

102. The Spanish Flu in Montagu

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Emeritus Professor Howard Phillips is a graduate of the University of Cape Town and the University of London. He specializes in two areas, viz. the social history of medicine (especially epidemics and pandemics, medical education and hospitals) and the history of universities. Both fields feature prominently in what he has published and what he teaches in two of UCT's faculties, Humanities and Health Sciences.

Notes used by Professor Howard Phillips when he addressed the Montagu Historical Society at the Montagu Museum on the 28 January 2019

Montagu was infected early in October 1918, probably by people arriving from Robertson or Ashton where it had broken out shortly before this.

Initially, there were not many cases, but in view of the disease's severity in Worcester and Cape Town, preventive

measures were instituted by the municipality:

- The bioscope, canteens, churches and schools were closed to try and check its spread. The Dutch Reformed Church compromised by holding its Sunday service in the open air at the entrance to the Baths Kloof;
- The proprietor of the town's hotel was requested not to allow unnecessary sitting and standing around the hotel bar;
- Shop hours were restricted to discourage crowding.

But as cases began to proliferate, the municipality and the Divisional Council took the lead in setting up a system to meet the growing crisis by:

- Opening several racially separate emergency hospitals, one in this very building (others were In the Salvation Army Hall and the Kindergarten School);
- establishing soup kitchens and medical and milk depots to provide these items free of charge for those laid low by the disease;
- Engaging two UCT medical students as inoculators to vaccinate residents in the town and the district with hastily concocted vaccine; many, (rightly) doubting the efficiency of this vaccine, relied rather on herbs and traditional folk remedies;
- Appointing a special watchman at Keurkloof Reservoir to

protect the water supply from contamination by baboons amongst whom a flu-like disease had broken out too.

These measures seem to have held the epidemic in check, with only 3 deaths among the 300+ cases reported by early in November.

However, the gathering together of townsfolk to celebrate Armistice on 11 November seems to have provided just the opportunity the virus needed to spread more widely, and in the week after this there was such a surge in cases that contemporaries spoke of 'a severe recrudescence'⁽¹⁾ or 'second visitation'⁽²⁾. 140 new cases were reported in the third week of November alone; among those who were laid low were the town's three doctors.

Anxiously the town council appealed to the Government for medical and nursing assistance which was quickly forthcoming because elsewhere the epidemic was on the wane. A missionary doctor, an army doctor and several nurses from Cape Town were able to step into the breach until the epidemic burnt itself out in the town in mid-December; the re-opening of the town's bioscope on 28 December after a ten-week closure was evidence of this.

But it was not until the end of December that the wider Montagu district, where whole coloured communities had been stricken, was free of Spanish flu. Even then, recuperation was slow and, with many farm labourers still too weak to return to work, local farmers were worried about how to reap 'their standing crops which are ready for the sickle', as a journalist reported⁽³⁾.

Overall, mortality in the town and its environs was low, 65 deaths in a population of 7085, i.e. 0.9%, compared to 1.8% in Robertson and 3.7% in Worcester. This probably was the benefit of not being on the railway line.

Howard Phillips. 22 January 2019.

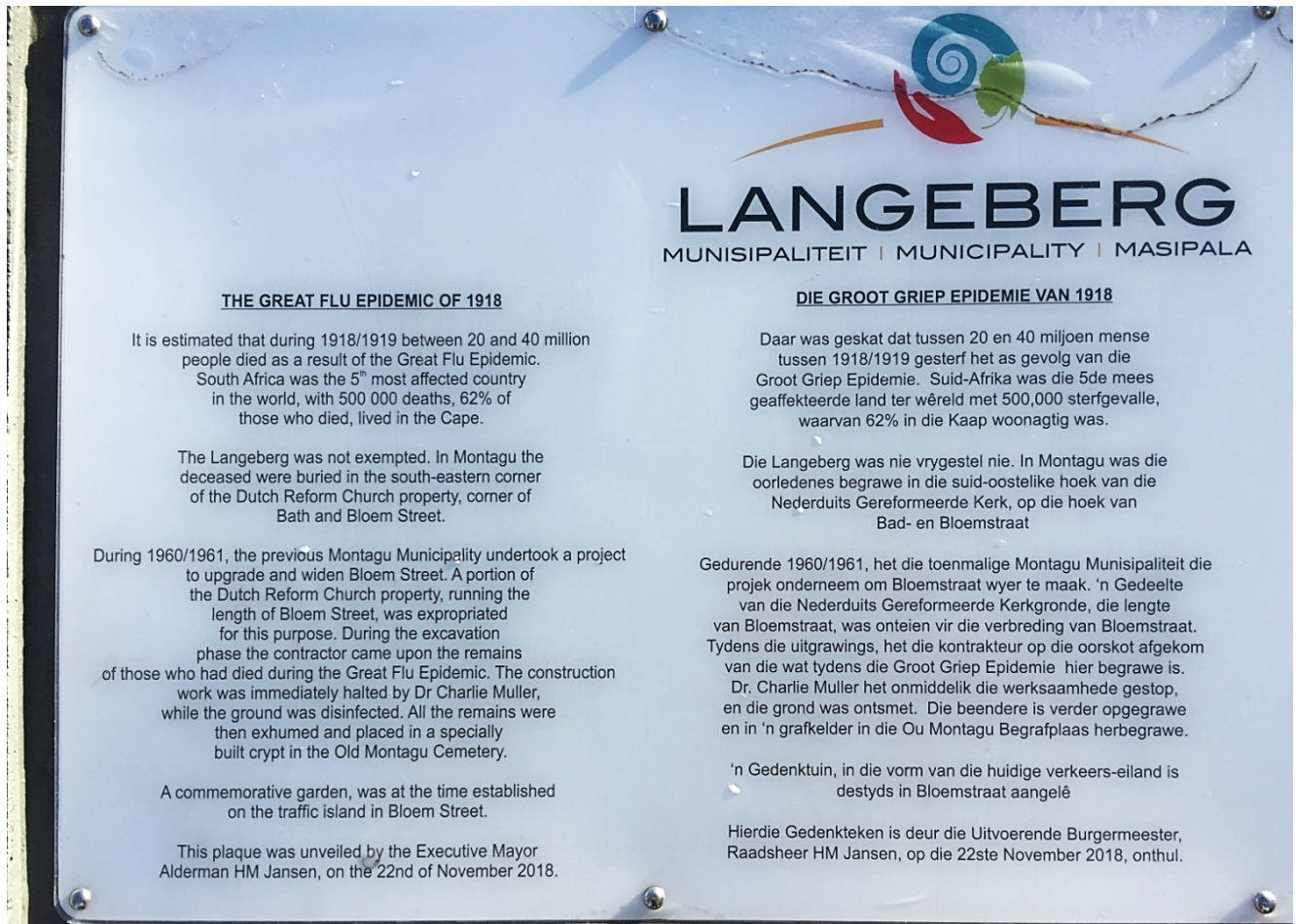
1.Worcester Standard: 7/12/1918/2.Worcester Standard:
21/12/1918/3.Worcester Standard 14/12/1918



The Flu Victim Memorial in Bloem Street Montagu which was officially unveiled in November 2018. According to Professor Phillips this memorial is one of five in South Africa



This crypt was built in the old NGK cemetery Montagu to house the exhumed remains of Spanish Flu victims. The exhumation was necessary as a result of the need to widen Bloem Street Montagu.



Baie interessant, baie dankie! Dis tragiese geskiedenis, wel baie bouend hoe groot verskil die saamstaan van gemeenskappe gemaak het.

Dr Charlie Muller, mediese praktisyn op Montagu, was 40 jaar oud in 1918, tweede oudste van vier broers.

In Oktober 1918 sterf beide sy twee jonger broers Frederick, 37, by Muizenberg, en Tobie, 34, predikant by Philippolis van die Spaanse griep.

Tobie was ons 8 kleindogters se oupa.

Nogmaals dankie, hierdie stories van Montagu is verrassend en verbredend!

Groete, Monica Muller

Francois de Kock local resident and historian responsible for motivating the Langeberg Municipality to erect the memorial.



A nostalgic memory is triggered

Ek het nou net jou nuutste storie gelees en kon nie anders nie as om 'n traan te stort.

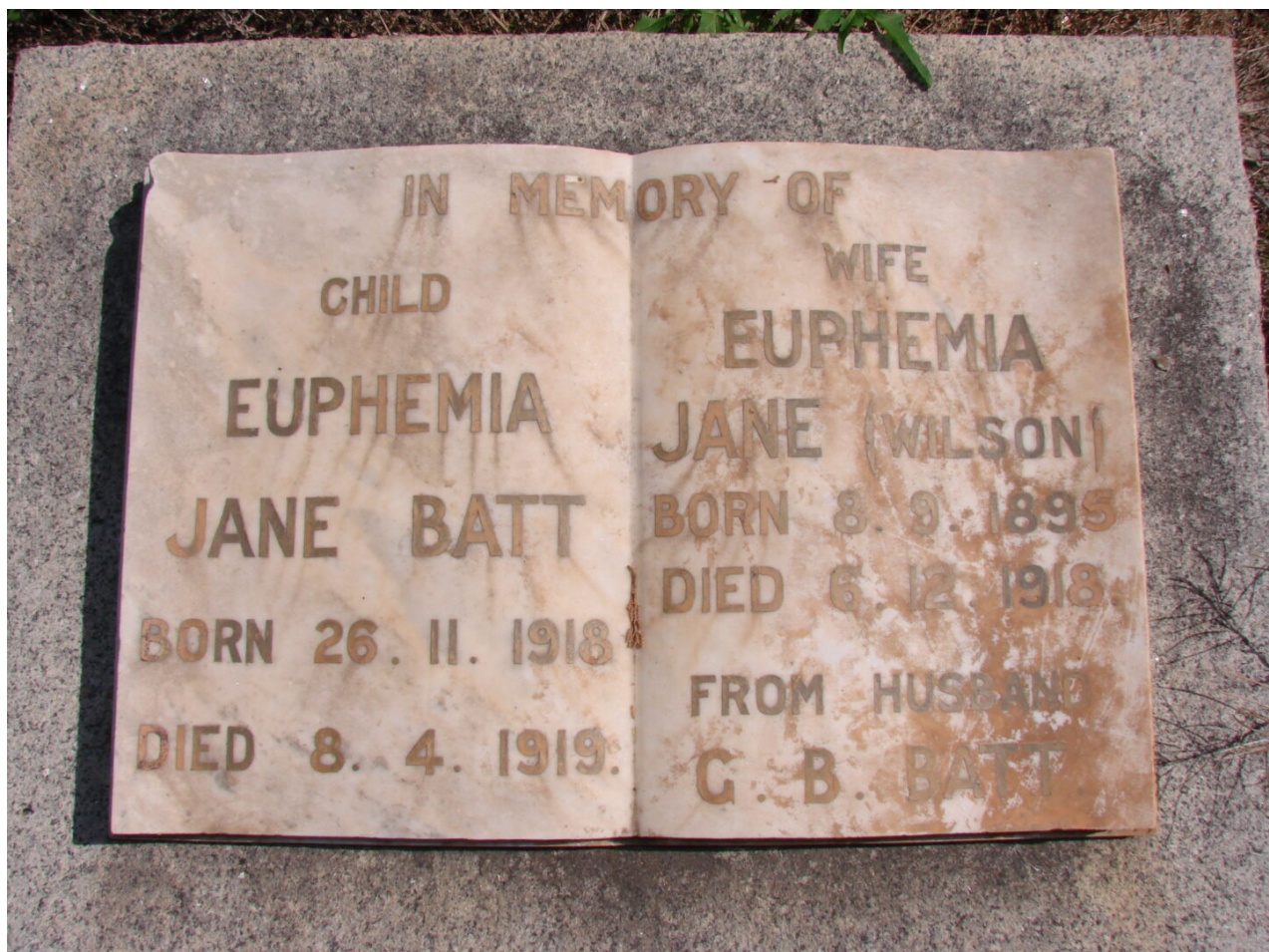
My Oupa Gerald Batt van die Koo was getroud met 'n dame Euphemia Jane (Wilson) van Skipskop. Hulle troue was in April

1916 en sy werk as 'n klerk in die winkel. Hulle eerste baba, ook Euphemia, word op 26 Nov 1918 gebore. Euphemia sterf op 6 Des 1918 as gevolg van die Spaanse griep en word in die Montagu Methodiste begraafplaas op Montagu begrawe. Haar ouers neem die baba aan, maar sy sterf op 08 April 1919, net vier maande oud . Sy word saam met haar ma in dieselfde graf begrawe.

Ek het hierdie foto van die grafsteen' n paar jaar gelede in die bergraafplaas geneem.

Baie dankie vir nog' n goeie maar ook treurige stukkie geskiedenis.

Gerald Batt



An article by Bee Jordaan



1918 INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC

at Montagu

There were comparatively few cases until the Armistice in 1918, when there was much rejoicing and gathering of crowds after which the flu spread like wild-fire, particularly amongst the Coloureds. Soup kitchens were organized for them in the old Ebenezer Church Hall and the soup was taken in large buckets to the Location for distribution. (Taken in milk cans to the outlying districts). A hospital was set up for them in their Church in Long St., and there were many deaths.

The hospital for Whites was in the old Salvation Army Hall (Joubert St. opposite Kriel's butchery) and the newly built kindergarten. Ds. D.P. van Huyssteen was very active in organizing relief. He repeatedly appealed to the voluntary helpers to eat a little salt, to take a little snuff and to tie little bags of garlic and "wilde als" (a bitter herb) round their waists before entering these buildings. Although many people were sick the recovery rate was high and the death rate appears not to have been so high as elsewhere in Touws River it was appalling and one night in particular is still

known as "the Black Night".

Pregnant women who got ill all appear to have died, although one did not, though the child was not normal.

Church Services were conducted in the open air in Lover's Walk under some trees. There were no burial services in the Church only short graveside services with the mourners gathered on the outskirts of the cemetery.

A man by the name of Boy Griessel helped the Dr's a lot, also on the farms when all three doctors were ill at the same time – Dr's Muller, Wessels and Mrs. Dr. Muller.

There appears to have been no shortage of coffins, grave diggers etc. out here, not like in Cape Town and suburbs where one old lady who lived out at Kalberg, Parow way told how she saw wagons of corpses piled high being dumped into communal graves. This lady's own daughter kept the whole family of 10 alive (all ill at the same time) by giving them paraffin on sugar to eat, and sponging them down with paraffin too.

The chief medicine was Epsom's salts. It is doubtful if any injections were given here at that time.

Source: Montagu Archives

In book "History of Montagu" compiled and typed by Mrs. Bee Jordaan
