



# *The* **GHOST MAP**

*The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—  
and How It Changed Science, Cities,  
and the Modern World*

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originating in France, the disease spent a month snaking along the trade routes of upstate New York toward the city, then floating straight down the Hudson. Every few days the papers would announce that the cholera had taken another step; when it eventually arrived, in early July, almost half the city had escaped to the countryside, creating traffic jams that resembled the Long Island Expressway on a modern-day Fourth of July weekend. The *New York Evening Post* reported:

The roads, in all directions, were lined with well-filled stage coaches, livery coaches, private vehicles and equestrians, all panic struck, fleeing from the city, as we may suppose the inhabitants of Pompeii or Reggio fled from those devoted places, when the red lava showered down upon their houses, or when the walls were shaken asunder by an earthquake.

The popular fear of cholera was amplified by the miasma theory of its transmission. The disease was both invisible and everywhere: seeping out of gulley holes, looming in the yellowed fog along the Thames. The courage of those who stayed to fight the disease—or investigate its origins—is all the more impressive in this light, since simply breathing in the vicinity of an outbreak was assumed by almost everyone to be risking death. John Snow had at least the courage of his convictions to rely on: if the cholera was in the water, then venturing into the Golden Square neighborhood at the height of the epidemic posed no grave threat, as long as he refrained from drinking the pump water during his visits. The Reverend Whitehead had no such theory to allay his fears as he spent hour after hour sitting in the presence of the sick, and yet not once in his writing about the Broad Street outbreak is there mention of his own private dread.

It is hard to peer behind that absence, to extract the real truth of Whitehead's mental state: Was he terrified but still compelled into action by his faith and his sense of duty to the parish? And compelled, by pride, to avoid mention of his terror in his subsequent writing? Or did his religious convictions help him ward off his fear, as Snow's scientific convictions helped him? Or had he simply acclimated to the constant presence of death? *a 3rd, mediating option*

Certainly some process of acclimation must have been at work. Otherwise, it is hard to imagine how Londoners survived such dangerous times without being paralyzed by terror. (Not all escaped the anxiety, however; witness the prevalence of hysterics in so much Victorian fiction. The corset may not have been the only culprit behind all those fainting spells.) The spike in cases of posttraumatic stress disorder experienced by big-city dwellers after 9/11 is conventionally attributed to a sudden rise in danger thanks to terrorist threat, particularly in iconic urban centers like New York, London, and Washington, D.C. But the long view suggests that this account has it exactly backward. We feel fear more strongly because our safety expectations have risen so dramatically over the past hundred years. Even with its higher crime rate, New York City in its debauched nadir of the 1970s was a vastly safer place to live than Victorian London. During the epidemics of the late 1840s and the 1850s, a thousand Londoners would typically die of cholera in a matter of weeks—in a city a quarter the size of present-day New York—and the deaths would barely warrant a headline. And so, as shocking as those numbers seem to us now, they may not have provoked the same mortal panic that they trigger today. The literature—both public and private—of the nineteenth century is filled with many dark emotions: misery, humiliation, drudgery, rage. But terror does not quite play the role that one might expect, given the body count. *A*