



Welcome to our April book, Historians!

We will meet on Tuesday, April 3 at 6:30 to discuss *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World* by Steven Johnson. This is the story of the cholera outbreak in Victorian London in 1854. The book centers on Dr. John Snow who created a map of the cholera cases and the Reverend Henry Whitehead who knew the community through his church work and who was able to use this "social intelligence" to figure out the source of the outbreak, the now infamous water pump on Broad Street. In *The Ghost Map*, we meet these men and the victims and medical workers, both named and

unnamed, who worked to stop a disease that no one understood or understood how it spread.

Fighting disease in a densely populated urban environment was a new development in medicine. With two and one-half million inhabitants, no city in history had been as large as London is in 1854. When a disease like cholera hits, the results are devastating. As Johnson explains, cholera acts swiftly upon the body. People can die in as fast as twelve hours as cholera causes you to lose the water in your body. Sadly, because the water keeping your brain hydrated is the last water to disappear, victims are consciously dying, fully aware of their circumstances.

The medical community believes that cholera is spread by bad air, what is called the miasma theory. Snow and Whitehead provide the evidence that cholera is spread by bad water, but the medical community is slow to accept the evidence, even when shutting down the Broad Street water pump ends the epidemic. But as time passes, the things learned in this epidemic lead to important changes in urban planning. For the first time, doctors and citizens come together and begin to use good science and good medicine to actively make decisions to improve public health through urban planning. Solving these issues leads to upgrades in plumbing and sewers. Cities become safer and urbanization grows, becoming one of the key characteristics of modernism in the 20th century.

As you read, consider the interesting issues that Johnson raises. Why is it so hard for the medical community to accept the evidence that cholera is spread by bad water? What causes the mental block that makes it difficult to accept new ideas in research? Look for instances in this history that show the importance of multiple disciplines coming together to solve a problem. How important is the "social intelligence" of people like Reverend Whitehead? And finally, how is the city of London itself a character in this book? And what does this character tell us about cities and people?

The Ghost Map is a fascinating story of the hunt for a silent killer. And this story has relevance for our own time and our own city. Come prepared for a lively discussion of medical history, urban planning, and human perseverance when we meet on Tuesday, April 3 at 6:30. I look forward to seeing you all!

Donna McBride