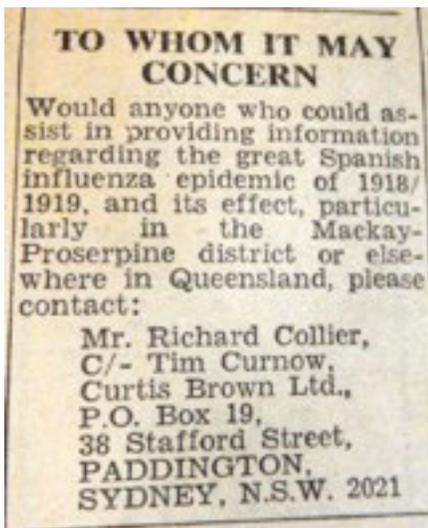


RICHARD HUGHESDON COLLIER

Remembering the 'Forgotten' Pandemic

Hannah Mawdsley

In the early 1970s, British historian and journalist Richard Hughesdon Collier placed advertisements in newspapers around the world. These adverts asked readers to share their memories of one of the deadliest pandemics in human history, the 1918-19 'Spanish' influenza pandemic. Collier was astounded at the scale and nature of the response he received. Even before he had received all responses, Collier stated that simply the 'indexing and cross-referencing' was 'the most herculean task' he had ever undertaken.¹ In November 1972, only part way through his collection of eyewitness accounts, he expressed how 'astonishing' and 'bewildering' he found the vast response his appeal from all around the world.² Surprised and heartened by such an enthusiastic global effort, Collier gathered far greater volumes of eyewitness accounts than even he had envisioned at the outset of the project. In the end, he received over 1700 letters in total.



The Daily Mercury, Mackay District, Queensland, Australia, Thursday 11 May, 1973.

Collier subsequently used his collection of letters to help write his book on the 1918-19 pandemic, *The Plague of the Spanish Lady*, which was published in 1974. Afterwards, the letters were stored in Collier's archive in his private home in Surrey, England. However, his archive was not cut off from the outside world. His research did much to form the collective memory of a worldwide event, as scholars researching the flu pandemic in later years actively sought out Collier and his archive. The eyewitness letters were particularly key for social historians who wished to uncover the personal experience of this pandemic. Australian flu scholar Anthea Hyslop summarised Collier's contribution to the field and the timeliness of this research, when seeking to borrow the Australian eyewitness accounts from him in 1994:

I am most anxious to secure more information from survivors as my own investigation began almost too late to achieve anything substantial by way of interviews. Your own research for *The*

1 IWM 63/5/28, Letter from Richard Collier to Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, 18 November 1972.

2 IWM 63/5/28, Letter from Richard Collier to Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, Macmillan London Ltd, 18 November 1972.

Plague of the Spanish Lady was undertaken at a more auspicious time, and your appeal for responses from around the world was an inspiration. That remarkable book must have been one of the first major studies of the pandemic, apart from those of a purely medical nature. Certainly, it opened up the subject for other social historians, including myself.³

Collier's research constitutes a unique record of the personal experiences of survivors of the 'Spanish' flu pandemic of 1918-19. It was the first to gather together a body of firsthand influenza memory, and the first to address this pandemic as the global phenomenon it was. But what motivated Collier to investigate this topic in the first place? One way to gain an insight into an historian's research is through analysing personal correspondence.⁴ By examining Collier's correspondence with his publishers Macmillan, it appears that Collier's main motivation was simply to write a book that would sell well. On hearing of his project, seasoned virologist Charles Stuart-Harris wrote to Collier that he was;

...interested to know that you are writing a book concerning the grisly affair of 1918/19...I am not familiar with your sort of research but the field has been well and truly tilled'.⁵

Despite such dismissive comments from some in the medical profession, Collier remained confident that a social history of the 1918 pandemic would find an interested audience. Collier had already seen, through the volume of responses to his newspaper appeal, that there was a significant global interest in this historical event. His enquiry seemed to resonate with many of those that responded to his adverts, who were gratified to have an opportunity to communicate their memories. The accounts Collier received included detailed accounts from soldiers, nurses, and ordinary civilians who recorded their memories of the Spanish flu pandemic. Some were factual, some humorous, some tragic. But many expressed their desire to remember, and be remembered. Madame Reynaud, a military nurse on the Verdun Front in France during the First World War, wrote, 'Thank you, sir, for remembering us again.'⁶ For many respondents, the advert itself had sparked memories in survivors. Madame Chabut wrote to Collier from Corsica, and noted how his advert had 'provoked in me a resurgence of the memories I lived through and which I now tell you.'⁷ Many respondents remarked on how the pandemic had remained seared on their memory. Gladys Brandt Morden, from Waterloo, Ontario, wrote that 'it was a period in my youth I shall never forget, and hope to never have a similar experience.'⁸

Collier's own initial confidence and interest in the subject of pandemic influenza may have originated in a number of places. Firstly, Collier's work followed soon after the two pandemic influenza outbreaks of the mid twentieth century. The outbreaks in 1957 and 1968 were far milder than that of 1918.⁹ However,

3 IWM 63/5/28, Letter from Dr Anthea Hyslop, Canberra to Richard Collier, 10 June 1994.

4 Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955): 64.

5 IWM 63/5/28, Letter from Professor Sir Charles Stuart-Harris, CBE, MD, FRCP to Richard Collier, 12 September 1973.

6 IWM 63/5/1 Letter from Madame Reynaud, France to Richard Collier, letter undated.

7 IWM 63/5/1 Letter from Madame Chabut, Ajaccio, Corsica to Richard Collier, letter undated.

8 IWM 63/5/6 Letter from Gladys Brandt Morden, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada to Richard Collier, 14 May 1972.

9 Edwin Kilbourne, 'Influenza Pandemics of the 20th Century', *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 12:1 (Jan 2006): 9-14.

they provided powerful reminders of just how deadly influenza could be, as well as drawing individual and collective memory back towards the 1918 pandemic. Then only a little over fifty years distant, the Spanish flu pandemic was still in the living memory of many.

Secondly, Collier identified a number of elements in the Spanish flu story that he felt would appeal strongly to readers. A key one was medical heroism, something that his friend and confidante Joan Saunders described as ‘a sure sell’.¹⁰ He was also confident that the readers would not find the subject depressing, but rather an uplifting ‘testament to human spirit’.¹¹ He felt that the humour and pathos present in the letters would appeal to his readers, as well as the way he intended to frame the story – as a science-fiction type thriller.¹² Collier believed that the big names that featured in the book would also be a draw for readers. ‘Walt Disney, Maugham, Rupert Brooke, Mussolini, the Kaiser, they all come into it.’¹³ Furthermore, Collier was confident that the book would be unique because the breath and depth of his research would never be matched.¹⁴ Collier also considered the threat of future pandemics would encourage people to buy the book. Accordingly, the original dust jacket design prominently warned of a future epidemic.

Finally, Collier’s interest in influenza and the personal experience of disease more generally may have been generated by his own first-hand experiences of disease. As a writer, Richard Collier ranged around the world for research, and in the process intimately experienced infectious disease. In 1966, for instance, he contracted ‘some sort of fever...after seven days in the jungle area’ near La Paz, Bolivia, and in 1967 he had a ‘notable’ experience of ‘flu in Milan’.¹⁵ Collier’s experiences of the sickbed as a child may also have been instrumental. After a near fatal incident where he almost drowned in a local river at the age of twelve, he was laid up for many months ‘ill with bronchitis and threatened pneumonia, too ill, the doctor said, to be moved’.¹⁶ He experienced the devoted and unflinching care of his mother who nursed him and remained with him day and night during the crisis of his illness.¹⁷ For Collier, his belief in his Spanish flu project not only related to his need as a writer to make a living, but also into very personal experiences of disease.

**The picture of Richard Collier is from the inside of the dust jacket of The Plague of the Spanish Lady (1974).*

10 IWM 63/5/28, Letter from Joan St. George Saunders to Richard Collier, 14 October 1971.

11 IWM 63/5/28 Letter from Richard Collier to unknown recipient, undated.

12 IWM 63/5/28, Collier to unknown recipient.

13 IWM 63/5/28, Collier to unknown recipient.

14 IWM 63/5/28, Collier to unknown recipient.

15 IWM 63/5/28, Letter from Mrs Patricia Collier to Inspector Thompson, 10 August 1966; and IWM 63/5/28, Letter from Mrs Patricia Collier to Paul Field Esq., 04 November 1967.

16 Richard Collier, *A House Called Memory* (London: Collins, 1960): 141.

17 Collier, *A House Called Memory*: 142.