

**‘Black October’:
the Impact of the Spanish
Influenza Epidemic of
1918 on South Africa**

H. Phillips

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**'BLACK OCTOBER': THE IMPACT OF THE SPANISH INFLUENZA
EPIDEMIC OF 1918 ON SOUTH AFRICA**

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To Juelle, Alec and the Memory of Helene

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used in the text and footnotes of all chapters:

IEC	Influenza Epidemic Commission – Evidence, 1918–1919 (2 typescript volumes in the Library of Parliament)
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly (Parliament)
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
MPC	Member of the Provincial Council
SADF	South African Defence Force
SAR&H	South African Railways and Harbours
UDF	Union Defence Force

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My initial interest in the Spanish 'flu epidemic can be traced to two very different sources: a curiosity about the impact of World War I on South African society, aroused when I was a post-graduate student at London University in 1972-1973 and, more specifically, to my father's account of his family's experiences in the epidemic in Cape Town in 1918. I hope that this study will satisfy both my former tutors at London University and my father – in other words, that it is academically sound without being unintelligible to the layperson.

The breadth of research required for this intensive examination of South African society during an acute crisis has been considerable. Collecting this material has left me deeply in the debt of a number of individuals and institutions and I consequently wish to record my gratitude to the personnel of the numerous libraries and archival depositories which I have used, to the 'flu survivors who readily recounted their memories of a terrible episode in their lives, to several people who acted as interpreters when survivors spoke neither English nor Afrikaans, to a number of strangers who were kind enough to put me in touch with 'flu survivors of their acquaintance, to Mr. Richard Collier who generously allowed photocopies to be made of the reminiscences he had gathered in 1972, to Dr. Sandra Burman for making these photocopies and to friends and colleagues who drew my attention to material which I would otherwise have missed.

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H. Phillips
Cape Town,
July 1984.

the absence of a strong central public health authority made it difficult to provide assistance to the worst-hit areas on any systematic basis.

Although the epidemic's presence was lethal, it was short-lived and by the middle of November it had virtually abated, leaving in its trail thousands of dead, many more thousands in mourning and a severely disrupted and shaken country. A third wave of the pandemic did develop and spread around the world in 1919, but it was far less severe.

It is estimated that the Spanish Influenza pandemic affected some 500 million people, killing 20 million or more throughout the world in the course of 1918–1919.²¹ This makes it by far the worst pandemic in modern times. Nearly thirty years ago a leading epidemiologist wrote of it:

“It is too recent an event to be seen in full historical perspective, and perhaps some historian of the future will be able to see that it had effects on world history comparable with those of the Justinian Plague or the Black Death.”²²

This study attempts to go some way towards making such an assessment, at least in so far as South Africa is concerned.

21. E. B. Kilbourne (ed.): *The Influenza Viruses and Influenza*, pp. 272–273, 275, 504; W. I. B. Beveridge: *Influenza – The Last Great Plague*, p. 32; J. M. Last (ed.): *Maxcy-Rosenau Public Health and Preventive Medicine*, p. 110.

The figure of 20 million or more exceeds the total number of World War I deaths by several million (J. M. Roberts: *Europe 1880–1945*, pp. 351–352; P. Stearns: *The European Experience Since 1815*, p. 228).

22. A. H. Gale: *Epidemic Diseases*, pp. 48–49.

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of September 1918 the second wave of the world-wide Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918–1919 struck South Africa. Within a fortnight the country was overwhelmed by the worst natural disaster in its history. By the time that it abated in November, probably more than a quarter of a million South Africans had died.

The aim of this study is threefold: to trace the course of this devastating epidemic in the Union and, in so doing, to provide the first serious, full-length account of what happened during “Black October”, as the episode rapidly became known locally; secondly, to ascertain its immediate and longer-term impact so as to assess its significance in the history of South Africa; finally, to use this unprecedented disaster to identify some of the underlying features of contemporary South African life and thought which it highlighted.

The social history of disease, even endemic disease, can reveal much about the composition and workings of past societies, for not only is disease

“related causally to the social and economic situation of the members of a given population, but the health care received also reflects the structure of a society, particularly its stratification and class divisions.”¹

Like medicine,² disease mediates social relations.

This is even more the case if a disease develops an all-threatening virulence and assumes epidemic proportions. Like wars, floods or earthquakes, serious epidemics evoke a broad cross-section of societal responses which reveal typical attitudes and assumptions more clearly than everyday activities. As Louis Chevalier has observed, epidemics sharpen behaviour patterns, betraying deeply-rooted social imbalances and illuminating latent or developing tendencies.³

Yet, historians have been slow to study them – or other natural disasters for that matter. In part they have been reluctant to tackle topics which appear to require extensive specialised knowledge; in part they have been wary of attributing too much weight to the “disease factor” in history, of treating it as an independent variable of some consequence. As William McNeill has observed,

“We all want human experience to make sense, and historians cater to this universal demand by emphasizing elements in the past that are calculable, definable, and, often, controllable as well. Epidemic disease, when it did become decisive in peace or in war, ran counter to the effort to make the past intelligible. Historians consequently played such episodes down.”⁴

In pioneering studies such as this one it is not uncommon to ascribe too much to the “newly discovered” factor which forms the subject of the thesis. This work tries to avoid this kind of tunnel vision by keeping the impact of the epidemic within the context of the contemporary development of modern South Africa. At the same time, placing the epidemic within these broader continuities must not mask its genuinely unprecedented results. Both dimensions must be kept in mind to achieve a balanced overall assessment of its significance. To borrow Eric Hobsbawm’s

1. G. Rosen: “Health, History and the Social Sciences” in *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 7 (1973), p. 236.
2. K. Figlio: “The Historiography of Scientific Medicine: An Invitation to the Human Sciences” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 19 (1977), p. 277 n. 29. See too Figlio’s articles in *Society for the Social History of Medicine Bulletin*, 21 (December 1977), p. 18, and in *Social History*, vol. 3 (1978) for a development of this argument.
3. L. Chevalier: *Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Introduction (III, IV) and Book III (chapter 5).
4. W. H. McNeill: *Plagues and Peoples*, p. 12.

metaphor,⁵ what is seen through the microscope must not be lost from sight when viewed through the telescope.

The experience of other countries in the 'flu pandemic provides few guidelines, for there are not many serious studies by historians of its impact elsewhere in the world.⁶ On the other hand, recent historical works on other modern epidemics are most suggestive as to possible approaches to the topic.⁷

In the case of South Africa itself, there is little on the 'flu epidemic besides sections in two popular, global accounts⁸ and the brief chapters in Jose Burman's *Disaster Struck South Africa*,⁹ Lawrence Green's *Grow Lovely, Growing Old*¹⁰ and the Reader's Digest's *South Africa's Yesterdays*.¹¹ General histories of the country overlook it entirely or refer to it in a sentence or less;¹² the majority of references to it in print occur in histories of towns, villages or institutions and in autobiographies or biographies, indicative perhaps of where it left its deepest mark. The two existing histories of medicine in South Africa¹³ do not venture into the 20th Century, Charlotte Searle virtually ignores it¹⁴ and works specifically devoted to epidemics amount to one unpublished dissertation¹⁵

5. E. J. Hobsbawm: "The Revival of Narrative – Some Comments" in *Past and Present*, no. 86 (February 1980), p. 7.
6. The fullest is A. W. Crosby: *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*. Other studies are more localised e.g. G. Rice: "Christchurch in the 1918 Influenza Epidemic" in *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 13, no. 2 (October 1979); L. Bryder: "'Lessons' of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic in Auckland", *ibid.*, vol. 16, no. 2 (October 1982); D. I. Pool: "The Effects of the 1918 Pandemic of Influenza on the Maori Population of New Zealand" in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 47 (1973); J. P. D. McGinnis: "The Impact of Epidemic Influenza: Canada, 1918–1919" in *Historical Papers/Communications Historiques*, 1977; M. W. Andrews: "Epidemic and Public Health Influenza in Vancouver, 1918–1919" in *BC Studies*, vol. 34 (Summer 1977); I. R. Phimister: "The 'Spanish' Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and its Impact on the Southern Rhodesian Mining Industry" in *Central African Journal of Medicine*, vol. 19, no. 7 (July 1973); R. Pankhurst: "The 'Hedar Basita' of 1918" in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1975); J. V. Spears: "An Epidemic among the Bakgatla: the Influenza of 1918" in *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 11 (1979); D. H. Ohadike: "The Influenza Pandemic of 1918–19 and the Spread of Cassava Cultivation on the Lower Niger" in *Journal of African History*, vol. 22 (1981); and three articles by K. D. Patterson – "The Demographic Impact of the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa – a Preliminary Assessment" in C. Fyfe and D. McMaster (eds.): *African Historical Demography*, vol. 2; "The Influenza Epidemic of 1918 in the Gold Coast" in *Journal of African History*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1983), and, with G. F. Pyle: "The Diffusion of Influenza in sub-Saharan Africa during the 1918–1919 Pandemic" in *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 17, no. 17 (1983).
7. For instance, C. Rosenberg: *The Cholera Years. The United States in 1832, 1849 and 1866* and "Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Europe: A Tool for Social and Economic Analysis" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 8 (1965–6); A. Briggs: "Cholera and Society in the Nineteenth Century" in *Past and Present*, no. 19 (1961); R. E. McGrew: *Russia and the Cholera, 1823–1832*; R. J. Morris: *Cholera 1832 – The Social Response to an Epidemic*; M. Durey: *The Return of the Plague: British Society and the Cholera 1831–2*; J. T. Alexander: *Bubonic Plague in Early Modern Russia – Public Health & Urban Disaster*.
8. R. Collier: *The Plague of the Spanish Lady* and C. Graves: *Invasion by Virus. Can It Happen Again?*
9. J. Burman: *Disaster Struck South Africa*, chapter 5. Burman drew on this chapter for his article on the epidemic in the *Standard Encyclopaedia of South Africa*, vol. 6, pp. 94–95.
10. L. G. Green: *Grow Lovely, Growing Old*, chapter 19.
11. Reader's Digest: *South Africa's Yesterdays*, p. 55.
12. C. W. de Kiewiet: *A History of South Africa. Social & Economic*, p. 231; T. R. H. Davenport: *South Africa – A Modern History*, p. 340; J. S. Marais: *The Cape Coloured People 1652–1937*, p. 258. C. C. Saunders' *Historical Dictionary of South Africa*, contains an entry under "Influenza Epidemic". It is to be hoped that this is a precedent which future general histories of South Africa will follow.
13. E. H. Burrows: *A History of Medicine in South Africa up to the End of the Nineteenth Century*; P. W. Laidler and M. Gelland: *South Africa – Its Medical History 1652–1898*.
14. C. Searle: *The History of the Development of Nursing in South Africa 1652–1960*, p. 256.
15. A. Lombaard: "The Smallpox Epidemic of 1882 in Cape Town with some reference to the Neighbouring Suburbs".

and seven articles,¹⁶ three of which deal with epizootics or crop-blight. With justice, Richard Rathbone has remarked, "It is an odd comment on our priorities that we know more about cattle epidemics than we do about human disasters."¹⁷

From this discouraging outline, information on the Spanish 'flu in South Africa might seem particularly scarce. This is anything but so.

Since the epidemic affected every person, authority or institution in the Union directly or indirectly, it generated extensive documentation – in every newspaper and periodical (whether medical or non-medical), in the report of the Government-appointed Commission of Inquiry (whose two bulky volumes of unpublished evidence have been on the shelves of the Library of Parliament, unexamined, since 1919), in the archives of local authorities, Government departments, the Union Defence Force, churches, welfare organisations and private businesses and in private correspondence and diaries.

Moreover, 1918 is within living memory. Personal recollections gathered by interview and letter added substantially to the information available, not only in quantity, but also in immediacy. To talk to someone with vivid personal memories of "Black October" was to gain a dimension on the subject which was unique. It rapidly became clear that any South African who was more than a child in 1918 was a potential source, indicating once again the place of the epidemic in popular memory. Indeed, its prominence in individuals' memories of that time compares sharply with the virtual silence of historians in their accounts of the same period and gives cause for thought as to why this has been so.

The abundance of material on the epidemic produced problems too, for these sources reflect White opinion and activities out of all proportion to the extent to which Whites (as a group) were affected, an imbalance corrected only in small measure by interviews with Black, "Coloured" and Indian 'flu survivors. The difficulty of securing even these interviews is a comment on the position of a White historian in South Africa today.

The intensity and widespread prevalence of the epidemic throughout the country raised further problems: which areas to focus on in order to gain a cross-section of South Africa's experience, how to relate this to what was occurring at a national level, how to assess the impact of the epidemic adequately in an array of fields hitherto barely touched by historians (such as demography, medicine and public health, popular thought, social welfare and the histories of specific towns), how to deal with less tangible aspects such as fear, rumour, grief and attitudes to death and how far to search beyond 1918 for long-term results. Sometimes, in the course of this study, the dimensions of the subject seemed close to those of the chimerical total history.

How these problems have been tackled will become clear, partly in the contents of the chapters which follow, partly in their very organisation and titles. The first

16. E. B. van Heyningen: "Cape Town and the Plague of 1901" in C. Saunders, H. Phillips and E. van Heyningen (eds.): *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 4; A. Davids: "The Revolt of the Malays: A Study of the Reactions of the Cape Muslims to the Smallpox Epidemics of Nineteenth Century Cape Town" in C. Saunders, H. Phillips, E. van Heyningen and V. Bickford-Smith (eds.): *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 5; C. van Onselen: "Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa 1896-97" in *Journal of African History*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1972); C. Ballard: "Pestilence and the Peasantry: The Holocaut in Natal and Zululand 1895-1907"; C. Ballard: "'A Year of Scarcity': The 1896 Locust Plague in Natal and Zululand" in *South African Historical Journal*, no. 15 (1983); M. Swanson: "The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909" in *Journal of African History*, vol. 18 (1977); R. Ross: "Smallpox at the Cape of Good Hope in the Eighteenth Century" in *African Historical Demography – Proceedings of Seminar at Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh*.
17. R. Rathbone: "World War I and Africa: Introduction" in *Journal of African History*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1978), p. 9.

five chapters trace the course of the 'flu in five specific areas, chosen either because they were the first to experience the epidemic on a significant scale (the gold mines of the Rand) or because the 'flu was particularly severe in these places (Cape Town, Kimberley, Bloemfontein and the Transkei). They underline the difference in impact and counter-measures in urban and rural areas and provide vivid case-studies of communities near breaking-point as a result of the epidemic.¹⁸ Moreover, it is likely that the effect of the 'flu and the measures taken against it elsewhere in the Union amounted to little more than variations on these experiences. Each of these five chapters also contains an examination of the local consequences of the epidemic; its more general results have been left for two later chapters. This predominantly narrative section of the study concludes with a chapter on what the fledgling Department of Public Health tried to do and the criticisms which these inadequate efforts incurred.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore the epidemic from the standpoint of medical science in 1918 and in 1984 and examine the views of doctors and the lay public as to its nature, treatment and cause. These "medical" chapters emphasise the fact that medical history is far more than a Whiggish chronicle of doctors and their heroic battles against disease.

The next chapter tries to estimate the epidemic's toll in lives, to analyse this (in so far as this is possible) and to suggest why it was so high in certain parts of the country. It also tries to gauge some of its demographic consequences, but points out that statistics tell only part of this tale. Further consequences of a more general nature, both immediate and longer-term, are examined in chapters 10 and 11, as a preliminary to a final chapter which addresses the question of the overall significance of the epidemic in South Africa's history.

It will be easier to follow the narrative chapters of this study if they are placed in chronological perspective by a brief outline of the course of the pandemic, itself an excellent example of Le Roy Ladurie's concept of "the unification of the globe by disease".¹⁹

The pandemic is thought to have originated in Asia late in 1917 or early in 1918, moved westwards and appeared in a mild form in Europe and North America in the first half of 1918. It was this first wave which produced the label "Spanish" Influenza, as reports of its outbreak in non-belligerent Spain were not curtailed by any war-time censorship there.²⁰

A second, more virulent wave erupted in August 1918 and was rapidly carried around the world by war-time shipping from three main foci, Brest, Boston and Freetown. Practically no part of the globe escaped. It was probably from Freetown that the deadly second wave was brought to Cape Town in mid-September; Durban was infected slightly earlier, probably by the far milder first wave of the epidemic. (This may explain why fewer deaths occurred in Natal and those parts of the Transvaal infected from there).

Once established in South Africa's ports, the epidemic spread inland at the speed of a locomotive on the country's railway system. By the second week of October even the most remote districts had been affected. Most communities were thrown onto their own resources to cope with the crisis, as the ubiquity of the epidemic and

18. These descriptions also demonstrate that South Africans no longer need to look only to the Black Death or Great Plague of London as exemplars of devastating epidemics.

19. E. Le Roy Ladurie: *The Mind and Method of the Historian*, ch. 2; C. Graves: *Invasion by Virus*, pp. 18-20 contains a chronological table of the pandemic, with dates of first reported outbreaks. It is a useful but not wholly accurate guide.

20. A. W. Crosby: *Epidemic and Peace*, 1918, p. 26; C. Graves: *Invasion by Virus*, pp. 17-18; R. Collier: *The Plague of the Spanish Lady*, pp. 7-9.