

THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF OUR GREATEST PANDEMIC

In the previous two Diary issues I talked first about how the smallpox pandemic of 1789 was deliberately started by the Lieutenant Governor, Major Robert Ross. I then described how the disease spread throughout Australia, partly aided by the warning song that had been composed.

Although the disease was new to Australia, in Europe and other parts of the world there had been rolling plagues of the smallpox virus through the entire eighteenth century. Any survivors gained lifetime immunity, so the overall death rate was usually 30% to 40%.

In populations experiencing their first exposure to smallpox, such as North America and South America in the sixteenth century and South Africa in the seventeenth century, the death rate was always around 90%.

Australians were even more vulnerable as this was a completely disease free environment. There was no resistance to European diseases and even the common cold could kill. The resulting Australian death rate from the 1789 smallpox plague was therefore at least 90%, with the actual numbers killed being at least 2 ½ million Australians. The enormity of this figure is hard to comprehend, even if it happened today.

This article will therefore begin to explore the social effects that accompanied this massive depopulation. This is something I have never seen attempted before by any previous author, and one can only wonder at the reasons for this.

The first point to understand is that, like the present day Covid19 virus, the smallpox virus was not an equal opportunity disease. Some people who caught the disease survived, but this was only the fittest 10% of people from later childhood and up to middle-age.

Like the present Covid19 the elderly were particularly vulnerable to smallpox. Unlike Covid19 however, young children were also particularly vulnerable. For those who caught smallpox in Australia, the harsh reality was as follows. If you were under six years old you were dead. If you were over sixty you were dead. If you were a pregnant woman you were dead.

I often use the term 'Druidic Meritocracy' to describe the nature of traditional Australian society. This means that people were promoted to authority in society solely on the basis of both their religious and secular knowledge. Both male and female Eldership was therefore achieved solely on merit, and through meeting the twin tests of knowledge and character.

So just think about the implications from that aspect for a moment. Suddenly in one fell swoop, a whole generation of Elders, both men and women, is wiped out before the next generation of Elders have completed their training. Nothing could have prepared them for this dislocation.

At the other end of the scale the youngest generation has also been wiped out, along with every pregnant woman. This meant that suddenly there were more men than women and there was a dearth of women of marriageable age. Not only that, but there was going to be a dearth of marriageable women for the next generation.

In traditional Australian society men had no say in who married who. Marriage was controlled by women a generation ahead by a process of mother-in-law gifting. Men had to be proven hunters and providers before they could marry, so were usually in their mid-twenties or later when they did. On the other hand girls were married at about fourteen, so a husband might be ten or fifteen years older than their wife.

This meant that a man was around the same age as their future mother-in-law. Both grew up knowing each other, and knew that the as yet unborn child of the girl would be the future wife of the boy. So to make sure there was no possibility of a sexual attraction between a future mother-in-law and her future son-in-law, he was never allowed to look at her face. He would rather blunder into a tree than look at his mother-in-law. Some might think it is an excellent rule.

However in the apocalyptic post-smallpox world of Australia, these generation-ahead marital arrangements were thrown into chaos. Female authority was consequently a prime casualty of the smallpox plague. A man's marital prospects now depended almost solely on either elopement or abduction, and this had two results.

First, previously unknown levels of domestic violence now became an institutionalised norm, and in some communities this result is still being felt more than two hundred and thirty years later. Second, as the rate of wife abductions increased, so did intertribal conflict.

Inter-tribal killings reached heights never seen before, prompting settlers and historians to falsely conclude that, like domestic violence, this was an age-old traditional norm. Historians have even gone so far as to count up the number of frontier period deaths recorded, to conclude it exceeded the deaths of Australian soldiers in the First World War. And this proves exactly what?