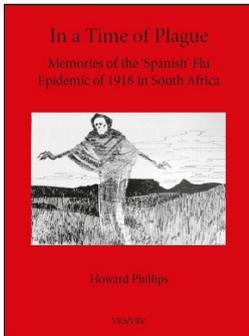




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**BOOK TITLE:**

In a time of plague: Memories of the 'Spanish' flu epidemic of 1918 in South Africa



**EDITOR:**

Howard Phillips

**ISBN:**

9780994720719 (hardcover, 189 pp)

**PUBLISHER:**

Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town; ZAR380

**PUBLISHED:**

2018

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**HOW TO CITE:**

Burns C. 'It chose the beautiful ones....'. S Afr J Sci. 2020;116(3/4), Art. #7717, 2 pages. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/7717>

**ARTICLE INCLUDES:**

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

**PUBLISHED:**

26 March 2020

## 'It chose the beautiful ones....'

*It was only the illness and dying of people that I remember. And the funerals, Oh! My brother Elias [Plaatje, an evangelist] had just caught the 'flu and died in the same 'flu. The 'flu really comes with the soldiers from overseas. Because people didn't even know what was causing that fever. Oh, it was terrible. People working in the mines who had died – they just made one grave for them. The children eight to twenty were mostly dying. Even the doctors could do nothing... I was supposed to get married in 1918, then the 'flu came and I got sick. I was in Kimberley for buying my wedding gown... the 'flu was very strong over September and October and over by November and towards December. ...Even the Europeans in Barkly West had to collect this 'wel-als' bush. You only collect that bush in the veld and boil it...*

Martha Bokako (born 1890), interviewed 22 November 1980 by Andrew Reed (p.95)

Martha Bokako was mourning her family's deep loss, and recovering from a serious bout of 'flu in Pniel (Western Cape) in late 1918, and yet she recalled anticipating the life ahead of her – including her hope that her postponed wedding plans would resume when her fiancée, an ordained minister, had recovered from the most thoroughgoing and severe epidemic the region had ever faced. In the 3 months Martha Bokako refers to here, South Africa lost about 4% of the total estimated population; millions of loved ones were left in mourning and many children were left orphaned and unmoored. Her full account, with that of 127 of her fellow South Africans, has been collected by Professor Howard Phillips of the Department of History at the University of Cape Town in *In a Time of Plague: Memories of the 'Spanish' Flu Epidemic of 1918 in South Africa*. This unique, harrowing and deeply engaging collection, has been edited and brought to life with a lucid and crisp introduction, carefully annotated throughout, to bring the specific geographical, medical and social details of the hundreds of witnesses to this epidemic into our world a century later. The letters and accounts in this collection locate South Africa in a tri-continental frontier – a region deeply imbricated in global movements of people, goods, animals, ideas, ideologies, forms of exchange and extraction. With people and microbes came also their microscopic parasitic cousins – viruses. The Union of South Africa, established in 1910, was one of the newest political formations in the world and the meeting place for people of the sub-continent, from Europe, and, with the outbreak of World War I in 1914, with new arrivals and cargoes from Atlantic African ports, from east Africa and the Mediterranean, and from ports and towns along the Indian Ocean. This book traces the routes of the epidemic through the words and memories of witnesses and survivors in accounts gathered in the 1970s and 1980s and is contextualised with painstaking archival research.

This book is the work of a lifetime of reading, collecting and analysing by Howard Phillips. In his earlier seminal scholarly works<sup>1,2</sup> on the influenza epidemic in South Africa, Phillips demonstrated that the race- and class-based official responses were rooted in the approaches of neo-colonialism by health and state planners of the day. He has shown how these were mitigated, but not obviated, by many acts of civic unity and generosity, courage, and shared resources and responses. One consequence of the post-epidemic era was the state, and elite society, doubling down on segregation as a state planning response to disease vulnerability and contagion. Phillips has also shown that the epidemic forced certain contradictions into the forefront of state health planning – initiating a set of universalistic public health goals; crafting policy and legislation around health provision; and acknowledging key individual and population-based health needs. This propelled the first county-wide health architecture, which, over time, led to providing better national care, even in the face of continuing gross iniquitous spending and racially divided facilities and institutions. A glaring example of such a contradiction is that even as this influenza epidemic devastated natal health, and undermined many generations of women's faith in the efficacy of medical institutions, it also initiated the first state (rather than the hitherto missionary institution-dominated) efforts at comprehensive pregnancy, immunisation and infant care.

In this collected volume, ordinary people's interpretations and voices are foregrounded. Martha Bokako's eloquent account of the 'flu epidemic in South Africa that struck in 1918, with the horror of October in her mind, echoes the many traumatic accounts, recorded in handwritten and typed letters and detailed interview-based recollections. People from the region – from the Cape Province through the Karoo across to communities on the Eastern seaboard and up into the interior of the country – including the huge conurbation of the Witwatersrand, responded to queries from researchers in heartfelt texts, or shared their memories in person.

It is rare in South African scholarship to have a wide cross-section of ordinary people's responses to an event or a calamity gathered in one collection. Coming alive in these pages are the causes and ramifications that Phillips summarises in his Introduction, and in the pages that follow, these searing memories form part of a wider whole. We begin to see a citizenry speaking in chords – experiencing and remembering a time when, for all that separated them, the memories and spectral images of this event coalesced and aggregated. Through Xhosa, Tswana, Afrikaans and Zulu into English translations we hear the ring of specific haunting phrases, cast around starkly similar factual accordances and details. In uncannily similar metaphorical phrases we understand that the epidemic was a shared national event, and how people at the time – even as children – understood that it was linked both to the dying days of World War I and the black and white servicemen on their way home. In these accounts, the specific descriptions of the care for the dead, the donkey and horse carts, railway carriages, and trucks filled with linen and blanket-wrapped pyramids of corpses, often move to a shared horrified memory of witnessing, or recalling being told about, the unconscious few rising from what had been their presumed death to terrified onlookers. In every story there is a reference to the terror; the sense of common destiny; the sharing of provisions and acts of enormous selflessness; the hastily arranged food and health stations; and the desolation of survivors who lost most of their family members. Tellingly, given the lack of effective biomedical treatments at the time, the detailed descriptions of medications used and shared – such as boiled and dried garlic; boiled and mashed lemons; boiled bush remedies;

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the use of iodine; carbolic acid; copious amounts of brandy, and even champagne in one account; the rubbing of tissue-salts, and the use of fresh and boiled milk, especially for pregnant women and children – also ring in unison. The accounts in this book are moving and suggestive of experience and memory knitted together as the basis for some forms of shared community for the witnesses and survivors – reminding us that the depth of this common bond could have provided the basis for a very different way out of the crisis.

Two key themes stand out. First, the movement of people (miners, traders, soldiers, workers, herbalists, wedding parties, families, school children, bankers, prisoners, farmers) speeding up through trains and new motorised transport forms, and on the water via engine-propelled ships, driving epidemics across vast territories. And second, the power of metaphor to cement memories. Phillips includes a section of black-and-white photographs of people affected by the epidemic, and of newspaper advertisements and covers of sheet music and fictional writing inspired by the 1918 'flu. In the early 1920s, Reuben Thlakele Calusa, a prodigious South African born composer, crafted several influenza-linked songs that were published by Lovedale Institution Press. The ethnomusicologist, Austin C. Okigbo, traced the lyrics and sheet music through archives and through pressed recordings of these songs made in London in the 1960s, analysing the lyrics of *Influenza 1918* that was devoted entirely to the ramifications of the epidemic in the Cape, along with the song *Intandane* (orphan).

In the first stanza of *Influenza 1918*, Calusa wrote (here translated into English by Okigbo and his researcher)<sup>3</sup>:

*In the year nineteen eighteen  
We're killed by the disease called influenza  
Which finished our beloved relatives  
Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers  
In other households no one was left  
It took young women and men  
It chose the beautiful ones*

*It even took the good-looking men  
It took the teenagers  
It took even the young maidens  
It took the engaged ladies  
It took the strummers [bridesmaids]  
Even the grooms  
It was like there was a black cloud  
over the earth.*

Black and grey clouds filled the mindscapes of the survivors. Angela Gilham (nee le Roux), born in Cape Town 10 years after Martha Bokako, recounted her own harrowing memories of the 'flu, in an echo of Calusa's song. She wrote a lengthy and gripping account which ended:

*...I sincerely trust that I have not bored you with this lengthy tale but I am so thrilled to think how my own life was lengthened at that sad period whereas so many young people were sent to an untimely death. Oh! It was dreadful. Even when October comes each year and skies become grey, my thoughts still go back to 1918.*

Angela Gilham (born 1901), interviewed 8 June 1972 by Richard Collier (p.29)

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