

The Pox and the Covenant: Mather, Franklin, and the Epidemic that Changed America's Destiny

Tony Williams

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People are afraid of disease. Though we live in a time of modern medicine and our arsenal of weapons is much improved over that of generations past, we still panic when diseases like the H1N1 virus spread rapidly over the globe. Imagine how people might have responded to an epidemic 300 years ago.

Tony Williams, historian and author, has done some of the imagining, and research, for us in his second book, *The Pox and the Covenant*, in which he details the 1721 smallpox epidemic that struck the city of Boston. With vivid detail and candid depictions, he explores the intersection of faith and science as they clash in a heated debate over the new method of inoculating healthy people in an attempt to keep the disease from claiming their lives.

Cotton Mather was one of the early supporters of inoculation, and campaigned heavily in favor of it to the doctors of the city. Only Dr. Zabdiel Boylston was persuaded. He tested it first on his own six-year-old son and two of his slaves before moving on to willing members of the community. Other doctors, the public, the Selectmen, and journalists like Benjamin Franklin and his older brother, James, thought Boylston's actions were the work of the devil.

Mather, on the other hand, considered inoculation to be a gift from God. As ministers fell on the side of science and men of science defended their aversion to medical advancement in the name of religion, the social order of the city self-destructed even as the epidemic and the debate over inoculation finally waned.

Williams excels at parsing out the individual experience of smallpox in the midst of crowded panic. Using diaries and other primary sources as jumping off points, he offers a richly imagined stage of grief, resilience, and resourcefulness: "The women tried in vain to draw out the smallpox into pustules before this happened with hot-humor remedies such as ginger in water so scalding that the patients could barely stand." He conveys the pain and suffering of an early American community with tenderness, humor, and objectivity.

Though we rarely credit Cotton Mather with being one of the first heroes of a new medical practice, one that we still use today, he certainly deserves thanks. If he hadn't been tireless in his pursuit of inoculation, if he hadn't convinced at least one doctor to try it, our history might be very different.

ANDI DIEHN (May / June 2010)

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