

Diphtheria Outbreak

The following unnerving account of the Diphtheria outbreak and famine of the 1830s was written by Rev. William Wilson: (Newfoundland and its Missionaries, William Wilson, MUN CNS, BX 8356 N4 W5.)

...Bird Island Cove has been called upon to participate largely in the distress consequent on the failure of the fishery, besides which it has been besieged with a species of quinzy that proved epidemic and fatal in several instances. Two of our members have fallen to the ravages of this dreadful malady. But as their lives were consistent with their profession - so in their deaths religion shone most conspicuously. They died in the most exquisite agonies of actual strangulation, but while they could articulate a single sentence it was the praise of the Redeemer, and the occasional admonitions addressed to their surrounding friends, provided an effect that will not soon be forgotten...

...In the midst of this poverty, a fierce epidemic broke out in Bonavista and Bird Island Cove. It was the ulcerated sore throat, Cynanche maligna, which seems to be identical with what is now known as Diphtheria. Many fell victim to this dire disease. The journals of the writer supplies the following particulars in reference to the family of Mr. George Crew, one of our leaders in Bird Island Cove, who lost three of his family by this disease in 21 days.

July 8, 1830.

This afternoon I interred two children, both died on the same day of the prevailing epidemic, one little boy, four years old, was the son of George Crew, one of our leaders.

July 17, 1830, Sat.

Mary Minty, a married daughter of brother George Crew, was taken alarmingly ill with sore throat.

July 19, 1830.

Susannah, a girl of twelve, second daughter of brother George Crew, was taken ill with the same complaint.

July 24, 1830, Sat.

Joseph, a son of the same person: a young man 18 years of age, was seized with the sore throat.

July 27, 1830.

The girl, Susannah, died on Sabbath morning, and was interred today. On entering the room, what a sight! The coffin containing the corpse of Susannah lay on the table, near which was her sister Mary Minty, struggling in the agonies of death, and in the intervals of pain, shouting "Glory to God". In another part of the room sat Joseph, suffering severely, and apprehending the fatal result of his disease; in an adjacent apartment, was the poor mother, - whose feelings can better be conceived than described, - bewailing the loss of two of her children, and expecting every moment to see a third expire, while a fourth was in a very dangerous and critical stage. But in the midst of this scene of suffering, stood the father, who seemed to have been endowed with more than an ordinary supply of grace, - giving up one child after another with a father's feeling, but with a Christian fortitude. Now turning to his dying daughter, he would exhort her to exercise strong faith in the Redeemer's blood, and take courage, insofar as a few more groans, a few more struggles would terminate all her sufferings, when her happy spirit would wing its way to worlds on high where suffering is never known. Then he would speak to his son, and exhort and entreat him to seek for a clear sense of pardoning mercy, that he also might be prepared for the awful change. After the funeral, when returning home, - "What a house, lord, to go to! - two children in the grave in a short span of time, and perhaps another dead before I reach home - how can I endure it?" exclaimed the disconsolate mother. "Wife", replied the pious father; "cannot you give up your children when the Lord calls for them? I can. The Lord knows best what He is about to do with us, and severe as is our afflictions, it becomes us not to murmur."

...To the writer our friend George Crew said, "The Lord gave me my children, and I freely give them up at His command: and I do this because I believe they have gone to Heaven. Of Thomas (the little boy), I can have no doubt, as he died so young. Of Susannah I was anxious to get something satisfactory, as she was old enough to understand and enjoy religion; she to me", said this pious man, "she was not afraid to die". "I feel", said she, "that Jesus has loved me and I will soon be with Him in Heaven". "Mary", continued he, "has long been a professor [sic] of religion, and she now testifies to all around her that she is personally introduced in the blood of Christ; that she has no doubt of her acceptance of God, and she will soon join the blood-washed throng in the realm of light and rest."

When we reached home, we found Mary still alive, but in a fearful agony; the sloughs in her throat were causing strangulation. One person said to her, "Mary, you suffer much in body, but how is the state of your mind?" She replied, "I do suffer much but God bless I am happy; death is disarmed of its sting; I feel I am pardoned; I feel, I feel---". Here a fit of coughing came on with such violence that all present thought suffocation would be the immediate result. On recovering a little she said, "I feel Christ's presence, but I cannot converse. Good-by. I shall soon be in Heaven in the full triumph of faith"

For more than a year, did this fearful plague, "Malignant Quinsy", rage in Bonavista and Bird Island Cove. It seemed for a time as though it would

depopulate the place; its victims were numerous; it seized people of all ages, and no constitution was proof against its attacks. At length it pleased our heavenly Father to stay his chastening hand, when the complaint entirely disappeared from the people...

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Information Provided by Mr. Doug Cole