THE GREAT AFRICAN CATTLE PLAGUE EPIDEMIC OF THE 1890's

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SUMMARY

Historical details of this rinderpest epidemic are given, with reference to some little-known and unpublished documents.

INTRODUCTION

The rinderpest epidemic of the 1890's was apparently the first in Africa; it swept through a whole continent of susceptible animals at a time when the only country to have a veterinary service was Cape Colony, and when the ox was the principal means of transport. 80-90 per cent of cattle, buffalo, eland, giraffe, wildebeest, kudu and antelopes died, and in South Africa alone the losses amounted to 2½ million cattle. The disease had important social and economic consequences, which do not seem to be appreciated in history books. In Kenya the Masai tribe were reduced to starvation and this, together with a smallpox epidemic that followed, severely reduced their numbers so that when the colonizers moved into Kenya they found great tracts of empty land, probably formerly populated by the Masai. The Masai never regained their supremacy over the Kikuyu tribe.

Edmund Burrows in his book "A history of medicine in South Africa" (1958) acknowledges that organized medical research owed its inception to the ravages of stock diseases. Organized research dated from 1891, when Alexander Edington, a medical graduate of Edinburgh, founded the Colonial Bacteriological Institute at Grahamstown. This laboratory was established to investigate stock diseases. Edington is now remembered, as far as rinderpest is concerned, for his modification of Koch's bile method of immunization, which consisted of adding glycerin to the bile.

SOURCE OF INFECTION AND COURSE

The origin was undoubtedly cattle brought from Asia, but the early course of the disease is uncertain, since what information we have comes from traveller's tales, and it was not diagnosed until it reached Bulawayo. The disease was prevalent in Egypt in 1841 and probably spread slowly southwards from there, although Duncan Hutchison in his special report on rinderpest (1897) believed it started in Abyssinia in 1889. Against this we have the observation of Joseph Thomson, who in "Through Masai land" (1885) recorded the occurrence of what was undoubtedly rinderpest in October 1883. He was 'greatly astonished to observe the dried carcasses of numerous cattle which dotted the entire district' in Masai land. On 12th March 1884 'the Masai of the surrounding district were in despair through the almost

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utter loss of their cattle’. Thomson and his party were held to blame for the disaster, and he was obliged to indulge in a show of magic designed to keep the disease at bay. Captain Lugard, another explorer who wrote “Rise of our East African Empire,” said that never before in memory of man, or by the voice of tradition, have the cattle died in such vast numbers; never before has the wild game suffered.

The disease crosses the Zambesi.—The Zambesi river, which is 2–3 miles wide in its lower reaches, apparently halted the southerly spread of the disease for some three years; here it became known as ‘Zambesi cattle fever’. Then in February 1896 a herd of cattle was brought from the Zambesi region to Bulawayo, sold and dispersed in all directions. Trouble soon became apparent and on 6th March 1896 the Rhodesian Administrator of the British South Africa Company telegraphed the High Commissioner of South Africa in Capetown for advice. The enquiry was dealt with by Duncan Hutcheon, Chief Veterinary Surgeon of Cape Colony, who informed the Company that they already had a veterinary surgeon working for them as a telegraph operator, who should be sent to investigate the disease. This was Charles Gray who qualified at Edinburgh in 1890 and arrived in Capetown at the end of 1895. As there was no work for him as a veterinarian, he took the post of telegraph operator because he had done this for 7 years before entering the veterinary college. Gray, who later became the Principal Veterinary Surgeon of the Transvaal, was thus the first qualified man to see the disease south of the Zambesi.

The message received at Capetown was also passed to the Transvaal Government in Pretoria, who called in a Swiss veterinary surgeon, Arnold Theiler, to advise them. Theiler had arrived in Transvaal five years previously, soon after qualifying, hoping to set up a practice. He had found it difficult to convince the Boers of the need for veterinary attention and for two years had little to do. Then in 1893 a smallpox outbreak created the need for vaccine, and Theiler was entrusted with its preparation. Theiler later became the first government veterinary surgeon in the Transvaal and founded the Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Laboratory, which he directed until 1927. Theiler was sent to investigate the disease that had broken out at Bulawayo. He went by coach, travelling for 18 hours a day for six days. There he met Gray and together they confirmed that the disease was rinderpest.

In Rhodesia the Matabele were becoming increasingly discontent with white men, for they had suffered bad drought and locusts; when their cattle began to die off, this was the last straw. A few days after Theiler arrived in Bulawayo the Matabele rebelled and murdered 244 white people; only those in Bulawayo and in the mining centre of Gwelo survived. Theiler had to return home quickly to warn his government of the disease, but the Matabele had blocked the way he had come, so he took a coach through the Motopo hills, via Tati, Palapye and Mafeking. On 3rd April he arrived at Palapye and there met Otto Henning, a Cape Colony veterinary surgeon sent by Hutcheon to investigate the disease. Henning had attempted to halt the disease at Palapye by slaughtering all sick animals. He had framed regulations to control movement of cattle along this important route, one of which was that all transport oxen from the north should be killed immediately upon arrival. The British Government, through the Resident Commissioner of Bechuanaland, refused to adopt this plan and refused funds for compensation for slaughter. Thus a good chance of halting the disease was lost.

Early control measures.—On March 25th Duncan Hutcheon himself was sent to Mafeking to urge upon the Resident Commissioner the necessity of slaughtering southbound oxen with payment of compensation. Rinderpest was now being spread