

INTRODUCTION

CHOLERA AND THE COLONIAL STATE IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

When did we ever know such a year like this?—when did this city, since its foundation, witness such scenes?—pestilence and horror stalking abroad in her streets—dismay in every countenance—death knocking at every door—none knowing who might next be the victim.

—G. J. MOUNTAIN

For the Anglican archdeacon of Quebec, G. J. Mountain, the sermon delivered on 30 December 1832 was an opportunity to reflect on the events of the almost bygone year. It had not been a good one. During the summer and autumn an epidemic of Asiatic cholera had had the city of Quebec in its grip. Cholera had been a traumatic experience of death and suffering that had cost hundreds their lives. Thus, sorrow was the dominant theme of Mountain's homily, although even in retrospect only God seemed to offer a plausible explanation for cholera's behavior. The disease's ways had been mysterious and had defied "all human sagacity and calculation":

Man can neither trace it in its course,—pronounce upon the manner of its propagation, provide against it by preventive measures, nor do more than allay its intenseness by the remedies of art; neither with respect to place nor with respect to persons, can they augur where it is likely to declare itself: at one time indeed, it seems to travel continuously along a line of communication, but as another to drop, as it were, straight down from Heaven upon a detached population, or upon the devoted head of an individual who has been scrupulously guarded from all contact with the apparent causes of danger: Seemingly capricious in its movements, and sudden, most awfully sudden, in its operation, it puts to flight all the wisdom of men; and those who have the lightest skill in the disease of this

mortal body, either profess the most discordant opinions, or frankly own their accumulated knowledge and their recent melancholy experience, to be equally at a fault.¹

If Mountain recognized in cholera an agent of God, causing havoc and overwhelming the capacities of the local medical experts, attacking “drunkards,” “profane persons,” and “jesters” more frequently than others, then there was also reason for consolation: faced with such an existential crisis, many Quebec residents had rediscovered their belief and returned to God.²

Yet, cholera’s power exceeded even its ability to kill its victims, puzzle doctors, or change the mind of individuals. It had also altered almost beyond recognition the city that was so familiar to its inhabitants:

We saw in our deserted streets, more signs of death than life—hearses carrying their load . . . the constituted authorities who watched for the public safety, unceasingly upon the alert, in token danger; engaged day after day and hour after hour, in active measures and anxious deliberations, doing all that man could do to stay in part the evils of the time, and to infuse confidence into the breasts of their fellow citizens,—Physicians and Ministers of Religion traversing the streets night and day with a hurried pace . . . —fires before every house, loading the atmosphere with vapour from prepared materials supposed of purifying power—or the official [health wardens] with their badges profusely scattering lime along the range of the more suspected habitations—these were the spectacles exhibited in our city—and images of deeper horror might be added were I to carry you into the precincts of the hospital in the first burst of the calamity, when its suddenness and overpowering magnitude, far surpassing all previous calculations, could not be met by any existing provisions nor at once mastered by any possible exertions.³

Mountain’s sermon betrayed feelings of alienation and helplessness even months after the epidemic had subsided. As a cleric, he made sense of this catastrophic experience by attributing its causation to God. Through cholera, God had disrupted normalcy in Quebec, changing not only the behavior of the citizens but the space in which they lived. This metamorphosis constituted a challenge that tested individuals’ faith and also tested the local authorities. They had to care for the ill and ensure that they received the treatment they required, but they also had to fight the environmental factors causing the epidemic. They did so, for example, by attempting to purify the atmosphere and by disinfecting dwellings and streets with lime.