



The Day of St. Anthony's Fire

John Grant Fuller Jr.

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This is the strange, true, almost incredible story of a small French village where in '51 hundreds of townspeople went mad on a single night. Many of the most highly regarded citizens leaped from windows or jumped into the Rhone, screaming that their heads were made of copper, their bodies wrapped in snakes, their limbs swollen to gigantic size or shrunken to tiny appendages. Others ran through the streets, claiming to be chased by "bandits with donkey ears", by tigers, lions & other terrifying apparitions. Animals went berserk. Dogs ripped bark from trees until their teeth fell out. Cats dragged themselves along the floor in grotesque contortions. Ducks strutted like penguins. Villagers & animals died right & left.

Bit by bit, the story behind the tragedy in Pont-St-Esprit--a tiny Provincial village of twisted streets that looks much today as it did in the Middle Ages--unfolded to doctors & toxicologists. That story, one of the most bizarre in modern medical history, is movingly recounted in *The Day of St. Anthony's Fire*.

Throughout the Middle Ages & during other times in history, similar hallucinatory outbreaks occurred. They were called St. Anthony's Fire because it was believed that only prayers to the saint could hold the disease in check.

Even modern medicine could find no way to check the disease. Drugs failed to bring even temporary relief. Hundreds in the village suffered for weeks, with total agonizing insomnia, never knowing when they might once more suddenly go berserk.

The cause of St. Anthony's Fire was known since early history to be ergot, a mold found on rye grain that at rare times inexplicably became poisonous enough to create monstrous hallucinations & death. In '51 little significance was attached to the fact that the base of ergot was lysergic acid, also the base for LSD, a drug just coming to the attention of scientists at the time--a drug so powerful that one eye-dropperful could cause as many as 5000 people to hallucinate for hours. At this point, the story becomes a vividly absorbing medical detective story demonstrating the possibility that a strange, spontaneous form of LSD might have caused the human tragedy that came to the hapless villagers of Pont-St-Esprit.

The Day of St. Anthony's Fire Details

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From Reader Review The Day of St. Anthony's Fire for online ebook

Lisa says

it kinda bored me after about 60 pages. i think this could have been a much shorter book. but other people may like it.

Jim Williams says

Fascinating read.

Colleen says

I am not especially interested in toxicology or French law, but this was still a fascinating read. It's written like a novel which helps with some of the more scientific and legal aspects of the narrative. I find myself wanting to learn more about ergot poisoning.

Since Fuller is American and the events take place in southern France, there are some weird language bits. He often leaves terms and even whole phrases in the original French without any translation, although sometimes you can guess the meaning by context clues. This makes a bit more sense after reading the epilogue, where he explains some of the difficulties he faced with interpreting. And of course there are some things that can't be translated. But some footnotes or something would have been nice. I do speak a little French but I still ended up having Google Translate open next to me for a good portion of the reading.

BookLady says

En un pueblo al norte de Francia llamado Pont-Saint Esprit hubo un omen previo a los hechos trágicos. A La estatua de La Virgen de Notre Dame de la Bache se le había caído el brazo izquierdo casi por completo. El incidente se consideró de mal agüero y causó temor. El pueblo tiene una larga historia de guerras, saqueos y muertes y acababan de salir de la Segunda Guerra Mundial apenas con vida ya que los bombardeos los alcanzaron en diversas ocasiones. Ésto es lo que sucedió...

En Julio de 1951 saldrían de la estación de Chauvigny, 10 sacos con 100 kilos de harina para ser distribuida en la región de Pont-Saint Esprit. La harina llega en las vísperas de la festividad de Fete du Premier. La empresa Union Meunière se encargaría de la distribución de ésta harina entre los panaderos de la región. El primer panadero en recibir ésta harina notó un tono grisáceo y una textura ólea y pegajosa, decidió mezclarla con las sobras de su harina para mejorar la consistencia. Las primeras hogazas de pan se vendieron a la mañana siguiente rápidamente.

Los primeros síntomas empezaron a manifestarse a las pocas horas de ingerir el pan. Hubo diarrea de aguda a grave, cólicos violentos y erupciones cutáneas e insomnio.

La gente compartió el pan con sus mascotas que empezaron a mostrar los primeros síntomas de envenenamiento pero presentaron otro síntoma más que fueron las alucinaciones. Corrían, aullaban,

chillaban, gruñían y terminaban lástimandose de muerte con golpes, comiendo piedras, metales u otros. La gente empeoraba poco después de la muerte de sus animales. Hipotermia, arritmia, escalofríos, náuseas, diarrea, vértigo y las primeras alucionaciones visuales y auditivas comenzaron a surgir. Ojos vidriosos, insomnio, explosiones de energía o euforia e histeria en algunos casos.

Las alucionaciones pasaron de momentos agradables hasta escenas sacadas del Infierno de Dante. Demonios y bolas de fuego nocturnas, tigres y techos sangrantes hasta deseos suicidas de tirarse desde la ventana o lugares altos con deseos de volar. 48 horas después, los síntomas aumentaron, la sudoración excesiva dejaba un olor rancio a ratón muerto u orina añeja en las sábanas de los enfermos. Las primeras víctimas murieron de falla cardiaca, ya que el ritmo y la presión sanguínea cambiaba constantemente. La gente llegó hasta las 200 hrs sin poder dormir.

El Ergotismo o Cornezuelo del Centeno fue el causante de ésta epidemia pero se le llamó entre la gente como El Mal del Quemado o El Fuego de San Antonio que fue descrito en libros de medicina de la Edad Media. Se creía que rezando a San Antonio, la sensación de fuego en las extremidades y el estómago disminuían. Pueblos enteros cayeron en la más intensa y aterradora locura que llevó a la gente al caos en las calles y miles se volvieron psicóticos en aquél entonces.

En Agosto 24 de 1951 llegó L'Éclosion Brutale y con ésto sobre vino una histeria masiva ya que todos los enfermos al mismo tiempo comenzaron a alucinar y a gritar constantemente. Cada uno estaba metido en su propia alucionación, muchos no se dieron cuenta de los gritos del vecino o de lo que alucinaban en la cama de al lado. La histeria masiva surgió en los familiares que no estaba enfermos para poder controlarlos.

Los síntomas del envenenamiento por Ergotismo incluyen: contracciones musculares violentas, sensación de quemarse en las extremidades, cuerpo tembloroso, contracciones espasmódicas, calambres, gangrena, sangrados vaginales severos o abortos en mujeres, acidéz y reflujo estomacal, irritación cutánea, insomnio, delirios, alucionaciones auditivas y visuales, pensamientos obsesivos y deseos suicidas con histeria.

Las investigaciones policiacas los llevaron hasta el Molino Maillet en donde descubrieron que ante la baja producción de trigo y para satisfacer la demanda, se molió junto con los granos buenos, los restos de granos al fondo de los silos. Éstos granos estaban entre humedad, polillas y pelos de ratas entre otros elementos como lo viejo y sucio de los engranes del molino lo que pudo crear ésta masa venenosa. El ergot prolifera en condiciones de humedad y forma manchas o parches en la cebada. Se detuvieron a dos personas bajo los cargos de fraude alimenticio, transporte inapropiado del grano, infracción especial de legislación hacia el grano y homicidio involuntario y lesiones.

Los laboratorios franceses y suizos investigaron los hechos, en los órganos de la gente muerta y sus animales se encontraron restos de ergot y mercurio. Se estaban llevando acabo investigaciones sobre alcaloides. El LSD-25 surgió de experimentos de la semilla de la planta Morning Glory y tenía síntomas parecidos al Ergot, lo que se encontró es que el mercurio pudo aumentar la potencia del alcaloide. El Mercurio se usaba en un fungicida llamado Panogen y al añadirlo a los sacos en dónde se transportó el grano, éste no se mezcló bien y se pegó a las manchas del hongo de ergot incrementando la potencia haciéndolo altamente venenoso. Pasaron 10 años del incidente y los sobrevivientes quedaron muy dañados del ataque de ergot, algunos incapacitados de por vida y muchos con cuentas enormes en hospitales y pendientes de ser indemnizados. Un libro muy completo e interesante, éste hecho salió en el periódico de NY Times y causó gran sorpresa que una enfermedad de la Edad Media surgiera con tal furia en pleno siglo XX. Las drogas alucinógenas como con todas las drogas terminan liberando una serie de pasiones que no necesariamente queremos que sean liberadas. Éste fue un episodio de envenenamiento colectivo con consecuencia catástroficas, lo que indica que hay elementos en éste mundo que desconocemos y que hasta un simple pan puede matarnos. Excelente recomendación de parte de mi hermana.

Josephine says

Interesting! I don't like it quite as much as the first time around, four years ago--the 'Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce' second portion of the book drags a bit, compared to the description of what must have been a nightmare for the villagers!

I still wonder why this tainted wheat didn't show up elsewhere....shrug. Maybe it just didn't!

Parker F says

This book is the true account of how in 1951 the people of a French village were driven mad by ergot-infected bread, but it is mostly about the maddening bureaucracy and legal processes by which the victims suffered before reaching a financial settlement. Thus, while the book might seem to be about the most interesting topic in the history of the world, the author chose to focus more on the less interesting machinations of the French Millers' Union and Health Department. It is like a GODZILLA movie that spends fifteen minutes on the monster attack and two hours on the long, unheralded struggle between a coalition of those whose cars were crushed and their auto insurance companies about the fine points of their policies. Perhaps this topic should be re-explored by a contemporary author with the benefit of fifty more years of scientific knowledge and less of a fixation on legal tedium, as a town driven mad by bread tainted with naturally occurring LSD is the MOST INTERESTING POSSIBLE SUBJECT IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD.

Jill says

Really interesting book about the mysterious 'accursed bread' that caused hallucinations, disabilities, suicidal thoughts, and ultimately death in the tiny French village of Pont-Saint-Esprit in August of 1951. Fuller is a journalist who decided to take up the story after seeing a small newspaper article on the mass poisoning. He traveled to France and interviewed some of the victims and read over all of the official reports, medical reports, and court cases. The legal proceedings of the case are as heart-breaking as the story of the actual poisoning itself. Of the blamed causes of the poisoning was mercury-based poison (in the end) and historical ergotism (in the beginning). Fuller delves into the rare historical appearances of ergotism, a mass poison event which suddenly strikes its victims with deep psychological terrors, insomnia that lasts weeks, convulsions, endless chattering, and the overwhelming desire to jump out of windows. As the story goes on, Fuller re-counts the discovery of the drug LSD by two Swiss scientists but which was too new a drug to be taken seriously in 1951 by the French police. As time went on, it seems more and more likely that what caused the mass poisoning was a high dosage of LSD in the flour used in the bread-making in Pont-Saint-Esprit, which appears in nature in rare cases of ergot on rye.

Very interesting book, not only for its medical points, but also for its glimpse at the French legal system, and the French government's flour monopoly in the mid-20th century.

Linny says

I am re-reading this book. This is one of the most fascinating books I have ever read. Fuller tells of an event that seems like it is coming from the dark ages, but happened just before I was born in 1951 in France. This is not a very remote event, yet it seems like it is very remote, since it is nearly incomprehensible that an

event like this could even happen in modern times.

The writing method is nonfiction yet in a riveting manner. I was never bored for one second when I read this book the first time, so I am going to read it again for pleasure (the subject is not pleasurable, but the act of reading about it is.)

Angie says

Fascinating until it reaches the point of minutia in the analysis of what went wrong. Then it becomes just tedious and unreadable.

Jim says

The fascinating story of a village gone mad. Also the only good book John G Fuller ever wrote.

I read this and loved it, then went looking for more from the author. Everything else seemed to be the trashiest sort of UFO / ghost story disguised as reportage.

It seriously made me reconsider this novel, which I had believed to be essentially historical. Based on the rest of his work, you at least have to be skeptical.

In spite of all that, it's in my top twenty.

Jenn Crowley says

Absolutely fascinating story about the devastating effects that Ergot poisoning had in the small French village of Pont-Saint-Esprit in 1951. I read this as a teenager and strongly believe that the maddening effects of this natural LSD fueled my entirely irrational fear of zombies.

Mark says

Imagine if the Yippies at the '68 Democratic convention in Chicago had succeeded in dosing the water supply of the city of Chicago (well, just *imagine*. The chemical is water soluble but (in water) does *not* maintain its molecular integrity, so it was a fail to begin with)- and you might end up with a scene like this- a whole town dosed to the gills and acting accordingly, unpredictably. One substance which DOES maintain the molecular integrity of lysergic acid is rye grain (where it originates, in the ergot fungus)... A whole batch of rye which was ergot-infected made it into and through the mills in a southern French town, and got baked into the daily bread, and that's what happened... A scandal for the Miller's Union, which did a poor inspection job, and a coverup, and the detective work leads experts to - who else? Dr. Hofmann, who identifies the substance correctly. Excellent read, a great detective story, and maybe, a warning of what *can* happen when cats leap out of bags.

Betty says

The story about an entire village poisoned with ergot-tainted rye flour, causing hallucinations, deaths, and other related symptoms as one might see in high doses of LSD, ergot being similar or relative to the making of LSD. I've read this book a few times but not recently.

Erik Graff says

Having read some of Fuller's books, I picked this one up at the sale table of the Amarynth Bookstore in Evanston, Illinois during a break from work.

The story is basically this: In 1951 a rural region of France was inflicted with mass insanity. A medical investigation followed and it was discovered that the region depended on rye flour for its breads. The flour had become wet, gone moldy and produced the ergot lysergic acid which caused the symptoms. Unlike its derivative LSD, however, rye mold doesn't just cause hallucination, it is also painful and, in high enough dosage, deadly.

Heidi says

I first read this book when I was about 35.

I won't go into the storyline because others have done that and I don't want to ruin the suspense for people who have not actually read it yet.

Absolutely one of the most fascinating and riveting books I have ever read in my life.

The last third of the book where he talks about the French government getting involved was not as interesting.

Anybody who likes to read at all would be interested in this book. Again, this is one of the most fascinating and riveting books that I have read in my life.
