

“‘In Sable Garments of Mourning...’ Cholera Devastates Upper Canada, 1832” *The Beaver*, April/May, 1992

**1832 Cholera Chronicle --
The ordeals of an epidemic
as recorded in a York merchant's diary.**

By Chris Raible

"Heavy thunder and rain with much Lightening," James Lesslie noted in his diary on Saturday, June 16, 1832.¹ The weather in York (Toronto) had suddenly changed.

Nine days earlier, Thursday, June 7th, his diary made its first reference to the dreaded disease *cholera*.. Lesslie had just learned it was "raging to a fearfull [sic] extent in Paris (France) -- Deaths from 600 to 1000 daily!" In an attempt to reassure himself perhaps, Lesslie added, "it has been but little felt in Britain compared with other countries." His guarded optimism was also reflected in his entry for the following day: "The 'Great Britain' arrives with 600 passengers. . . mostly English & Scotch Emigrants of a better Class than arrived last year."²

In the course of the next week of fine weather, business continued more or less normally at the Lesslie & Sons stationery and apothecary shop on King Street. The proprietor purchased a "quantity of the finest Honey I ever saw in the country," taught Sunday School, and followed press reports on the fate of the Reform Bill in the British House of Lords. On Wednesday, brother John, manager of the family's store in Dundas, arrived in York, en route to Montreal to purchase new stocks.³

On Friday, however, Lesslie noted: "Rumour says that the Cholera is in Quebec & that there had been 15 cases & 7 deaths -- It is indeed a fearfull

¹James Lesslie, *Diaries*, Dundas Historical Society Museum (hereafter *Diaries*), 1832 June 16.

²*Diaries*, 1832 June 07 & 08.

³*Diaries*, 1832 June 09, 10, 12, & 13.

visitation of heaven upon mankind & is calculated to rouse them from their apathy to the solemnities of futurity."⁴

Asiatic cholera was getting closer. The epidemic had started in India in the 1780s and had spread throughout the near and far east by the early 1820s. By 1830 it had reached Russia and from there it swept across Europe. It was first identified in London two years later. In the spring of 1832, emigrants carried it across the Atlantic to North America, where it would spread almost unheeded before subsiding in September. That summer, government records reveal, some 5,820 persons died of cholera in Lower Canada, with at least a thousand more in Upper Canada.⁵

When the plague finally passed, worst hit in Upper Canada was the town of York. Its population of just over five thousand had known half the province's cholera deaths.⁶ An estimated one person in ten died. (A comparable disaster today would be some two hundred thousand Toronto deaths!)

As he daily recorded the dreadful occurrences around him, James Lesslie had no way of knowing what was causing the disease, how it was spread, or where it would strike next. He could not know when or even whether it would abate. All he knew was that something horrible was happening -- and he knew why: "Terrible O Lord are thy judgements."⁷ His Scottish religious heritage interpreted everything as providential. Any disaster was divine retribution, the punishment for sin. Before God, a mortal soul was always in danger.

Lesslie was not alone in his fears. A month earlier, Archdeacon John Strachan, the spiritual (and often political) leader of York's ruling "Family Compact," had proclaimed a day "for a General Fast and Humiliation before Almighty God, to be observed in the most Devout and Solemn Manner, by

⁴*Diaries*, 1832 June 15.

⁵See Geoffrey Bilson, *A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth Century Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980, pp. 179-80.

⁶See C. M. Godfrey, *The Cholera Epidemic in Upper Canada 1832-1866*, Toronto & Montreal: Secombe House, pp 19-20.

⁷*Diaries*, 1832 June 21.

sending up our Prayers and Supplications to the Divine Majesty: For obtaining pardon of our Sins, and for averting those heavy Judgements which our manifold Provocations have most justly deserved."⁸ Prayers and supplications notwithstanding, cholera kept coming.

As a practising Christian, Lesslie was apprehensive about the future, about life after death. As a practical businessman and conscientious citizen, he was also concerned with his immediate community, with enriching life and preventing death. In the years following his settling in York in 1826, his name was regularly to be found on the lists of patrons of the town's educational and charitable institutions.⁹ His diary for that awful summer of 1832 daily often testifies to his compassionate nature.

By mid-June, Lesslie could see the shadow of death approaching, even though he tried to deny it. Rumours that cholera was in Montreal, in Cornwall, in Kingston, he discounted as "very probably Without foundation no authentic accounts being given from the Board of Health." Nevertheless, brother John decided to defer his trip to Montreal.¹⁰

On Monday, June 18, Lesslie's mind was still partly focussed on British politics. In his diary he expressed his dismay at the news "that the Reform Bill is Thrown Out! Earl Grey's administration broken up & Wellington again in power!!!! The stamina of British Freemen will now be tested."¹¹

The stamina of persons much nearer than England, however, was to be tested that summer. The next day, Tuesday, June 19, Lesslie was forced to set aside all thoughts of politics for many months. It was "a beautiful day," but the "pleasant breeze from the NW" carried dreadful news: "Three Cases of Cholera announced by the Physicians to be in the Hospital in Town!"¹²

⁸Broadside cited in Patricia Lockhart Flemming, *Upper Canadian Imprints 1801 - 1841*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, p. 166.

⁹See J. M. Careless, "James Lesslie" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. XI*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.

¹⁰*Diaries*, 1832 June 17.

¹¹*Diaries*, 1832 June 18.

¹²*Diaries*, 1832 June 19.

Those first York cholera victims were "Emigrants by the late Steamers." The town mobilized to defend itself, Lesslie noted: "A Public Meeting called to take such measures. . .as may tend to mitigate its destructive power & Committees appointed to the various wards in Town to see that the greatest Cleanliness in observed."¹³

Not that they had not been warned. As cholera spread through Europe, the disease had been thoroughly studied and reported on. A British Central Board of Health bulletin had been reprinted in Halifax "for the use of Magistrates, Clergymen, Local Boards of Health, Members of the Medical Profession, and a few private friends," in the earnest hope "that every Person into whose Hands this copy may come will preserve it, and give its contents every possible circulation." The leaflet described the "leading preliminary Symptoms" of the disease: "Diarrhea, Spasms, Apoplectic Vertigo with Nausea, imperfect vomiting, or various Combinations of these Symptoms." It advised treatment with opium, astringents, heat, bleeding by leeches, "cupping along the Course of the Spine," and "perhaps bilious purging." It also outlined the steps to be taken when an individual has been attacked: "the Room or Apartment... from which he may have been removed should be purified by scrubbing, lime-washing, free Ventilation and Fumigation by heated Sulphuric Acid and Common Salt, with Black Oxyde of Manganese, or the same Acid with Nitre' or when these Materials cannot be obtained, by strong vinegar thrown upon heated Bricks. The Bed, Bedding, and Clothes should be immersed in Water, washed with Soap, and afterwards fumigated..."¹⁴

Upper Canada's Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Colborne, acted with dispatch. On Saturday, June 16, he called together the magistrates of the community "to take such precautionary measures as may be necessary to prevent the spread of Cholera."¹⁵ York town records reveal that a Board of Health was quickly appointed. It met on Thursday, June 21, and

¹³*Diaries*, 1832 June 19.

¹⁴Broadside in Metro Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room, Broadside collection (hereafter "Broadside"): "1831, Cholera."

¹⁵*Diaries*, 1832 June 16.

immediately designated health wardens to visit to every house house in town.¹⁶

The inspection report for the 7th ward was no doubt typical. "New Street:... yard rather dirty dung &c wants removing.... Barns & under them... stagnant water which might be easily drawn off.... Tavern Keepers house in bad order very dirty wants white washing & repairs very much, yard & premises in a most shameful condition.... Tenant complains that his landlord will not make any repairs.... Dutchess Street:... a privy shelter overflowing & causes much offence & inconvenience to the neighbours.... Water course on both sides of the Street wants repairs.... Slaughter House [an] offensive smell proceeds from it, there being blood and other stuff near it.... frame House owned by S Jarvis a very dirty privy overflowing.... Duke Street: House owned by George Duggan in a very dirty state, no less that 5 families in the House, yard of which is in a dirty state Dung &c about it. In William Campbells yard there is a pile of rotten dung -- a very dirty privy overflowing or very nearly so & very offensive.... George Street:... yard large pile of rotten dung.... a drain wants cleaning out.... deal of dirty stagnant washing water.... In Duke Street from Bank to New Street the water courses want repairs... stagnant water, a dung heap, & draining running across pathway into street... yard in a very dirty state a large quantity of dung stagnant water &c &c..."¹⁷

The Board of Health agreed to issue daily reports. Innkeepers and persons keeping lodgers were instructed "on Monday and Thursday of each week to report... the number of [their] boarders... and whether there are any sick amongst them." Health wardens were "strongly enjoined to impress upon the several householders... the necessity of immediately calling in the assistance of a medical practitioner in the event of sickness." To this end,

¹⁶Minutes, York Board of Health, Baldwin Papers, Metro Toronto Reference Library (hereafter "Minutes"), 1832 June 21.

¹⁷Inspectors Report fro the 7th Ward from New Street to Caroline Street, attached to, Minutes.

the Board distributed a leaflet listing the fifteen "Medical Practitioners in the Town... for the information of the public."¹⁸

Medical officers concluded that the main danger to the town was from immigrants. The next day, Friday, June 22, the Health Officer reported he had discovered cholera on visiting the steamship *Great Britain* "on her coming last evening into port." The Health Board quickly decided "to purchase and fit up [a] wagon... for removing sick patients to the hospital and that it be stationed at or near the Court House with horse and rivers. Also that a proper carriage... be stationed as near as possible to the place where ships come into port for a like purpose..." The Board also recommended that the Health Officer receive a substantial raise in salary.¹⁹

One problem, as even Lesslie noted, was that the "Physicians in Town are not agreed... neither were they in Quebec..."²⁰ Regarding cholera, physicians everywhere disagreed. They differed about its cause and about its cure. In general, there were two schools of thought. The miasmists argued that cholera came with bad air, such as that which hovered over marshes, stagnant waters, and refuse areas. York's muddy stagnant pools and mists over the Don river marshes were thought to be ideal carriers. The contagionists, on the other hand, were convinced that the disease was passed on through human contacts. They thought the best prevention was quarantine, isolating cholera victims from the rest of the population.²¹

There were other, more bizarre explanations. Canadian medical historian, C. M. Godfrey, in his 1968 study of Upper Canada's cholera epidemics, summarized the several schools of thought: those who ascribed cholera to the influence of the sun and moon, those who believed an approaching comet was effecting the electricity of the earth, those who suggested that earthquakes exhaled the malady from the bowels of the earth, those who blamed poisonous air (malaria) formed by the decomposition of dead fish or animals, those who saw evidence of changes in the gasses of the earth's

¹⁸Broadsides: "1832, Board."

¹⁹Minutes, 1832 June 22.

²⁰*Diaries*, 1832 June 19.

²¹See Godfrey, pp. 6-7.

atmosphere, and those who speculated that the disease was carried by "poisonous, invisible, aerial insects, of the same or similar habits with the gnat."²²

Understandably, "on a/c of the bad news," brother John did not make his Montreal business trip. Instead he quickly departed "per 'the Canada' for the American side to purchase some necessary Drugs." Both Lesslie brothers were apothecaries -- both realized that their medicine trade was about to become very brisk! Indeed, the diary soon noted, "Camphor & opium have risen very much -- the former 70 Cts. 2 months ago is now \$3 to \$3.50!"²³

Day after day, Lesslie's diary entries recorded the number of new cholera cases: June 22 - 2, June 23 - 4, June 24 - 3 more with "4 Deaths since yesterday," June 25 - "4 new cases & 2 deaths," June 26 - "6 new cases & 5 deaths." Not only did Lesslie cite numbers, he named victims: "Mr. Stevens a portrait Painter took ill last night at midnight & is now no more;" and "a Boy of 9 years...a child of Mr. Woods who Keeps the museum."²⁴

Lesslie also repeated stories he heard: "The Steamer 'Niagara' left Port yesterday with passengers from below for Niagara & it is rumoured 3 of her Crew are dead on board of her by Cholera! -- She had not been allowed to remain at the wharves but out in the Stream." "Montreal has had a terrible visitation! By late accounts business was suspended & people going of to the country in all quarters -- The Churches closed -- deaths 200 in 24 or 36 hours!! -- unable to find graves for them! -- but in one vast grave they put the bodies & cover them with Lime!!!"²⁵

The Health Board continued its daily meetings. Convinced that cholera was carried by foul air, the Board instructed town inhabitants "to prevent the spread of malady by burning before their houses and in their yards pitch, tar, rosin, sulphur, or any other anti-contagious combustible at intervals during

²²Godfrey, pp. 7-8

²³*Diaries*, 1832 June 19, 22 & 23.

²⁴*Diaries*, 1832 June 23 & 25.

²⁵*Diaries*, 1832 June 25 & 27.

the day." A barrel of tar was placed in the Court House yard "for the use of such as are too indigent to purchase it for themselves."²⁶

As a deeply religious man, James Lesslie had no doubt about the reason for the deathly visitation: "This manifestation of the hatred of God against sin seems to be implied by the term 'Cholera' a derivative perhaps from Cholera signifying anger. -- May we be all led wisely to consider our ways -- to see the hand of God around us & to Love and serve him faithfully."²⁷

Unlike many of his fellow citizens, Lesslie did not pack up and leave town. Nevertheless he tried psychologically to distance himself from the disease. At first he believed victims were only among the arriving immigrants. Then, when he saw the illness spread to town residents, he mused: "These cases & former ones have principally been unhappy victims of intemperance." He noted: "a Coloured man took ill yesterday at 1 p.m. and died at 5 under the most appalling suffering -- he had neglected the premonitions of a violent [God]" On the following day: "I saw a poor man... put in the covered car to be conveyed to the Hospital -- and now he is dead -- Heedless of the danger to which Intemperance peculiarly exposes... he had been laying on one of the wharves in a state of Intoxication all night!"²⁸

Wednesday, June 27, brought reason for optimism: "Today the report is more favourable 1 new case & 1 death," even though, "4 new cases however are rumoured to have occurred since the Report came out." The next day, "clear weather but warm," also seemed brighter: "The Cholera seems by today's Report not to be on the increase altho there have been 6 cases yet only one had terminated in death." But on Friday, June 29th: "9 new cases of Cholera & six deaths since yesterday! -- the alarm excited by it very great so that but a few persons are found coming in from the country but may leaving & going to a distance."²⁹

²⁶Minutes, 1832 June 23.

²⁷*Diaries*, 1832 June 26.

²⁸*Diaries*, 1832 June 25, 27 & 28.

²⁹*Diaries*, 1832 June 27, 28 & 29.

Today, of course, we know that the epidemic eventually eased and that life went on. But Lesslie and his fellow townspeople at the time had no way of knowing that. All they knew was the sickness and death all around them. They could see cholera almost every day getting worse. It might never end.

The town's authorities were trying to act, but like Lesslie they tended to see the problem as somehow *other's*, not theirs. They tried to punish: "all drunkards found on the streets taken up and put either in Jail or the the Stocks." They tried to cleanse: "Houses occupied by poor persons cleaned & washed." They tried to dry the ground: "Drains making from the undrained parts of the Town." They tried to dampen the air: "The dusty Streets watered every day by means of Carts filled for the purpose." They tried to alter the air: "The burning of Tar, Pitch, Sulphur &c. recommended & adopted by many." They advised: "The the use of the 'Chloride of Lime' as an anti-contagion." They scolded: "Hand Bills circulated to persuade not to use Brandy -- opium &c. as preventatives."³⁰

Initially, these measures seemed to have some effect. Saturday, June 30th: "The Cholera seems from accounts today to be on the decline an event which ought to fill all hearts with gratitude to Him 'whose tender mercies are over all his other works' -- 4 cases & 2 deaths appeared by the Report of the Board." The next day, the Sabbath, July 1st, for the first time in two and a half weeks, Lesslie made no reference to the disease. Monday's entry continued to be upbeat: "The report of the Board of Health more favourable today than it has been." Nevertheless, "the various denominations have appointed special Prayer Meetings to implore the mercy of God in his awful visitation upon our Land. The Cholera still raging in Lower Canada..."³¹

Wishful thinking was by no means limited to York. On June 25th, the Gore District Medical Board at Hamilton produced a bold broadside declaring that "its Members this day... after a minute inquiry into the disease of Mr. Thomas Racey, are unanimously of opinion that his was not a case of the Asiatic Cholera, and further are happy to state that no cases of an alarming

³⁰*Diaries*, 1832 June 29.

³¹*Diaries*, 1832 June 30 & July 02.

nature, have occurred in this neighbourhood..." Alas, two days later, the same Gore Medical Board president, Dr. T. Slade Robinson, issued a heavily headlined retraction: "**CHOLERA BULLETIN**" reporting "Cases THREE, Deaths 1, Convalescent 2."³²

Lesslie's optimism was similarly short-lived. Tuesday, July 3rd: "The Cholera Report is again more unfavourable... alarm pervades the minds of the Country people..." Wednesday, July 4th: "The Reports still unfavourable..." To his dismay, he recorded that "the Pensioners seem to be paid today so many of them going about Intoxicated." Thursday, July 5th: "A Pensioner & 4 or 5 of his associates were carousing & became all Intoxicated." He died, "with Cholera unknown to his companions &... every one of them were afterwards seized by it and are now in their graves!! Oh what a solemn & affecting warning to man & particularly to the Intemperate!"³³

If the spreading of the disease could not be stopped, perhaps relief could be found for those who suffered. Near the end of June, Lesslie learned of "a Recipe for Cholera which was witnessed to be effectual in 30 cases in Montreal viz 2 Table Spoonfuls of ground maple Charcoal -- 2 Hogs Lard & 2 of maple sugar to be mixed & given at 3 doses -- 1 every 1/2 hour." A week later he reported "This afternoon a man named Hewitt a Bricklayer at the Newmarket House was taken with it and did in about 2 Hours! The Charcoal remedy not given to him -- it has however been successfully used in Town & may... be more extensively useful."³⁴

Very early on, the Board of Health observed that "several cases of cholera [have] occurred in Church Street near Market Lane." Its solution was to remove the people from the area, "take immediate measures for cleaning and purifying the houses and premises," and then allow the residents to return.³⁵ Later the Board requested the use of the old school near the market as a cholera hospital. Colborne reluctantly agreed, but he warned of the danger

³²Broadsides: "1832, Gore" & "1832, Cholera Bulletin."

³³*Diaries*, 1832 July 03, 04 & 05.

³⁴*Diaries*, 1832 June 30 & July 06.

³⁵Minutes, 26 June 1832.

"of inflicting a severe injury" by placing sick people in a wooden building in the area "where, even in a healthy season the effluvia is sufficient to produce pestilence, and where from the tainted atmosphere... the prevailing disease has appeared in its worst form."³⁶ The source of the problem, as neither Colborne nor the Board understood, was neither air nor dirt. It was the neighbourhood public well in Market Square.

It would be another fifty years before medical researchers would determine that cholera bacilli are transmitted in water polluted by fecal matter.³⁷ Yet in April of 1832, two months before cholera appeared in York, *Canadian Freeman* editor Francis Collins had written with amazing prescience: "It is really astonishing how the magistrates can allow the horrible nuisance which now appears.... All the filth of the town -- dead horses, dogs, cats, manure, etc. heaped up together on the ice to drop down in a few days, into the water which is used by almost all inhabitants on the Bay shore.... There is not a drop of good well-water about the Market-square, and the people are obliged to use the Bay water however rotten.... There is nothing more conducive to health than good water -- nothing more destructive than bad..."³⁸ Again, in May Collins commented: "Stagnant pools of water, green as a leek, and emitting deadly exhalations, are to be met with in every corner of the town.... and the state of the bay, from which a large portion of the inhabitants are supplied with water, is horrible..."³⁹ (It is tragically ironic that two years later, in a second epidemic, Collins died of cholera.)⁴⁰

Day after day Lesslie noted the horrors around him: Sabbath, July 8th: "one young woman dies in half an hour!" Monday, July 9th: "No less than 10 cases of Cholera since yesterday & 5 deaths -- 7 persons taken ill in one house & 3 have died!!" Tuesday, July 10th: "one young man it is said took ill at 11 a.m. & died at 2 a.m." Wednesday, July 11th: "The devastations of the Cholera still continues around us and baffles the skill of the

³⁶Letter from Lt. Col. Rowan, Colborne's secretary, to the York Board of Health, Baldwin Papers, Metro Toronto Reference Library.

³⁷Godfrey, p 8.

³⁸*Canadian Freeman*, 1832 April 05.

³⁹*Canadian Freeman*, 1832 May 19.

⁴⁰See H. P. Gundy, "Francis Collins" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. VI*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.

Physicians...Pilkington -- messenger of the Govern's office -- I have been informed is in his grave." Thursday, July 12th: "S. Shanklin's wife is in the dust but he survives and is on the way to recovery." Friday, July 13th: "This day Seely the Jailor dies of the Cholera -- took ill this morning at 6 and was a corpse in the afternoon! -- a rapid & solemn transition! May eternal realities be more familiar to us all."⁴¹

From July 15th to the 21st, Lesslie may have been too awed even to write. There is only one diary entry for the whole week: "The town very dull -- few of the Country people coming in...It has been a solemn visitation & is truly calculated to make all feel that they are in the hand of a Great & almighty being who altho unseen to mortal eye is evidently by His judgements searching his vast Creation..."⁴²

The peril was everywhere. No longer could cholera be dismissed as a disease of the emigrant, the intemperate, or the impoverished. Everyone was in danger. Sabbath, July 22nd: "This morning the Cholera car passed our door in the morning to convey some person to their long home -- and again as we came out of meeting was it receiving the body of a man who had died in the house opposite. -- how many cases may have been today I know not" Monday, July 23rd: "Rumour says that this day 20 or 21 persons have died of Cholera in Town!" A crowd packed Lesslie's Baptist chapel that evening; the preacher's text: "while we were yet without strength in due time Christ died for the ungodly."⁴³

Lesslie tried to go about his business. On Tuesday, July 24, he attended a Young Men's Society meeting, but few others were there. Thursday, July 25th: "The prevailing disease the topic of conversation everywhere -- it spreads around." Sunday's sermon was on Ecclesiastes "Better to go to the House of mourning than to the House of feasting."⁴⁴

⁴¹*Diaries*, 1832 July 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, &13.

⁴²*Diaries*, 1832 July 15 to 21 inclusive.

⁴³*Diaries*, 1832 July 22 & 23.

⁴⁴*Diaries*, 1832 July 24, 26, & 29.

From the beginning the Board of Health had tried to isolate the dying from the rest to the population. It strongly recommended (it had no power to enforce its strictures) that inhabitants "permit those sick of cholera to be removed to the cholera hospital, especially in those cases when the means of friends cannot provide them at home with lodging, airy and wholesome, or with medical attention."⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, however, inhabitants of York were reluctant to have family members suffering with cholera taken to the hospital. Such a removal was seen as an abandoning of hope. Many who got the disease recovered, but half of those who died, died at the hospital. It was hardly to be considered a beneficial environment. Even the Board, in urging quick burying of cholera victims, had observed, "it is the opinion of the professional gentlemen that infection is more certain immediately after death."⁴⁶

Clergymen in town tried to minister to those sick in hospital. Archdeacon John Strachan, in a letter to the Archbishop of Dublin, described conditions: "This terrible dispensation came among us like a thunderbolt and brought with it increased & heart rendering duties.... Often have I been in the Cholera Hospital with six & even eight persons expiring around me but blessed by God I felt no apprehension & by my example arrested much of the alarm which was fast spreading... Everything was done that we possibly could & I am confident that many were cheered & consoled and restored to health by my ministrations."⁴⁷

Lesslie also maintained his religious convictions, despite the daily reports. He believed God's will was being done: "This day Mrs. Knott (wife to B Knott the Chandler) is laid in the Dust -- last afternoon or evening it is said was engaging the society of some friends -- took the Cholera in the evening & in a few hours quitted this world! Were our minds uncorrupted would not every solemn incident of this kind speak to the heart of all with power &

⁴⁵Minutes, 25 June 1832.

⁴⁶Minutes, 25 June 1832.

⁴⁷John Strachan to Richard Whatley, 1832 September 24, *Strachan Letter Book, 1827-34*, Public Archives of Ontario.

with a blessed influence? -- It is from him who opens the blind eyes and unstops the deaf ears that this can come."⁴⁸

By the first of August, the town was near panic. "This day the mortality by Cholera truly alarming there being 40 new cases & report says from 14 to 24 deaths! -- Mr. Bell the Chandler cut off in 2 or 3 Hours -- Mr. Bell the Tavern Keeper also among the victims -- O that 'all were truly wise to consider their latter end!'"⁴⁹

The next day was no better. "The pestilence raging still to a fearful extent -- B. McMurray the merch't taken ill last night or rather about 1 or 2 in the morning & dies in the afternoon." Yet Lesslie kept his Christian compassion: "Met a poor woman on the street... crying bitterly -- on enquiry found that she had come in from the Country with her husband to buy some necessaries & was now sorrowing over his departure to another world!" The diarist continued, "These scenes and the numbers clad in sable garments of mourning -- spread a gloom & sadness around -- may it be a salutary gloom! -- a prelude to a morning of righteousness & peace."⁵⁰

Attempting to bring some relief, doctors resorted to strange new practices. With its excessive nausea and diarrhea, cholera dehydrates its victims. In modern treatment, intravenous feeding is standard practice, but injection was a radical notion in 1832. In late July Lesslie had reported, "old Jordan Post very ill of Cholera -- his Physicians preparing that singular yet efficacious remedy resorted to in extreme cases in Scotland -- viz injecting an artificial serum to the Blood into the veins!"⁵¹ Again, early in August: "This morning Mr. Fairbanks son is taken ill with Cholera & was in the afternoon said to be in a most dangerous state. The very singular remedy in dangerous cases viz transfusing artificial serum into the veins adopted & with some hopes of success." Two days later, an addendum: "after 2 or 3 injections he was delivered from the disease & now labours under the fever which succeed the

⁴⁸ *Diaries*, 1832 July 30.

⁴⁹ *Diaries*, 1832 August 01.

⁵⁰ *Diaries*, 1832 August 02.

⁵¹ *Diaries*, 1832 July 28.

Cholera generally."⁵² How many others were injected is not known, but it apparently did not become common treatment.

Sabbath, August 5th: "The solemnity of the present period forms a subject of almost every public discourse -- 14 persons buried today! & among these Mr Baty... to whom I spoke but yesterday about noon in apparent ordinary health!!" Monday: "The Town almost quite deserted... the terror of the Cholera seems to have spread everywhere [sic] around us."⁵³

And then again a ray of hope, on Tuesday, August 7th: "The pestilence rather on the decrease by the last 24 hours Report -- Quebec (it is said now happily delivered from its terrific scourge." Wednesday: "No alarming reports about the Cholera today."⁵⁴ But the pain and suffering had not subsided -- and no one was safe. "Mr Giran dies and is buried today. -- He was a sober, temperate good man -- and I hope has made a happy change in his entrance upon an eternal world from all corruption sin & sorrow -- He was for many years a faithful servant in the Govern't House & latterly also a keeper of the Hospital."⁵⁵ "One of my scholars -- W. Emery -- a fine youth about 8 years old was at school last Sabbath as well as usual but now is in the dust! - a victim of the prevailing epidemic."

Day after day Lesslie continued to name the victims. "Dr. Cathcart dies and is buried after a post mortem examination of the nature of his disease -- Cholera." "Mrs. Carfrae's remains conveyed to the Potter's Field for interment this morning." "The Jailer in Hamilton dead, and all the prisoners except the Criminals liberated." "This day Cap't Bowket & mother die of Cholera and are buried in one grave!" "Thursday poor Mackenzie the Watchmaker is cut off on about 3 hours illness of Cholera -- a poor & helpless widow & 3 children cast upon the charity of the public by his death."⁵⁶

⁵² *Diaries*, 1832 August 04

⁵³ *Diaries*, 1832 August 05 & 06.

⁵⁴ *Diaries*, 1832 August 07 & 08.

⁵⁵ *Diaries*, 1832 August 08.

⁵⁶ *Diaries*, 1832 August 12, 13, 14, 16 & 17.

The Board of Health urged the town magistrates "during the present Extremity from Sickness" to make use of statute labour "in draining and even in cleaning those Yards still remaining n a State of Filth where the Inhabitants discover an Indifference prejudicial to the State of the public Health."⁵⁷ On August 7th the Board was tired. In frustration it voted a long series of resolutions, declaring that cholera "has within a Short period increased... to an alarming degree," that "Medical Gentlemen [suffer] with the very Labourious Duties, the public sickness imposes on them by day as well as by night," that "at the present time Several Nuisances Exist in various parts of the Town (Prejudicial to the Health of the Inhabitants)," and that the Board had "no authority by Law to enforce the carrying into Effect, or observance of any Salutary regulations, for preventing the Increase of the Disease."

The Board also complained "nor hath [it] any funds at its disposal" and "his Excellency, the Lt. Governor [has] declared that he has no funds within his control for any further Grant." Noting "that there will be ere long, Imperative Calls on the public benevolence in behalf of the numerous Widows & Orphans left Destitute by this Distressing and fatal Malady," and doubting "that a sufficient sum could be raised by public subscriptions for the purpose," the Board addressed "the Lt. Governor, Praying his Excellency to summon the Legislature, at the earliest possible period." Four days later, Saturday, August 11th: "Resolved that the Board of Health, being at length, fully convinced from their want of legal Enactment, as well as from the want of funds -- of their total inability to be of any further service to their fellow Townsmen, have this day Dissolved themselves as a public body."⁵⁸

A new Board was appointed, but town authorities were desperate. Saturday, August 18th, Lesslie recorded: "The Magistrates in order to have the Town thoroughly cleansed have appointed overseers to each Block for the purpose of calling a meeting of the residents upon it to take such plans as may to them be advisable for the General good to prevent the extension of the

⁵⁷Minutes, 1832 August 06.

⁵⁸Minutes, 1832 August 07 & 11.

Cholera among the inhabitants." The next day: "Many cases of Cholera since yesterday -- some say 14."⁵⁹

Conscientious citizens tried to help. If they could not to stop the spreading, they could relieve the suffering. Lesslie gave time to "the Soup Kitchen as one of the Committee... upwards of 300 poor persons daily supplied with Bread & soup from the Kitchen."⁶⁰ One person in twenty was being fed.

Hopes rose and fell. Wednesday, August 22nd: "The Cholera subsiding apparently." Saturday, August 25th: "The pestilence not much abated." Wednesday, August 29th: "Cholera seems to decrease daily & perhaps the providence of God may not deliver this afflicted Town from its destructive power and may sanctify the terrible visitation to those who have been spared & unharmed by it." Saturday, September 1st: "The number of cases of Cholera have again increased." Sabbath, September 9th: "The Cholera subsides very much but visits other parts of the province severely."⁶¹

At last, Thursday, September 20th: "The Cholera has it is said quite subsided throughout the Canadas and altho not entirely in the U. States has however become much milder and seems to be fast decreasing." Pious as always, testifying to the faith that had carried him through the summer, Lesslie penned a reflective paragraph, "These awful visitations to such as believe in the dominion of a supreme Being possessed of the attributes of Holiness and Justice appear not as a mere contingent effect arising from the action of some contingent cause but as a clear manifestation of His existence -- His power -- His hatred of Evil -- a manifestation which bears or has a natural tendency [sic] to bear these truths with power to the hearts of men and to make them remember that they are but dust. -- that transient at the longest and uncertain is the tenure of human Life, and that therefore it should be improved diligently as preparatory to an unchangeable and eternal state. These ends being accomplished mankind may behold in all these afflictions

⁵⁹ *Diaries*, 1832 August 18 & 19.

⁶⁰ *Diaries*, 1832 August 20.

⁶¹ *Diaries*, 1832 August 22, 25 & 29, September 01 & 09.

the corrections of a gracious & merciful Father."⁶² One wonders if most York inhabitants would have been as sanguine.

The town had known horror for a hundred days, and James Lesslie made only one more diary reference, Tuesday, September 25th: "It is cheering that no cases of Cholera are now heard of -- the period of this terrible visitation is perhaps now terminated. Confidence is now restored -- people visit Town from distant parts and all moved on as if it had not been. -- Fruit and vegetables are seen in abundance in the market."⁶³

⁶²*Diaries*, 1832 September 10th to 20th

⁶³*Diaries*, 1832 September 25.