

Hempel, Sandra. *The Strange Case of the Broad Street Pump: John Snow and the Mystery of Cholera*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 321 pp. [original British ed.: *The Medical Detective: John Snow and the Mystery of Cholera*. Granta Books, 2006]

As the original British title implies, the journalist, Sandra Hempel, is most intrigued by John Snow and cholera as a narrative of medical detection. The book consists of sixteen chapters, some of which focus on the story of the cholera epidemics of the early nineteenth century, others on Snow's life and work, culminating with his discovery of the mode of transmission of cholera. This treatment makes for a compelling read and a nicely-moving narrative account suitable for the general reader.

At the conclusion of the volume is a twelve-page bibliographic essay, in which Hempel tells both the story of how she came to write the book, and what sources she used. The individual chapters are not footnoted, but a short list of relevant sources is given for each.

As a co-author of *Cholera, Chloroform, and the Science of Medicine*, I modestly assume that work to be the definitive recent treatment of Snow's scientific biography. So I was most interested to see how Hempel utilized that reference. She had begun work on her own book before the publication of our volume. She reports, "My knee-jerk reaction to the news of their book—horror that I had been pre-empted and by such a distinguished group—was followed by the realization that our aims were very different. They had written an academic biography of John Snow. I was very careful not to read their book . . . until I had finished mine because I didn't want to be influenced by them or tempted into making shortcuts with my research. When I had finished, however, I cross-checked my version of some of the more complicated areas of Snow's work with theirs to see if our accounts tallied." (293) Hempel also credits one of our co-authors, Nigel Paneth, for advice on her chapters on Broad Street and South London. I discovered subsequently that she had also met with another co-author, Stephen Rachman.

The method of not allowing another book to over-influence one's own writing seems reasonable. And it is quite true that Hempel's focus is not on John Snow's career as a medical scientist, but the specific episodes in his life involving his cholera discoveries. Nonetheless I believe that Hempel has somewhat overstated the difference in aim between the two volumes. In particular, even though her work does not sport the exhaustive footnotes that are usually taken as the badge of academic respectability, she has in fact engaged in a significant amount of background research, which she has woven very smoothly into her narrative. I found a number of her findings on Britain's cholera epidemics illuminating and novel.

Reviewers often feel compelled to play the "gotcha!" game to see if the author can be tripped up in any substantive error. While I did not exhaustively cross-check Hempel's account while I read it, I found myself in disagreement, factually, only once. She made the same assumption that our group did in our own early work—that by the time Snow presented his case to the Board of Guardians of St. James's Parish, Westminster, on September 7, 1854, he must already have constructed his spot map of cholera deaths clustering around the Broad Street pump. Today we find the map's visual evidence so compelling, that we readily imagine that such a map must have been what swayed the Board sufficiently to prompt them to order the pump handle removed on the following day. It took us several more trips through the material before we became

convinced that the drawing of the first version of Snow's map probably did not appear until at least two months later—in late November or early December 1854—and that as much as Snow employed spatial and topographic thinking during the early days of his Broad Street investigation, he did not actually construct any map until after he had already reached his key conclusions. On the other main issue that threatens to trip up narrators—the relatively inconclusive nature of Snow's Broad Street investigation as compared with his more definitive study of the water supply in South London—Hempel's account is generally on the mark.

The Snow expert will find little if anything new in Hempel, but we can hope that her well-researched, engaging, and readable volume will become the vehicle to introduce many more general readers to Snow's story.

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