

SMALL-POX IN THE LAST CENTURY.

To the Editor of the SATURDAY REVIEW.

12 June, 1899.

SIR,—The allusion to this subject in the SATURDAY REVIEW of 10 June prompts one, with your kind permission, to refer to it. The small-pox mortality of England before Jenner is not known, there being no official registration previous to 1838. To estimate the whole of England and Wales by the Bills of Mortality, from a city so exceedingly insanitary as London (the method usually adopted) as fairly representing that of country towns, villages, and rural districts, is, therefore, utterly misleading. The alleged small-pox mortality previous to vaccination is much exaggerated, and no two authorities agree in their estimate. Small-pox inoculation, then in favour with the medical profession, was responsible for a great deal of it. The late Dr. Farr, one of the greatest statisticians of our time, says that in twenty years, from 1780 to 1799, the average annual deaths from small-pox in London were 1,740. The disease, he says, began to grow less fatal before vaccination was discovered, indicating, together with the diminution of fever, the general improvement in health then taking place. And Professor E. M. Crookshank, M.D., in his instructive evidence before the Royal Vaccination Commission, said (q. 10,708): "I wish to draw attention to the fact that Dr. Farr's statistics bear out the evidence of contemporary literature." Dr. Alfred R. Wallace, F.R.S., in his essay "Vaccination a Delusion," says: "The facts well known to every inquirer are: that the very highest small-pox mortality in a year was 3,992 (in London) in 1772, while in 1871 (18 years after the introduction of compulsory vaccination) it was 7,912 in London, or more than double, and in the same year, in England and Wales, it was 23,000." The epidemic form of various diseases which flourished amidst the unwholesome conditions prevailing when small-pox was so rife, is now practically extinct, having been got rid of by the ameliorations incident to a higher development of civilisation, viz. drainage, improved dwellings, better food, purer water, and less overcrowding. Those diseases are the plague, jail fever, black death, scurvy, and sweating sickness. And amongst the dreadful epidemic plagues of former centuries, it is a curious fact that small-pox, for which a special and alleged infallible antidote is provided and enforced at an enormous cost, should be the only one that now affrights us.—Your obedient servant,

JAS. R. WILLIAMSON.

[Mr. Williamson's letter is an instance of the tendency prevalent among anti-vaccinators, as we noted, to rely on the historical argument and to lay undue stress on doubtful statistics. He quotes from Wallace an apparent doubling of the deaths from small-pox in 1871 as compared with 1772; he omits to note that within that period the population of London had increased at least five-fold.—ED. S.R.]