

THE EMERGENCE OF A HEROIC MYTH: HISTORIES OF THE PLAGUE IN EYAM

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SUMMARY

The village of Eyam attracts thousands of visitors each year. Its fame is the result of what will be referred to as the 'traditional' story of Eyam. This tells of a voluntary quarantine intended to protect the neighbouring villages from a plague epidemic in 1666. Through analysis of a range of sources that deal with the Eyam epidemic from 1666 to the modern day, this essay will analyse the emergence of this heroic story. These accounts first appeared long after the epidemic and were promoted by poets whose artistic temperaments seemed to surpass the need for historic veracity. Similarly, they ignored the ambiguity of previous accounts of Eyam that do not allude to, and sometimes directly contradict, the 'traditional' story. The fame of the heroic myth was disseminated during the Romantic era, with the fullest account being written almost two centuries after the epidemic.

Recently, authors have begun to challenge some of the claims made in the 'traditional' story, but it is useful to catalogue its emergence. Although there is very little historical evidence for the 'traditional' story, the power of the myth has been perpetuated with many people still promoting the story today. In discussing and understanding the emergence of the heroic myth, it is important to remember that the power of the myth is not dependent on its validity. Eyam still receives a local identity from the story and its fame appears to fulfil the needs of the people who continue to visit.

INTRODUCTION

Eyam is a small village in Derbyshire which attracts thousands of visitors each year. In 1665 and 1666 the village had an epidemic of the plague, not atypical of villages elsewhere. The source of Eyam's fame is how the villagers responded to the plague and in this paper will be referred to as the 'traditional' narrative.

The 'traditional' narrative of Eyam states that the plague was inadvertently imported into the village in 1665 in a box of cloth sent from London. The plague spread through the parish resulting in over 200 deaths. During this epidemic, the minister, Rev. William Mompesson (1639 – 1709) and his predecessor Rev. Thomas Stanley (unknown – 1670) made the decision to quarantine Eyam from the neighbouring villages to protect them. This fits the heroic philosophy of Durkheim's 'altruistic suicide' (Durkheim *et al.* 2010, 217-240), where individual good is sacrificed for the common benefit. Necessary supplies were provided by the Earl of Devonshire and picked up at designated spots, for example Mompesson's Well, which is still visible today. This story of heroism has inspired many poems, novels, songs and even musicals, but only emerged over a century after the event.

This paper will begin with a brief introduction to the plague, including details about the threat of the plague today and then discuss the historical view on the contagious nature of the plague and other examples of quarantines in Europe during the second plague; this will set a context for the Eyam quarantine.

The following section will chronologically analyse the most influential sources that were written about Eyam between 1666 and the modern day; these are organised in a timeline shown in Figure 1. These accounts will be used to discuss how and why the epidemic in Eyam was transformed into the heroic myth that has made the village famous. This section will begin by analysing the only contemporary sources available on the Eyam epidemic, namely, the Eyam parish records and three letters written by Mompesson during the epidemic and will then analyse two accounts published in 1702 and 1722 that each claim to be informed directly by an inhabitant of the plague village.

Over a century after the epidemic occurred, the ‘traditional’ story began to emerge. The most influential of these accounts present the Eyam quarantine as a heroic act that embodies the concept of a ‘last stand’ against the plague. In the same way that comparative mythology has been used to discuss the purpose of myth-making (Campbell 2012; Frazer 1911), The ‘traditional’ story of Eyam will be compared to other heroic myths and stories of ‘last stands’ which will enable a suggestion to be made as to why the Eyam myth received so much historical interest after the ‘last stand’ framework emerged.

The story of Eyam is still prevalent today and over the last few decades has attracted attention from a wide range of academic fields including demography (Race 1995; Scott and Duncan 2005), mathematics (Brauer *et al.* 2008, 19-32; Raggett 1982) and science (Massad *et al.* 2004). Notably, it has recently been used as a case study in the *Oxford Textbook of Infectious Disease Control* (Cliff and Smallman-Raynor 2013, 78-80). Although some of these accounts begin to critically analyse the reliability of the story, few discuss the origin and development of it (Wallis 2006). Discussion of modern analysis of the accounts will be in the final chapter.

As the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins discusses in his book *Islands of History*, an event only acquires historical significance as it is ‘appropriated in and through the cultural scheme’ (Sahlins 1985). He argues that metaphors and analogies are commonplace in everyday language and this gives them the opportunity to become part of the ‘cultural scheme’. Where Sahlins’ book is discussing how Captain Cook was remembered differently by several disparate cultures, the story of Eyam demonstrates how people in various historical contexts can draw new meanings from a single event. In some ways, these differing historical contexts can be considered equivalent to different cultures. The story of the Eyam plague is a rare example of how the representation of an event can be developed and reconstructed over the centuries. This fascinating evolution reveals how authors’ intentions differ and how that can define their interpretation of an event.

Alun Munslow (2012) argues that how history is defined is a choice made by the historians at the time. This is exemplified in William Wood’s ‘historical’ account of Eyam from 1842 that was based on oral tradition and involves fictional dialogue. The dynamic relationship between truth and fiction led the philosopher and historian Peter Munz (1956) to suggest that history and myth are not contradictory but are interdependent. This concept is embodied in the word “mythistory”, coined by William McNeill (McNeill 1986). The same can be said about myth and scientific knowledge; for example, in Greek mythology Prometheus’s liver is eaten and grows back each day, perhaps based on the Medical knowledge that the liver is one of the few organs that can regenerate. Often history or science inform or develop into myths. I will use Eyam as a demonstration that, as Munz (1956, 6) describes, a myth can arise through the telescoping of a historical narrative.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE STORY OF EYAM

The history of plagues is commonly divided into three pandemics, the third of which is still prevalent today (Naylor 2012). The second plague pandemic began with an epidemic commonly referred to as the Black Death (1346 – 1353). Some estimates suggest that up to 60% of the population of Europe died during the initial pandemic (Benedictow 2004) and manorial records of isolated examples have suggested that some villages lost up to 80% of their population (Cohn 2008). The second plague is believed to have caused an epidemic every year from 1347 to 1670 within Europe, but many other outbreaks occurred after this point (Biraben 1975, 363–449). Interestingly, there was a chronological overlap between the second and the third plague, but they can be distinguished geographically (Hays 2005, 46).

During the initial outbreak of the third pandemic in 1894, the microorganism responsible for the plague was identified: *Yersinia pestis* (Byrne 2012; Rollins *et al.* 2003). Since this time, there has been a substantial amount of microbiological evidence to support the role of *Yersinia pestis* as the causative agent behind the second plague, although the topic is still controversial (Naylor 2012).

Use of Quarantine During the Second Plague

Although most people seemed to cite the source of the plague as *miasma* or “bad air” caused by divine wrath, an awareness of its contagious nature developed in parallel. Isolating people with disease can be seen throughout history, but the term “quarantine” originated from the Italian word *quarantino*, used to describe 40 day periods of isolation that were enforced during the Black Death (Mackowiak and Sehdev 2002). The rationale behind the length of 40 days could be based on Judeo-Christian tradition, where the period of 40 days often represents trial and testing (for Biblical examples of this see: *Exodus 24:18*, *Deuteronomy 9:18,25*, *Matthew 4:2*, and *Acts 1:3*), or from Hippocrates (*The Aphorisms of Hippocrates 1822*). In addition to quarantines, Italian cities appointed committees to enforce sanitation and the disposal of clothing, as well as limits on the movement of goods and people from infected places (Hays 2010; Slack 2012). By the end of the 18th century the quarantine of ships’ passengers and goods from infected ports was commonplace.

It is now understood that the plague is a zoonosis so inanimate objects cannot directly transmit the plague, but infected fleas can hibernate for up to 50 days in grain or cloth and still transmit the disease (Watts 1999). This may explain the recordings of plague transmission through the handling of clothes and even money left by plague victims; however, some of this may be due to a tendency to lean towards melodrama. Melodrama, exaggerations and hyperboles are an integral part of myth making. It is through these ‘semantic improvisations’ that an event can acquire new interpretation or significance (Sahlins 1985).

Although quarantines did not directly address the flea or rat vectors of transmission, some laws did command the destruction of clothing, the shaving of people who may have been in contact with the sick, and even the mass slaughter of domestic pets (Defoe 1722).¹ In 1762, the royal physician Richard Mead wrote that people should be “particularly careful to destroy the clothes of the sick, because they harbour the very quintessence of contagion” (Mead 1762, 266). He based this theory on a secondary account of seeing hogs dying within hours of sniffing the clothes of a plague victim. Although this account does not fit with our current medical understanding of the virulence of the plague (Cook 2008, 1120–1121), his advice may have been an effective strategy against flea-borne infection.

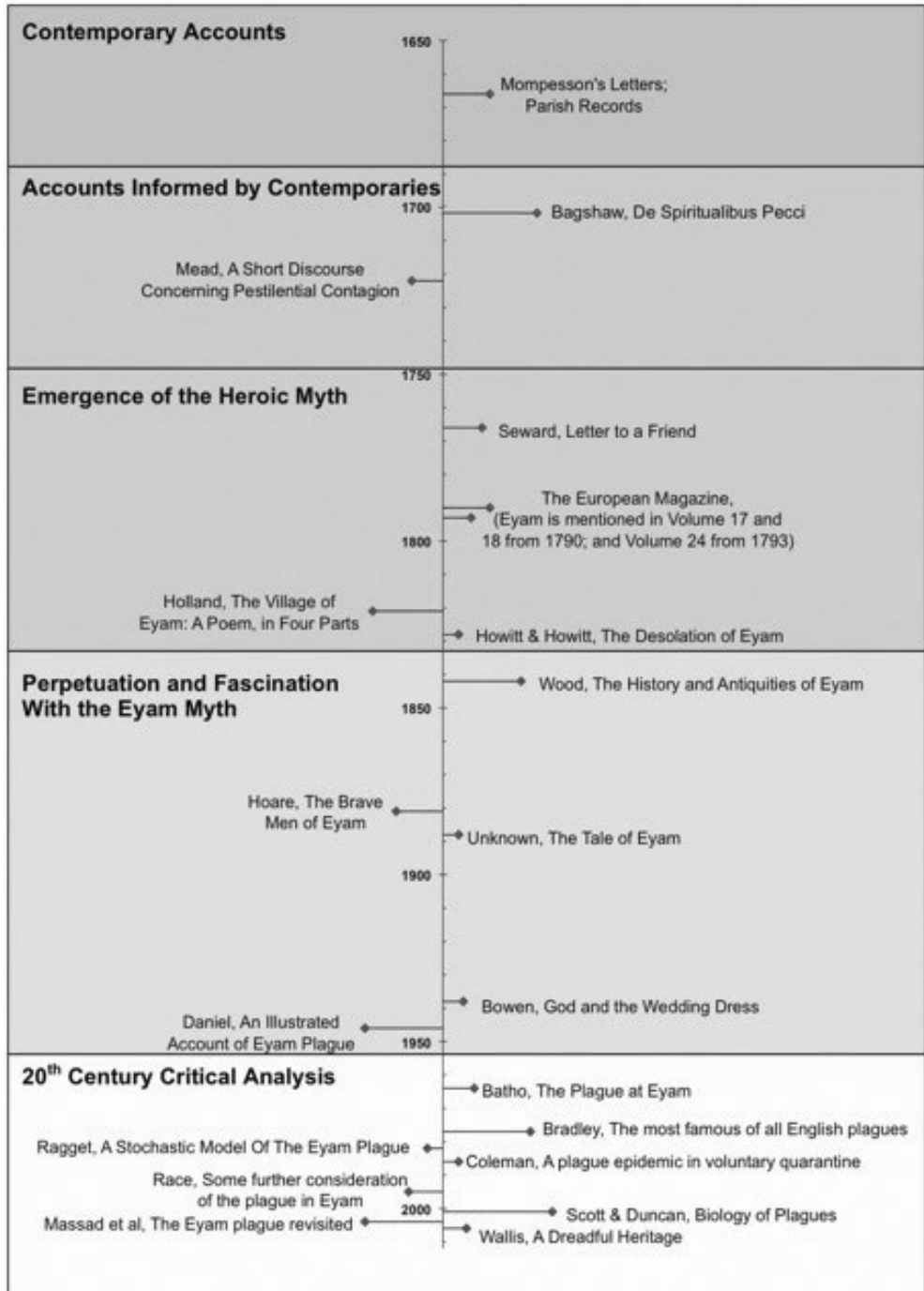


Fig. 1: showing the chronology of sources that discuss the Eyam epidemic.

Quarantines were enforced within England by the early 16th century and prevalent in other European countries long before this (Byrne 2006, 134). Paul Slack has suggested that *cordon sanitaires* were not uncommon in parishes in England in the 1660s and were often created in exchange for the necessary provisions of food (Slack 1985). This reveals an aspect of the Eyam story that is still misconstrued today: quarantines were not rare and were not usually undertaken for heroic reasons.

ANALYSIS OF HOW THE STORY OF EYAM DEVELOPED

The following sections analyse chronologically the evidence that corroborates or contradicts the ‘traditional’ account of Eyam. The sources used are the primary accounts that have defined how the story of Eyam was interpreted from 1666 to the modern day (Fig. 1).

Contemporary Accounts

The only contemporary sources available on the Eyam plague are three letters written by Rev. William Mompesson (two of these are dated within the outbreak in August and September 1666, whereas the third was written on 20th November, after the outbreak had passed) and a transcript made of the parish records in 1705, which details the baptisms, marriages and deaths. Although the parish records available are a copy, the historian Leslie Bradley has concluded that the 1705 copy is accurate by comparing these records with the Bishop Transcripts (Bradley 1977). The landscape of Eyam is also a source of evidence, with its many graves haphazardly scattered through the village.

The parish records show a significant increase in deaths in the village during 1666 and near

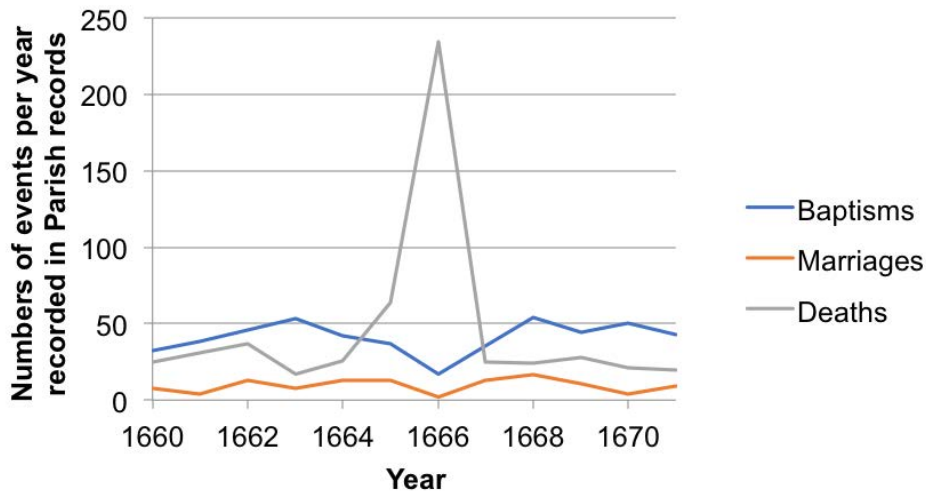


Fig. 2: showing the baptisms, marriages and deaths each year recorded in the Eyam parish records between 1660 and 1671 (Clifford and Clifford 1993).

the end of 1665 (Fig. 2). Until relatively recently, the accepted value for the population of the village was an estimation made by William Wood (1842). Although some sources still quote Wood's predicted value of 350, it has been refuted by a very detailed analysis of censuses of Eyam around the time of the plague by Bradley (1977). She concluded that the population was probably closer to 1000, but either way, the deaths caused by the epidemic represented a significant proportion of the village population.

Further analysis of the parish records reveals that from 1660 to 1664 there were averages of 42 baptisms, 9 marriages and 27 deaths recorded each year. Similarly, from 1667 to 1671, there were averages of 45 baptisms, 11 marriages and 24 deaths each year. The data suggest that the population returned to a similar level after the plague, which would have required a significant influx of villagers after the plague. It has recently been suggested that a significant number of Eyam residents fled the village at the start of the outbreak (Bradley 1977, 63-94). Interestingly, there were disproportionately fewer deaths in richer families of Eyam, which may have been the result of having the resources to flee (Wallis 2006, 9). In addition, Mompesson's letters reveal that he sent his children away and also encouraged his wife to leave, although she refused. It could be supposed that some of the influx after the plague were villagers returning who had left when the plague first started to appear, like Mompesson's children. As Slack discusses, at the time in England "there was no sharp antithesis between advocates of flight and its opponents" (Slack 1985, 42). However, this information reveals some inconsistencies with the 'traditional' account in which the whole of the village chose to be quarantined.

The first and second letters written by Mompesson were addressed to his children and Sir George Saville respectively. They are both concerning the death of his wife, Catherine Mompesson, which according to the parish records was on 25th August 1666. Mompesson exclaims that this was "the saddest news that ever my pen could write!" and the letters convey a rare and touching personal slant on the Eyam story. Similarly, another personal slant can be revealed by the names listed in the parish records. For example, there are seven deaths with the name Hancock within a period of eight days: the husband and six children of Elizabeth Hancock. The reality of this is exacerbated when it is realised that she most likely had to bury them herself.

Mompesson's third letter, addressed to his uncle, John Beilby on 20th November 1666, reports the end of the Eyam epidemic and expresses the magnitude of the plague.

The condition of this place has been so sad, that I persuade myself it did exceed all history and example... Here have been seventy-six families visited within my parish out of which two hundred and fifty-nine persons died Mompesson's third letter (Seward 1796)

As well as the personal pain caused by the deaths, the letters expose some of the ways the village dealt with the plague, for example, constructing pesthouses, burning clothes and "chemical antidotes". Although these methods of plague management are sensible, they cannot be considered uncommon at the time in England and had been practiced over three centuries before this in Italy (Hays 2010, 54-56; Newman 2012). It is interesting, although not conclusive, that Mompesson made no mention of quarantine or of the Earl of Devonshire, who provided food to the village according to the 'traditional' story. This omission brings doubt to the credibility the 'traditional' narrative.

Overall, the letters and the parish records reveal very little either to corroborate or contradict the ‘traditional’ account of Eyam. Furthermore, they do not give the story a guise of heroism or make any demonstration that Eyam’s experience with the plague was any different from the countless other villages that had plague epidemics. The ‘traditional’ story of Eyam is that the village quarantined themselves as a form of altruistic sacrifice, but this is only an interpretation. Motives are not addressed in the contemporary sources. An alternative to this hypothesis is that the villagers that remained had limited ability to flee, so could be encouraged to stay within their confines by neighbouring villages in exchange for food.

Accounts informed by Contemporaries

This section will discuss two accounts that were informed by residents with access to first-hand information on the Eyam epidemic. The first account was written by the local nonconformist theological writer William Bagshaw. This account was, at least in part, informed by the son of Thomas Stanley who was the rector of Eyam from 1644 until 1662 when he was removed from his post for nonconformity (Bagshaw 1702, 61-64; Thomas 2013, 242). It was not uncommon for clergymen in England to be removed from their post at this time due to the *Act of Uniformity* (1662), but Stanley continued to serve the villagers of Eyam “in private” until he died there in 1670 (Calamy and Palmer 1775, 317). The second account was written by the royal physician Richard Mead (1722) and was informed by Mompesson’s son. These are the only accounts that are informed by contemporaries, which gives them a certain authority.

Bagshaw’s account of Eyam, *De Spiritualibus Peccis*, was published in 1702 and is the earliest printed account of the plague in Eyam. Interestingly, Bagshaw’s account contains no direct reference to Mompesson and gives no impression of an internal decision to quarantine Eyam; two elements that become intrinsically part of the ‘traditional’ story.

The emphasis of the account is not focused on the way the village dealt with the plague (and does not imply that they did so in a notable way) but is more concerned with the Earl of Devonshire’s response to villagers trying to force Stanley out of Eyam. According to Bagshaw’s account, upon the villagers’ request of Stanley’s ejection, the Earl of Devonshire replied that “it is more reasonable, that the whole country should in more than words testify their thankfulness to [Stanley], who together with his care of the town, had taken such care, as no one else did, to prevent the Infection of the Towns adjacent.” (Bagshaw 1702, 64) This claim explicitly counters the ‘traditional’ position of Mompesson as the progenitor of the quarantine of Eyam. The unique absence of Mompesson in this account, and the emphasis of Stanley’s role, may be due to denominational rivalry between Bagshaw and Stanley’s son (both nonconformists) and Mompesson (Anglican). In addition, as Wallis points out, Bagshaw’s account was a “minor political triumph for the nonconformist cause” as the family of the Earl of Devonshire was part of the aristocracy from whom the nonconformists were seeking support (Wallis 2006, 11).

The second account that claims to be directly informed by a member of the plague village is by Richard Mead (1722), informed by Mompesson’s son. Although Mompesson’s children were sent away during the plague, they returned to the village and it can be conjectured that they were well informed of the events that took place in the village. The first edition of Mead’s *Short Discourse* was published in 1721 and did not contain any mention of Eyam. However, this was met with some criticism, notably, George Pye criticised Mead’s methods strongly as he did not believe that the plague was transmitted by contagion, but by the Hippocratic mechanism of *miasma* (Pye 1721). In Mead’s eighth edition, which was published in 1722 and

was over three times the length of the first edition, he used the case study of Eyam to justify his suggestions of the use of pesthouses and village quarantine to protect against the spread of the plague through England. The entrance of the plague to Eyam through infected cloth is also used by Mead to add evidence to arguments of contagionism. This is the first written account of the plague's entrance to the village and, unlike later accounts that are criticised for the apparent virulence of the infection (Scott and Duncan 2005), Mead makes no mention of a time scale.

Contrary to Bagshaw's account that does not mention Mompesson, Mead presents the story of Eyam with a familial bias in favour of Mompesson, and consequently makes no mention of Stanley's role in the village. Irrespective of the bias of Mead's account being formed by Mompesson's son, he does not suggest that Eyam, or specifically Mompesson, dealt with the epidemic in a heroic way but simply in an effective and imitable way to combat contagion.

These two accounts are the only ones that can claim to be informed by a resident of the plague village, which gives them a certain level of authority that future accounts lack. However, they reveal a very different type of story from that which is popularised today. Although these accounts may be the origin of the future accounts' focus on quarantine, they leave the following questions unanswered:

- Who initiated the quarantine?
- How strict was the quarantine?
- Were the villagers encouraged to undergo quarantine by neighbouring villages?

The ambiguity that these early sources reveal seems to have been ignored by later writers, whose blinkered approach helped propagate the account of Eyam that we know today.

The Emergence of the Heroic Myth

Eyam was mentioned in a few texts during the middle of the 18th century but they appear to be relying on older accounts. Consistent with the theme of Mead's account, many only mention Eyam as a demonstration of the contagious nature of the plague or the resultant depopulation, without any mention of quarantine or heroism (Pilkington 1789, 342-343; Short 1749, 412). There is a stark difference between this and the accounts that emerged later in the 18th century, which are more similar to the 'traditional' accounts known today and have an emphasis on Mompesson's role. One of the earliest of these accounts was a letter from 1766 written by the daughter of Eyam's rector, a local poet named Anna Seward. Perhaps prompting this letter, earlier that year there was a centenary memorial led by her father, Thomas Seward. Anna Seward's letter represents a turning point in the way the Eyam story was viewed and was published posthumously in 1810 (Seward 1810).

After describing the landscape around Eyam, Seward begins her account by stating that "the village of Eyam was one of the last if it were not the very last place in England visited by that dire contagion" (Seward 1810). Although this claim is not strictly true and the plague still caused some minor outbreaks in England after this time (Scott and Duncan 2005), it framed the story in a new realm of importance by painting it as England's 'last stand' against the plague.

There are many comparable examples of heroic 'last stands' throughout history. These stories characteristically involve self-sacrifice, for example the Battle of Thermopylae or

the Siege of Masada. Many of these have relatively recently been dissected and found to have weak historical foundations (Ben-Yehuda 1996; Fox 1997; Terry 2012; Tucker 2009). Irrespective of their truth, ‘last stands’ bear a historical significance that Nathaniel Philbrick (2010) argues is due to a “strong pull on human emotions, and on the way we like to remember history”. He continues:

The variations are endless – from the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae to Davy Crockett at the Alamo – but they all tell the story of a brave and intractable hero leading his tiny band against a numberless foe. Even though the odds are overwhelming, the hero and his followers fight on nobly to the end and are slaughtered.

Seward places Eyam within a poetic framework where the sacrifice of the inhabitants of Eyam led to the triumph of England against the “dire contagion”. This romanticism seems to be the foundation on which Eyam is remembered today; for example, a documentary and an article from 2012 called *Eyam Village: Where The Plague Stopped and Eyam* and “*The Last Great Visitation*” respectively, both heavily embody the theme of Eyam being England’s ‘last stand’ (Big baby Productions Ltd 2012; Fanshawe 2012).

To further the transfer of heroic status to Mompesson, Seward compares him to M. de Belsunce, the Bishop of Marseilles. The Bishop of Marseilles had remained in his village during an outbreak of the plague in 1720 and this had been eulogised widely across Europe (Wallis 2006, 13). Seward (1810, cix) composes this comparison by paraphrasing Alexander Pope’s praise of the Bishop of Marseilles from *An Essay on Man*. In addition, Seward referred to Mompesson as “the rival in virtue of Marseilles’ good bishop” in a letter written in 1788 (Seward and Constable 1811, 71). It could be conjectured that this viewpoint was rife in the village of Eyam itself, since in 1791 the historian John Howard made the same comparison after visiting Eyam (Howard 1791, 24-25; Seward 1810, cixi). Similarly, a series of three publications by different authors in *The European Magazine* all make the same comparison and also indicate local knowledge of the village (Philological Society of London 1790, v17; *Ibid.* 1790, v18; *Ibid.* 1793, v24). Regardless of whether the authors made this comparison by coincidence or if it was initiated by a unified source, it was repeated many times in the late 18th century and throughout 19th century.

Seward’s account has a bias heavily in favour of Mompesson and, for the first time, tells the story with him as a central figure in the care of the village. It could be suggested that part of this is due to being influenced by a friendship with Mompesson’s great granddaughter and access to Mompesson’s three letters (Seward 1810, clx + clxiii). In addition, as a poet, her intentions may be assumed to be more artistic than historical or scientific. This approach contrasts with Mead, whose source was a closer relative to Mompesson (son) and who took a medical approach. In addition, the comparative temporal distances from the event would favour Mead’s account. All these factors place some doubt on the historical accuracy of Seward’s account, even though her account is most like the ‘traditional’ story known today.

In 1790 *The European Magazine* included Mompesson as a distinguished Englishmen in response to the Bishop of Marseilles’ growing fame (Philological Society of London 1790, v17; Wallis 2006). The subsequent volume of the magazine (1790, v18) contained a letter to the editor attempting to correct some mistakes made in the original account. In addition, this account claims that three people died after opening a grave almost a century after the

epidemic; a very similar story can be found in Seward's account of Eyam (1810, clxv–clxvi). This does not fit with our current medical understanding of the plague bacillus, and although some historians would use this to argue against *Yersinia pestis* being responsible for the plague, it seems more likely that this story is only loosely based upon reality. The exhumation of human remains has risks even after the body has undergone modern embalming techniques, something that certainly did not occur during the Eyam epidemic. Therefore, the sickness that was attributed to the plague may well have been from unsafe handling of human remains.² However, in the same way that the death of Egyptian archaeologists in the 19th and early 20th century fuelled public superstitions of curses from pharaohs,³ this story is more likely to be rooted in public fear than truth. Regardless of whether it was true or not, it will have given the story a contemporary relevance to the readers and added more weight to the heroic characteristics attributed to Mompesson by portraying the plague as an even more ominous foe.

Perhaps prompted by the second account from *The European Magazine* in 1790, which says that “it is a pity [Mompesson's letters] have never appeared in the world”, an account of the plague was published three years later in the same magazine that contained Mompesson's letter to his children (1793, v24:62–65). Confusingly, this account was written by William Seward who was not related to, but an acquaintance of, Anna Seward. William Seward's account was republished a further three years after this (1796, 267–280), within *Anecdotes of Some Distinguished Persons*, this time containing all three of Mompesson's letters. He dramatically introduces the letters in both accounts with: “I hope that neither I nor my friends shall ever know that person who can read them without tears” (Philological Society of London 1793, 63; Seward, 1796, 270). All three accounts within *The European Magazine* contain the same comparisons to the Bishop of Marseilles as can be found beforehand in Anna Seward's account.

It could be suggested that the accounts discussed in this chapter construct a tragedy where Mompesson is the “exemplary...pious and affectionate” protagonist (Seward 1810, clxiv). In some ways, these epithets are consistent with Aristotle's concept of a “virtuous” tragic hero, whose narrative begins with happiness and ends in disaster, intending to evoke pity from the audience (Reeves 1952, 182). Aristotle discusses the constituents of a tragedy in *Poetics* (1997) and concludes that for something to be considered a true tragedy, the change towards disaster must be due to a mistake the protagonist has made. Contrasting to this, Seward's account depicts Mompesson's decision as admirable, although it led to much death and sorrow. Interestingly, as I will discuss in the last chapter, 20th century analysis of the Eyam epidemic has suggested that the decision to quarantine may have been a mistake, fulfilling the requirements of Aristotle's tragedy.

The accounts discussed in this chapter further establish the theme initiated by Anna Seward of Eyam being England's momentous ‘last stand’ against the plague, where the deadly foe was defeated by heroism. The transformation of the Eyam epidemic into a ‘last stand’ myth exemplifies a more significant shift in literary tastes at this time, the Romantic era (Ruston 2007). Other comparable examples of this are discussed in the essay *The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period* by the historian Prys Morgan (1983, 85–86); for example, the Welsh poet Iolo Morganwg who transformed many obscure figures into “national heroes” in the 1780s. Morgan argues that these transformations helped define the Welsh national identity. Many other movements towards nationalism within Europe occurred during the 18th century, such as national anthems and national flags (Hobsbawm 1983, 7). It could be argued that the

heroic myth of Eyam helped defend local and national identity. This attitude is demonstrated when the authors compare Mompesson to his eulogised French equivalent, the Bishop of Marseilles. The identity that Eyam receives from the ‘traditional’ story is still clearly visible today; the village, museum and church attract thousands of visitors each year and annually the start of the plague is commemorated in the church.

The 19th Century Perpetuation of the Heroic Myth of Eyam

Anna Seward and the accounts from *The European Magazine* began the transformation of the Eyam epidemic into the story of heroism that is known today. Promoting this further, two epic poems were written about the Eyam epidemic in the early 19th century (Holland 1821; Howitt and Howitt 1828). In addition, the fascination with Eyam’s heroic myth extended beyond the realm of poetry and it was mentioned in at least two tourist guidebooks in the 19th century (Adam 1851; Rhodes 1824). All of these accounts seem to be heavily influenced by Seward’s account and do not add any significant details to the story.

By far the most detailed account on the Eyam plague and the one that is most commonly cited today as the ‘traditional’ account was written by William Wood (1842), a local amateur historian. Although presented as a historical book, he relied mainly on the oral tradition and his account involves fictional dialogue between villagers during the epidemic. This overlap between history and fiction can also be seen in Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, which Bastian (1965 153) argued could be considered a “historical novel”. However, unlike Defoe who was a child living in London during its epidemic in 1666, Wood had no contact with anyone who was alive during the epidemic in Eyam.

Wood’s account retains many of the themes seen within previous writing on the Eyam epidemic but take these to a new romanticised level.

Let all who tread the green fields of Eyam, remember, with feelings of awe and veneration, that beneath their feet repose the ashes of those moral heroes, who, with a sublime, heroic, and an unparalleled resolution, gave up their lives...to save the surrounding country... Their magnanimous self-sacrifice...is unequalled in the annals of the world... Let the ground round the village be honoured and hallowed.

(Wood 1842, 40)

The first edition of the book written by Wood boasts the title: *The History and Antiquities of Eyam; with a Full and Particular Account of the Great Plague, Which Desolated that village in 1666*. Interestingly, this title had been replaced by the third edition, published in 1859, and instead of claiming to be the “full and particular account”, it was demoted to “a minute account”. Similarly, examples given by Leslie Bradley (1977, 64) in her comprehensive analysis of the Eyam epidemic show how Wood’s language evolved through different editions of the book. For example, in early accounts of *The History and Antiquities of Eyam*, Wood makes claims such as “it is, however, matter of fact, that this terrible plague was brought from London to Eyam in a box of old clothes”; these are later withdrawn by the addition of phrases like “according to traditional accounts” and recording events as being what “imagination may paint”. The change in language in the subsequent editions of the book betrays a lack of confidence in the reliability of his accounts.

The parish records indicate that the first death was George Viccars (sometimes spelt

Vicars), and according to Wood this was the result of infected clothes being sent from London. After opening the box, Viccars noticed that it was damp and so hung them by the fire to dry. Woods writes that “he was suddenly seized with violent sickness and other symptoms” (Wood 1842, 50). This instantaneous account of the plague affecting Viccars contrasts with previous accounts that do not allude to the speed that symptoms developed; for example, Mead’s account does not mention a time scale at all. It could be argued that this account of the entrance of the plague to Eyam is more likely to be due to Wood’s melodramatic tendencies.

Continuing the theme initiated by Seward of the heroic myth, Wood’s account praises the villagers for their “superhuman courage” (*Ibid.*, 59). In addition, Wood praises the authority of Mompesson’s word and makes the assumption that it “must be conclusive” even on matters like the diagnosis of the plague (*Ibid.*, 117). Similarly, he claims that according to village traditions, Mompesson’s wife claimed how sweet the air smells and this was how Mompesson knew that she had caught the plague (*Ibid.*, 69). Phantasmia or olfactory hallucinations have not been described as a symptom of the plague historically or in modern textbooks.

This section has intended to emphasise a number of factors that shed light on the lack of validity of Wood’s account. These factors have been ignored by a multitude of authors writing about Eyam who rely on the authority of Wood’s account. This laxness has allowed the propagation of the heroic myth to continue throughout the 19th and 20th century, as can be seen below in the lyrics from the folk song *Roses of Eyam* composed by John Trevor (1975):

George Vicars was a tailor to the village life of Eyam

And to his house a case of clothes from London town was seen

To be delivered one fine day in September ‘65

And never more was tailor Vicars ever seen alive Ever seen alive

The scars upon his face and chest were many to behold

And, lying by his severed body, now so very cold

The case from London opened wide, the clothes all neatly hung

And from the bell upon the church the knell of death was rung The knell of death was rung

There followed sixty scarred and bleeding, buried in their grave

And Thomas Stanley stood above and told them Jesus saved

But Stanley was a Puritan, an enemy to heed

To Mompesson, the Anglican, who held the rector’s creed Who held the rector’s creed

The differences between these men, which were so very wide,

Were shattered by their desperate need and rudely cast aside

The voices of these two were joined, their words were not in vain

They told the villagers of Eyam the plague must be contained The plague must be contained

The village people took their word, agreed to stay and die

They built a wall around the hamlet not so very high

*But high enough so they would know that though it mean their lives
The plague must stay behind the wall with children, friends and wives
With children, friends and wives*

*For six long months the wall did stand and honest to their word
The families died, the Fryths and the Syddals never more were heard
The Thornleys, Hancocks and the Torres were buried in the ground
The Coopers and the Vicars never made another sound
Never made another sound*

*The dawn that rang the final bell left thirty-three alive
From three hundred and sixty in September '65
The villagers rebuilt their lives with those who still remained
The name of Eyam can still be seen, the plague had been contained
The plague had been contained.*

Another notable example of a modern reworking of Wood's account of Eyam is Geraldine Brooks' novel *Year of Wonders* from 2002, which was an international bestseller.

Fundamentally, Wood's account should be doubted for two reasons. Firstly, it was written over two centuries after the event. Although it contains lots of information that had not been written before, he had no additional sources than what we have available to us today. Secondly, the sources that he did use were accepted uncritically and are highly ambiguous, for example, oral tradition and Seward's account. The presentation of this as a historical text led to further dissemination of these unreliable accounts and was a defining moment in the development of Eyam's heroic myth.

20TH CENTURY CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EYAM

In the 19th and 20th century the story of Eyam was retold numerous times, but these have largely been imaginative reinterpretations of Wood's account. Some of this interest may have been fuelled by public fear of the third plague, which killed around 13 million people between 1896 and 1910 in China and India (Slack 2012). In addition, this time period saw an enormous shift in medical understanding of the plague, culminating in the discovery of *Yersinia pestis* and the rat flea vector. The fame of plagues and their consequences would have fuelled interest in Eyam's story and optimism and hope would have been generated by the idea of a heroic resistance to the horrors of the plague.

A number of factors within Wood's account are incompatible with 20th century knowledge of the plague. He claims the outdated view that plagues are "in general...a consequence of violent commotions in the earth" (Wood 1842, 42). Interestingly, this is not without any basis as there are occasional modern accounts of earthquakes triggering the spread of the plague. This has been suggested to be the result of driving rats out of their homes leading to a greater spread of infection, but this is not the norm (Bailey 2010, 83).

Wood's account of the entrance of the plague to Eyam does not fit with our modern knowledge of the virulence of the plague. To explain how the plague may have become epidemic within the village and led to the death of Viccars (the first villager to die in the epidemic), Batho (1964) has suggested that the plague was transported to the village by

visitors from Derby for the Wakes, which Wood writes were two weeks before Viccars' illness and had many visitors. Although this seemed plausible, Batho dismisses his own suggestion and concludes that the 'traditional' account is more probable. Shrewsbury (1970, 552) also tried to defend Wood's account by suggesting that 'blocked' fleas were in the cloths that Viccars received and this introduced the plague to the rats of Eyam. This explanation ignores the speedy onset of Viccars' symptoms but may explain how an epidemic occurred in Eyam after Viccars' death.

The entrance of the plague to Eyam is one example of many where Wood's account does not fit with our current biological knowledge. Primarily relying on Wood's account, Scott and Duncan (Scott and Duncan 2005, 261) conclude that it is a "biological impossibility" that *Yersinia pestis* was responsible for the plague in Eyam. Considering the compelling microbiological evidence suggesting that *Yersinia pestis* was endemic in England and the rest of Europe (Drancourt and Raoult 2011), it seems more likely that Wood's account is incorrect. It will be interesting to see if in the future microbiological studies can be carried out specifically in Eyam to conclusively prove this.

In 1964 Batho challenged Wood's claims that there were only 83 survivors from the epidemic by analysing the *Compton Ecclesiastical Return* from 1676. In 1977, Bradley exposed more flaws in Wood's demographic assumptions and revealed that over half of the families from Eyam might have escaped the plague. These authors began to shed light on the lack of historic validity of previous accounts about Eyam. This critique developed further when Coleman (1986) suggested that the village's decision to quarantine themselves directly led to the high mortality rate:

Mompesson's policy was credited at the time with preventing the spread of the plague...but the policy can now be seen as an error, and one which probably caused the extraordinarily high mortality in Eyam, by keeping the population in close contact with a domestic rat plague epizootic, while having little or nothing to do with the freedom from plague enjoyed by the adjacent valleys.

The suggestion that the decision to quarantine Eyam led to a worse outcome for the village was echoed almost 20 years later by the mathematicians Massad *et al.* (2004). They hypothesised that the increase in rate of deaths that can be seen in the parish records after 275 days was the result of the plague developing from bubonic to pneumonic (where human-to-human spread can occur). To test this hypothesis, they designed two mathematic models for plague dynamics and these showed a remarkable agreement to the parish data. They concluded that the epidemic developed to the more dangerous pneumonic form and this may have been the result of Eyam's villagers' decision to quarantine themselves. However, it could be argued that the increase of deaths seen in the parish records simply reflects the usual seasonal patterns of the plague, where the plague is less prevalent in colder climates, i.e. the winter months (Naylor 2012).

The 20th century debunking of the Eyam story further undermines the validity of the 'traditional' account. However, this does not take away from the local identity that many villagers in Eyam receive from the heroic myth; it is not rare for 'traditions' that provide local or national identity to have a weak historic foundation, as discussed in the *Invention of Tradition* (Osborn and Hobsbawm, 1983).

CONCLUSION

The 'traditional' story of Eyam is one of heroism and tragedy that has captured the imagination of many authors as well as the interest of the many visitors to the village. Since the early 19th century, the story has been retold in at least three poems, nine novels, five plays, three musicals, three operas and two songs. However, the historical context of the 'traditional' story presents a reality that is often ignored: high plague mortality and quarantines were not rare. This mundane truth is exemplified by the lack of significant historical interest in the Eyam epidemic until around two centuries after the event. Moreover, none of the earliest accounts implied that Eyam handled the plague epidemic in a unique or heroic way. The 'traditional' story of Eyam has a weak foundation, but as Scott and Duncan (2005, 281) expressed in *Biology of Plagues*, "many villages and towns in England today still have their plague stones; it is just that Eyam has had better public relations agents to promote this story".

The heroic myth of Eyam was propagated in the late 18th and 19th century by poets and other authors whose artistic temperament seemed to surpass the need for historic veracity; this reflected a general movement of literary tastes within Europe towards Romanticism. These accounts relied on oral tradition and seemed to ignore the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the previous accounts. Many of these accounts encouraged the transformation of the Eyam story by inaccurately portraying the epidemic as England's 'last stand' against the plague. This recasting allowed the story to be set within a new framework, where Mompesson was given a heroic status. As well as exemplifying the shift in literary tastes seen in the Romantic era, the transformation of the Eyam story to a heroic myth is a demonstration of Europe's move towards nationalism and an attempt to define local and national identity. The local identity that Eyam receives from the 'traditional' narrative is irrefutable today. Commemorations of the plague occur annually within the village and Eyam's heroic myth is mentioned in many modern tourist guidebooks, in the same way that it has been since the 19th century (Burkinshaw 2003, 127-132; *Lonely Planet England* 2007, 510-511). Most noticeably, a weathervane with the silhouette of a plague rat stands proudly on top of Eyam's Museum (Fig. 3).

The parish records reveal little doubt that there was an outbreak of the plague in Eyam in 1665 and 1666, even though modern estimations of the prevalence are significantly lower than the previous accounts. Regardless of the proportion of the village that died from the plague, the claim that the village heroically quarantined themselves has very little historical evidence. Recent evidence suggests that over half of the village escaped, and this prompts another possible hypothesis: that the villagers who remained had limited ability to flee, so could be encouraged to stay within their confines by neighbouring villages in exchange for food. It seems unlikely that definitive evidence will reveal the intentions of the villagers, or what role Mompesson or Stanley had in influencing this. However, the development of the 'traditional' story in the different historical contexts reveals how authors' intentions differ and how that can define their interpretation of an event.

In *History and Myth*, Munz (1956) discusses many examples where historical events are "telescoped into myth". I have shown that this has occurred in the emergence of the 'traditional' story of Eyam. In the 18th and 19th century, the story of Eyam was channelled into the common romantic framework of a 'last stand' narrative; this is the account of Eyam that is still prevalent today. Although Munz is discussing another myth in the following passage, his words resonate with the story of Eyam.



Fig. 3 The weathervane on top of Eyam's Museum.

Whatever the particular historical facts were, the stories have all been condensed into myths that run along a certain line... When history is telescoped into myth, the myth-maker always has the object of bringing out certain features deeply characteristic of human behaviour.
(Munz 1956, 7)

The “myth-makers” in the Eyam story sought to bring out characteristics of heroism within the framework of England’s ‘last stand’ against the plague. This memorable story inspired and encouraged the listeners with a sense of hope and gave the villagers a sense of local identity. The power of the myth has been perpetuated with many people still promoting the story today, a testament to the human desire to uphold heroes. In discussing and understanding the emergence of the heroic myth, it is important to remember that the power of the myth is not dependent on its validity but can serve other purposes of cohesive village identity.

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NOTES

¹ Defoe (1722, 139–140) writes that 40,000 dogs and up to 500,000 cats were killed. This figure may be embellished for dramatic effect, however, as W G Naphy and P Roberts (1997) discuss in the chapter “*The Great Dog Massacre*”, it was not uncommon for thousands of

domestic pets to be slaughtered within a single year.

² A list of the key infections that could be acquired from human remains can be found in: Health and Safety Executive (2005) *Controlling the Risks of Infection at Work from Human Remains*.

³ For more information on the ‘curse of the pharaohs’ see: Day (2006) *The Mummy’s Curse*.

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