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Britain's Rabid Obsession

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At the opening of the Channel Tunnel in December 1993, the *New York Times* ran a story which reported that a recent poll 'revealed that half the British population is convinced that lurking somewhere among the tens of thousands of visitors streaming through the Channel Tunnel will be that most dreaded of travelers – rabies.' It then quoted Neil Edington, Professor of Virology at the Royal Veterinary College, saying that 'Ninety-one years after the last recorded indigenous case of rabies in Britain, the nation remains uniquely, stubbornly obsessed by the disease.' Now, over twenty years later and with no instances of rabid animals breached the Tunnels defences, rabies continues to haunt the country, regularly featuring in sensational newspaper headlines. Its place in the public imagination has been fed by the popular media, as in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), when monkeys suffering from 'rage virus' (the French word for rabies), which caused them to bite and eat most of the British population. In case anyone missed the rabies connection, in the sequel, *28 Weeks Later* (2007), the first attempt at resettlement was in the Isle of Dogs.

How do we explain the seemingly unique British paranoia with rabies? Firstly, it is a terrible disease, often seen to cause the worst of all possible deaths with mind and body out of control, and untreatable once symptoms appear. In its final stages it causes hallucinations, violent convulsions, fear of water (hydrophobia) and other frightening symptoms. Sufferers are likely to have already endured weeks and months of anxiety as the infection has a long, unpredictable incubation period. This is due to its unusual mode of transmission: the bite of an infected animal introduces the virus, usually carried in saliva, into a nerve. There it multiplies, unseen by the immune the system, and is able to travel passively through the nervous system. Eventually, large numbers of the virus reach the brain, to unleash its fearsome symptoms and inevitable death. There is only one proven case of a person surviving full-blown rabies, an eight-year girl in Wisconsin who had been

bitten by a rabid bat in 2004. However, the paradox remains that, to quote the *New York Times* article again, 'a wide gulf yawns between perceptions in rabies-free Britain, where the disease verges on a shared national nightmare, and the Continent, where rabies is found yet little feared'. It cannot be unfamiliarity that stokes British fears because it is rarely out of the public domain, rather I want to argue it is the ways in which the government, politicians, veterinarians and the media have made it only too familiar and with particular meanings and associations.

Britain was declared free of rabies in 1902 and the government aimed to keep it out with quarantines on all imported dogs and cats. However, the disease returned at the end of the First World War carried by the pet dogs that soldiers had adopted in France, but cases remained localised and were readily contained. From the 1920s to the 1960s, many dogs died of the disease in quarantine and there were a few human deaths in people infected abroad. The low profile of rabies ended in 1969, when Fritz, the pet of a soldier previously stationed in Germany, developed rabies after six months in quarantine. It escaped the home and was able to roam for many hours before its capture, raising fears that it had infected domestic and wild animals locally. Restrictions were imposed on the movement of dogs in the area and muzzling required. Government agencies responded to Fritz's lost hours by taking draconian measures with a cull of local wildlife through poisoning and shooting. A 'mass extermination' – as contemporary newspapers called it -- took place on 30 and 31 October, bagging 11 foxes, 102 squirrels, 1 rabbit, 5 jays, 7 magpies and a crow. There were no further cases in the area, but the episode was taken as warning of the danger of imported rabies in the new era of international travel and mass tourism.

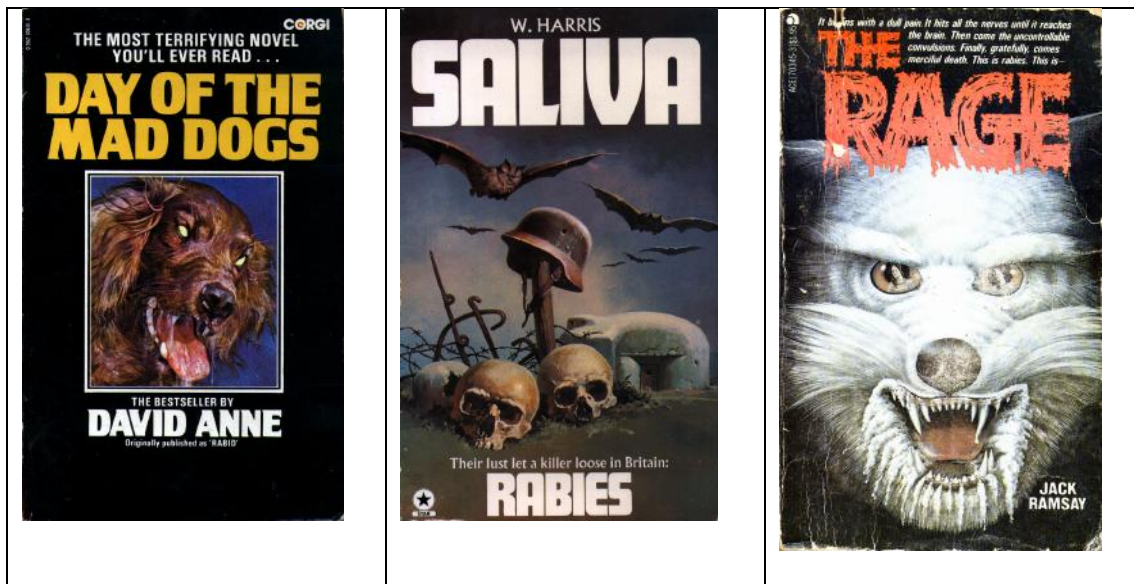
Soon there was also a new enemy, foxes and new context, the Common Market. In Continental Europe, where rabies remained endemic, the rabies situation had changed over the twentieth century. In the 1900s, 99% of reported cases were in dogs and domestic animals; by the 1960s the figures were 7% dogs, 15% other domestic animals and 78% wild animals, mostly foxes. Britain joined the Common Market on 1 January 1973. The anticipated rise in the volume of trade, travel and tourism was expected to increase the

risk of the importation of rabies. All the more so because of the eastward march of fox rabies, which was reported in the British press on maps, with sweeping arrows, that echoed the advance of the Nazi forces in the Second World War. Such maps were familiar to the public as they were used in the opening credits of the popular comedy show *Dad's Army*. A new Rabies Act in 1974 included regulations to deal with a post-quarantine outbreak, which included controls on animal movements and powers for the destruction of wildlife in affected areas. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the veterinary profession encouraged a siege mentality. They painted a picture where the invasion of rabies, though fifth column smugglers or the incursions of wily foxes, had to be resisted by measures that were demonstrably tough and might include the summary execution of pets.

Rabies was back in the headlines in the summer of 1975. The World Health Organisation (WHO) warned that fox rabies was advancing 20-30 miles eastward each year, which was reflected in headlines such as 'The deadly virus marching across Europe'. The British government produced multi-language posters to be displayed at ports in Britain and Europe, with leaflets, and television and radio campaigns before and during the holiday season. MAFF issued a series of scary posters, which had their own canine font.

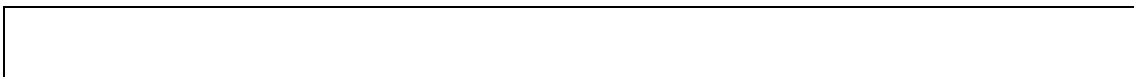
 <p>RABIES PREVENTION When unloading vessels from abroad, check for stowaway animals</p> <p>If you see an animal- 1 If possible prevent it from escaping 2 Contact immediately the nearest MAFF Animal Health Office (tel.) or the police, even if the animal does escape</p> <p>RABIES IS A KILLER</p> <p>MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD</p> <p>Wellcome Images</p>	 <p>Avis aux voyageurs se rendant dans les îles Britanniques et les îles Anglo-Normandes</p> <p>LA RAGE</p> <p>Les îles Britanniques sont exemptes de la rage et entendent le rester. Tout animal débarqué doit être muni d'un permis d'importation et placé en quarantaine, même s'il a été vacciné. Si vous traversez la Manche, il est recommandé de ne pas emmener vos animaux avec vous. (Si vous voyagez sur votre propre bateau, ils doivent être strictement confinés à bord pendant tout votre séjour.) Pour empêcher l'introduction de cette maladie mortelle et coûteuse, des sanctions sévères (fortes amendes et jusqu'à un an de prison) sont imposées à quiconque tenterait d'introduire des animaux en fraude. Tout animal importé illégalement est susceptible d'être abattu.</p> <p>NE CACHER PAS VOTRE SUIVRE COMMISSAIRE LES RÈGLEMENTS</p> <p>Wellcome Images</p>
<p>L0070326 Credit: Wellcome Library, London, Poster advertising the dangers of rabies. Rabies virus. Dog. Animal., 1978</p>	<p>L0070330 Credit: Wellcome Library, London, Poster advertising the dangers of rabies. Rabies virus. Dog. Animal, 1976</p>

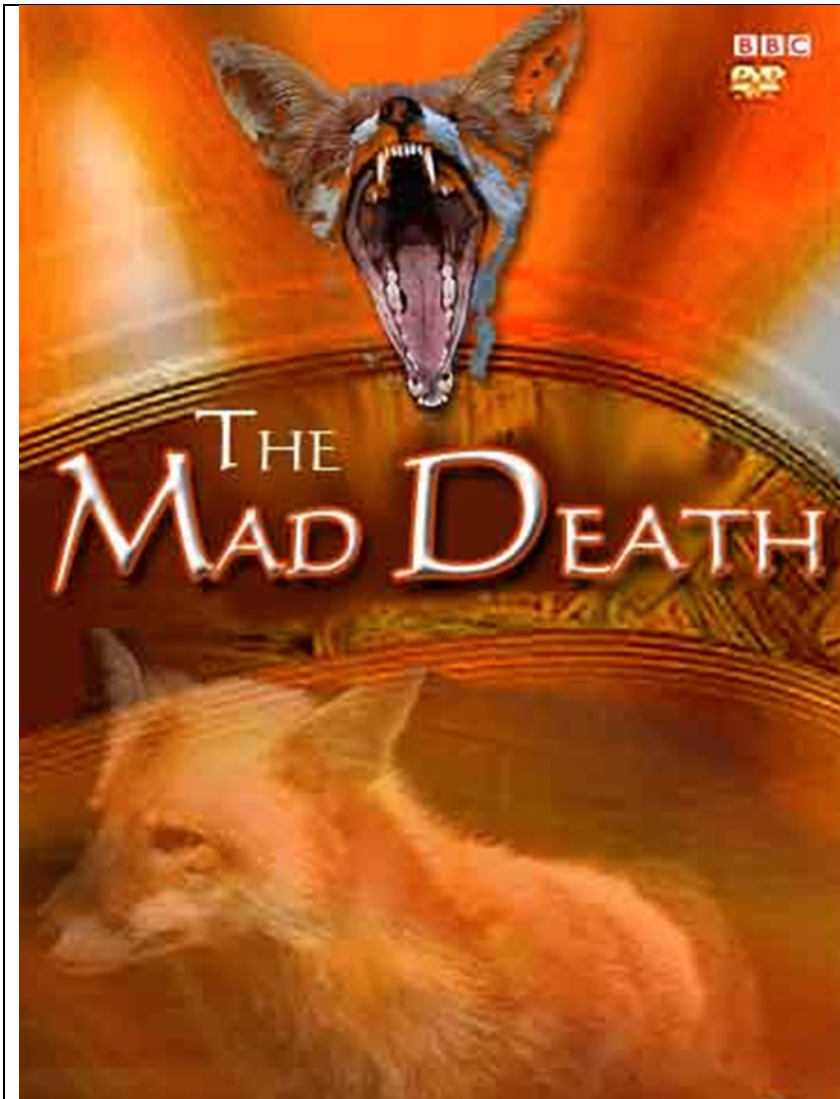
There were more inspections and magistrates were encouraged to give higher fines and prison sentences to pet smugglers. The menace of foreigners was clearly expressed in popular rabies fiction, a new genre which emerged in 1977 and 1978, with three major titles: *Saliva* (1977), *Return of the Mad Dogs* (1978) and *Rage* (1978).



There is no evidence on how successful these novels were in terms of sales (they were very unlikely to have enjoyed any critical acclaim), their significance was what they revealed about popular images of rabies, their Europhobia and the ways rabies was transmogrified into a pandemic.

Through the late 1970s and early 1980s the nature and profile of rabies in Britain was defined by the annual government campaigns, sporadic press coverage of deaths from people bitten whilst abroad, and the sense that this was a foreign problem in every sense of the word. It was ironic, therefore, that in the listings of human deaths from rabies in Europe, Britain was usually top because it had largest number of people travelling to and from South Asia, the region with by far the highest incidence of dog rabies in the world. Public perceptions, fed by a Eurosceptic press and popular media, reflected these developments. In 1983, the idea of rabies arriving in Britain was the basis for the three-part primetime drama series on BBC, *The Mad Death*.





The drama followed the familiar idea of rabies introduced into the country through a smuggled pet which, unbeknown to its owner, had been bitten by a rabid fox. The narrative echoed fears that closer European integration was weakening Britain's border controls.

The question of the harmonisation of regulations across the Common Market was the central issue at the political summit in December 1985, at which Britain and France 'came to blows over the notion of a Europe without frontiers'. In the negotiations Britain's special position with rabies was used time and again to illustrate the folly of moves towards the free movement of everything. In a sense, the menace of rabies allowed Euroscepticism to be naturalised – a disease-free island next to an infected continent had to have special consideration. In many debates, the need to protect the Britain from rabies was linked to other diseases (brucellosis, foot-and-mouth disease, and

Colorado beetle) and to fighting terrorism, drugs, and illegal immigration. Often it was the iconic, and assumed to be an unanswerable illustration of Britain's claim for exceptions to rules that suited the rest of the Common Market. In 1985, when Sir Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary, dismissed claims that Britain was seeking economic advantages from its opposition to reforms, he stated 'that Britain's natural concerns over rabies and drugs were not an excuse for protectionism'. Margaret Thatcher told the Conservative Women's Conference in 1989 that 'although we want to make it easier for Europe's citizens to move around Europe, that doesn't mean giving greater freedom for illegal immigrants, nor for terrorists, nor for drug dealers, nor for rabies and other animal diseases'.

The implications of a Channel Tunnel for rabies had been discussed by British veterinarians as early as 1973. They recommended stringent anti-rabies features be incorporated in its construction and operation: 'sealed trains, physical barriers and grids at entry points, regular inspections, rigorous cleaning programmes, and the continuous deployment of baited traps in both tunnel and terminal areas'. Over the period of construction, MPs wanted further assurances that wildlife would be kept out. By the time the tunnel opened in 1994, the government was confident that it was no more dangerous than ferries, aircraft or the many other ways that animals were brought into the country. However, echoing the views expressed in the *New York Times*, Julian Barnes, a well-known Francophile, wrote that on the day of its inauguration in May 1994,

It was as if, lining up behind Mitterrand and the Queen as they cut the tricolour ribbons at Calais, were packs of swivel-eyed dogs, fizzing foxes, and slavering squirrels, all waiting to jump on the first boxcar to Folkestone and sink their teeth into Kentish flesh.

The portrayal of rabies remained that of a threat due to sentimental or ignorant tourists, complacent foreigners and French foxes. However, the position of rabies in Continental Europe was being transformed by the vaccination of foxes. Julian Barnes might have been right about the British imagination, but on the ground reported cases of rabies in France had fallen from 2,500 in the mid-1980s to 200 in 1994; with most concentrated on the

German border, a long way from Calais. By then it was much harder for British politicians to boast about the country's own record on human-animal health because of BSE and the fact that Britain had been exporting diseased animals and meat around Europe for years.

As early as 1992 and buoyed by initial success, the European Commission's Standing Veterinary Committee passed a resolution looking towards a community-wide, post-eradication policy of vaccination, blood tests, and the free movement of pets. This proposal was swiftly condemned by the British Veterinary Association, the RSPCA, the Quarantine Kennel Owners Association and MAFF, and was rejected in a motion passed by the House of Commons. All again pointed to Britain's uniqueness: its island geographical and longstanding success with quarantines, to which was added its higher proportion of urban foxes. They argued British foxes were different to those on the Continent, living at higher densities, being more sociable and likely to lick each other. Models produced by epidemiologists projected that if rabies reached Britain, 92% of foxes would need to be culled, or 95% vaccinated, both were said to be impossible targets. Officials pointed to a range of problems with any passport scheme: accuracy of the blood tests, out of date vaccinations, false passports and the ease of 'impersonation'! An additional problem was that the government that had abolished the dog licence and would now have to reintroduce a registration scheme.

However, radical change was afoot and the key year was 1997. The new Labour government, wishing to signal its positive view to Europe, instituted an inquiry into the feasibility of a Pet Passport scheme, based on vaccination, to replace quarantines. There had been pressure for change from a campaign led by Lady Mary Fretwell, along with her husband Lord Fretwell who was a former British ambassador to France. The Fretwell's campaign gathered momentum in 1996 when Chris Patten, the leading Conservative and then Governor of Hong Kong, started to worry about putting his two Norfolk terriers, Whisky and Soda, in quarantine on his return to Britain in 1997 when the colony was taken back by China. Influential columnists, such as Simon Jenkins and Brian Sewell, published articles in support of a change, arguing that the current policy only served the kennel lobby. An article in *The*

Independent asked pointed, 'Why aren't Germans all dead from rabies?' Supportive veterinarians pointed to the effective eradication of rabies in domestic and wild animals in the near Continent. The inquiry recommended Pet Passports and the scheme began on 28 February 2000.

Indigenous rabies returned to Britain in November 2002. A conservationist handling a bat in the Scottish Highlands was bitten and developed rabies; he died several weeks later. That bats could carry rabies was known in the 1930s and there had a few reported cases in Europe, where the particular form of the infection - European Bat Lyssavirus (EBL) was common. The risk was known, but it was only after this incident that the public were warned not to handle any dead or dying bats they found. The death of the very unlucky death naturalist did not linger in the news nor change public attitudes to rabies, which continued to be dominated by fears of imported dogs and the risk to those visiting countries where the infection is endemic in dogs and other mammals. However, the press, ever on the look out for a headline grabbing story about rabies, has regularly reported on bat rabies in South America, with gothic horror stories of vampire bats causing multiple deaths in the Amazon regions of Brazil and Peru. They also warned the threat of dogs brought to Britain as pets from former communist countries in Eastern Europe, where the disease remains widespread in dogs.

From the eighteenth century to the present day, rabies has had a profile out of proportion to its prevalence and mortality. There is no doubt that this profile is in part because it causes the worst of all possible deaths and, at least until 2004, it was the one disease that medicine had never treated successfully. However, diseases are never purely medical phenomena, they have social and cultural meanings. The first attempt in Britain to control rabies was in 1796, when William Pitt's government introduced a dog tax; putatively to reduce the numbers of strays and reduce the incidence of rabies, but widely seen as paying for the war with France. The next major outbreak in the early 1830s coincided with agitation over the Great Reform Act, 1832, when the muzzling of allegedly innocent dogs was portrayed as a metaphor for the limited extension of the franchise and the silencing of the voice of the working class.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the muzzling, quarantines and other measures brought in to eradicate rabies were opposed as authoritarian and to infringe the liberties of the free-born citizen. Most recently, rabies has been invested with new meanings by Eurosceptics and Europhiles, and in gothic horror movies, such as *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*, as a disease vulnerable to manipulation and misuse in scientific research.

For further information see; Neil Pemberton and Michael Worboys, *Rabies in Britain: Dogs, Disease and Culture, 1830-2000*, Palgrave Paperback, 2012.