to come. The Courts are Adjourned to the first Tuesday in May, hoping by that time the Small Pox will be clear of the place.