

Essay Review

RANDOLPH TRUMBACH (editor), *Marriage, sex, and the family in England, 1660-1800*, New York and London, Garland Publishing Inc., 1985, a facsimile series:

1. Thomas Salmon, *A critical essay concerning marriage*, London, 1724, \$30.50
7. George Booth, Earl of Warrington, *Considerations upon the institution of marriage*, London, 1737; with *The present state of matrimony: or, the real causes of conjugal infidelity and unhappy marriages*, London, 1739, \$25.50
14. John Marten, *A treatise of all the degrees and symptoms of the venereal disease in both sexes*, London, 1708-09, \$50.50.
16. William Buchan, *Observations concerning the prevention and cure of the venereal disease*, London, 1796, \$30.50.
20. *Hell upon earth: or the town in an uproar*. London, 1729; with *Satan's harvest home, or the present state of whorecraft*, London, 1749, \$15.50.
29. Walter Harris, *A treatise on the acute diseases of infants*, London, 1742; with John Martyn, *The nurse's guide: or, the right method of bringing up young children*, London, 1729; with William Cadogan, *An essay upon Nursing, and the management of children, from their birth to three years of age*, London, 1750, \$25.50.
30. James Nelson, *An essay on the government of children*, London, 1756, \$37.50.
31. John Hill, *On the management and education of children*, London, 1754, \$30.50.
34. William Fleetwood, *The relative duties of parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and servants*. London, 1705, \$50.50.
36. Thomas Seaton, *The conduct of servants in great families*, London, 1720, \$30.50.

“Seek and ye shall find” is not a bad golden rule for the social historian of medicine. None would deny that there is a great deal more seeking out to do amongst even the printed sources; after all, it would not be a very adventurous or radical act for the medical historian to venture beyond the “great tradition” of sacred texts from Hippocrates to Sydenham if he then quickly attached himself to a new canon of works embodying the “little tradition” of popular health care and medicine—*Aristotle's masterpiece*, *Onania*, William Buchan's *Domestic medicine* and so forth. As yet, we've got all too impoverished a notion of what medicine and health care actually amounted to in society beyond the theories of the schools and the practice of the top physicians. One dimension of this little-known world (we may call it “popular medicine”, “lay medicine”, “irregular medicine”, or “folk medicine”, but all such titles are open to grave objections) was the spread and transmission of medical information and ideology through books. And it may be safely said that though we know some of the titles which sold best, and are beginning to get high-calibre analyses of their content (e.g., the work of Lawrence and Rosenberg on Buchan's *Domestic medicine*),¹ our knowledge of the whole range of books dedicated, wholly or in part, to spreading medical knowledge in pre-industrial or early-industrial society remains distinctly rudimentary. Recent research and publications are beginning to eat at the edges of our ignorance,² but at present, one of the most useful tasks for the social historian of medicine posing the questions, “what did ordinary literate people think about medicine in 1600 (1700, 1800, 1900, etc.), and where did they get their ideas from?” is simply randomly to trawl the pages of a wide sample of publications in search of buried treasure. Bernard Capp has shown how much health advice lies contained in almanacs (though no one has yet subjected this material to detailed scrutiny); and we are beginning to get studies of the medical contents of newspapers and the periodical press (but a vast amount of material

¹See C. Lawrence, ‘William Buchan: medicine laid open’, *Med. Hist.*, 1975, 19: 20-35; C. Rosenberg, ‘Medical text and medical context: explaining William Buchan's *Domestic medicine*’, *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1983, 57: 22-42.

²See Ginie Smith, ‘Prescribing the rules of health: self help and advice in the late eighteenth century’, in Roy Porter (editor), *Patient and practitioner: lay perceptions of medicine in pre-industrial society*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 249-282; and her recent London School of Economics PhD thesis on popular medical literature.

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remains unsifted here).³ But key sorts of reading matter still entirely await their historian. No one has systematically sifted sermons to see whether they were inculcating attitudes towards health (explanations of disease, notions of the body, and so forth):⁴ and though studies of early children's literature and chapbooks are now appearing thick and fast, what they have to say—or what they imply—upon health has not yet been examined (and this despite the encouragement given by reading the very first page of *Goody Two Shoes*, which contains a blatant advertisement for James' Fever Powders!).

A great deal of seeking thus remains to be done. And medical historians engaged in this task should be grateful to Garland Publishing Inc. for making the task of seeking considerably easier. For under the skilled editorship of Randolph Trumbach, Garland are currently reprinting some fifty important texts (let us call them "advice manuals" for want of a better single label) published in England during the "long eighteenth century" (i.e., from 1660 to 1800) covering the general area of the regulation of personal life and well-being. Twelve texts will be reprinted dealing with the general subject of marriage, a further half a dozen covering divorce and adultery; a couple dealing with sex in general; two handling masturbation; three treating venereal disease; thirteen dealing with prostitution and "the sexual life of the town"; seven covering sodomy and homosexual behaviour; and about a dozen ranging over problems of the family, child-rearing, education, and the "servant problem". These texts will be housed in three dozen volumes, of which the first ten have now appeared. Some (chiefly still to be published) will be what constituted major books in their day, though works hitherto little used by medical historians, such as Nicholas Venette's *Conjugal love* (the mid-eighteenth-century translation is being reprinted). Others will be primarily medical texts essentially unknown to medical historians, such as John Marten's *A treatise of all the degrees and symptoms of the venereal disease in both sexes*, a vivid early-eighteenth-century work crammed with fascinating details of the cut-throat world of semi-quack clap-curers. And still others are works that on first sight seem to have little connexion with medical matters, but which on further scrutiny provide valuable windows on to perceptions and practice about sickness and health in the world we have lost. The medical historian might be inclined to write off Thomas Seaton's *The conduct of servants in great families* (1720) as three hundred pages of windbag homiletics teaching masters to teach their servants to be honest, frugal, and cringing (which it largely is). Yet it also contains, towards the end, a remarkable series of hymns on sickness and health which put across a series of contradictory messages. On the one hand, the servant is to lift up praise to God, for endowing him with raw good health of a kind the rich lack—

Health is a blessing from above
Which riches cannot buy (p.289)

and yet at the same time he is to look forward joyously to a "happy dissolution" from "this vale of sin" and hope

T' ascend without controul
To those celestial mansions where
No sin or sorrow dwells (p.298)

(obviously the labour is not so hard in the celestial mansions!).

Or take James Nelson's *An essay on the government of children* (1756). At first sight, this looks as if it is yet another of the plethora of post-Lockian educational texts, warning parents to seize control of the *tabula rasa* mind of their offspring before fashion, folly, passion, and the superstitions of nurses will warp their development ("Just as the Twig is bent, the Tree's inclined"). But on closer inspection it turns out to be a full-scale essay on the environment and health of infants, stressing how sound physical and mental health in later life depend upon a sure foundation built in youth, emphasizing the medical dimensions of the Lockian

³See the literature cited in Roy Porter, 'Lay medical knowledge in the eighteenth century: The evidence of the *Gentleman's Magazine*', *Med. Hist.*, 1985, 29: 138-168. For almanacs see B. Capp, *Astrology and the popular press*, London, Faber, 1979.

⁴But for analysis of religious attitudes see Andrew Wear, 'Puritan perceptions of illness', in Porter (editor), *op. cit.*, note 2 above, pp. 55-100.

recommendation of hardening, and containing a lengthy and entertaining section denouncing the evils of feeding children with the eighteenth-century equivalents of “junk food” (tarts hawked round the streets by the enticing pieman). Drawing upon the tradition of the non-naturals, Nelson insists that bad diet for children leads to tooth decay, stomach decay, and moral decay as well.

In short, the social historian of medicine, following the injunction to “seek”, will have his suspicions amply confirmed that medical ideas and information were being disseminated through numerous channels, many of them not principally medical, in the centuries when literacy was advancing and there were plenty of writers and publishers to cash in on the business of knowledge. But what precisely will he find? In the rest of this review I wish to spell out some of the themes stressed time and again in these texts from the generations spanning 1700. One constant emphasis is on the crucial importance of marriage and the nuclear family. Works such as Thomas Salmon’s, *A critical essay concerning marriage* (1724) and *The present state of matrimony* (1739) see marrying almost as a duty. That there is so much satire against unhappy marriages, the high rate of conjugal infidelity, the preference of the wits of libertinism and of “learned women” for “single blessedness”—all these are seen not as real causes to pause for thought concerning the institution, but as the scandalous talk of the town and the evils of high society. Monotonously, insistently, the virtues of matrimony are rammed down the reader’s throat. Why? It is an interesting question and one that can’t be wholly satisfactorily answered. Standard histories have told us that the English were keen to marry (for men, wives and families gave them households to provide economic bases; for women, no fate was worse than becoming an “old maid”), and historical demographers have been at pains to explore the cultural mechanisms holding back Stuart and Georgian English people from marrying too early. But this may only tell one half of the story; maybe there was also considerable resistance to matrimony (it could be a brutalizing experience for a woman, and a very costly venture for a gentleman). If one reads between the lines of a work such as *Aristotle’s masterpiece* (soon to be published in this series), one sees the author anticipating serious objections from readers of both sexes against marrying, and considerable hostility from women against childbearing. In the light of the fact that the English population was only just managing to reproduce itself in the latter part of the seventeenth century, these questions deserve further exploration.

What is noticeable throughout these tracts is that the reasons for recommending marriage are very heavily “medical”. John Marten’s *A treatise of . . . the venereal disease* and William Buchan’s *Observations concerning the prevention and cure of the venereal disease* both insist that though the pox and clap can be cured, they open a Pandora’s box of other ills, and prevention is better than cure. The only safe method of prevention is conjugal fidelity. The outcry against venereal disease in the late Stuart and early Georgian period—well represented in these treatises—has been surprisingly neglected by social historians (as incidentally, has the history of Georgian prostitution).

But monogamy and the nuclear family are also vital for the generation of offspring (still, according to several of these books, the prime purpose of marriage: a view disputed in Venette’s *Conjugal love*, to appear in this series). Georgian England produced a flood of books on childbirth, infant-rearing, and the education of children in morals, manners, and good breeding, admirably represented here by Walter Harris’s *Treatise on the acute diseases of infants*, *The nurse’s guide*, William Cadogan’s *An essay upon nursing*, James Nelson’s already mentioned *An essay on the government of children*, and John Hill’s *On the management and education of children*. What is remarkable is that they essentially speak with one voice. All denounce the old ways, the ignorant midwives, the stuffy birthing rooms, the cramming of spiced, alcoholic and artificial food down the baby’s (and indeed mother’s!) throat; all attack wet-nursing (and dry-nursing), all recommend maternal breast-feeding whenever possible. And, at a later stage, all are hostile to spoiling and cossetting infants, all warn parents not to ruin their offspring by leaving them in the company of servants and familiars; all recommend sparse diets, hardening treatment, rational discourse, and early and rigorous moral training. It would be good to know where this eager consensus came from. One is tempted to answer “Locke”, and indeed most authors pay lavish tribute to him (even while dissenting from some of the

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excesses of the Lockian hardening treatment, such as wearing leaky shoes). Yet Locke himself must have been as much symptom as cause. A more thick-textured social history of children, going beyond the global generalizations of Ariès *et al.*, is clearly called for.

All these treatises on child care touch upon, but decline to face head-on, a critical paradox. For they assert just how vital it is that the mother/child link should be strengthened and protected (William Fleetwood's *The relative duties of parents* makes it quite clear that the prime duty in life of woman is to act as mother), while at the same time fearing that excessive "feminine" influence will spoil the child. A deep-seated misogyny is at work here: women are inherently flighty and so must be riveted into their roles in the family; but then the danger is that they will pollute the next generation with their silly, thoughtless, impulsive ways. No resolution is offered. But it is worth noting that the characterization of the inadequacies of womankind so universal in these tracts is not especially "medical" or "anatomical". We don't here see the portrait of the "hysterical" or "neurasthenic" female type so characteristic in future centuries. If anything, the defects of women as mothers are viewed as an insoluble consequence of a necessary role division. To be good daughters, to net husbands, to prove good wives, ladies must cultivate charm and submission; but these qualities all too often leave them grossly deficient for the parts they have to play as mothers.

One of the key roles of the social history of medicine lies in acting as a bridge and a medium between distinct technical disciplines. Specialists tell us about diseases and treatments, about mortality and morbidity and population curves; but they have less to say about how knowledge and theory were translated into the everyday attitudes and practices of the masses. Books such as these reprinted by Garland provide the raw material on which the historian must work to resolve these problems. It is a great pity, however, that these volumes have been reprinted without scholarly introductions, however brief. Even the bare bones of information about how many editions such tracts went through, their price, how they were received, the career structures of their authors, etc., would have reduced the risk that these volumes too will become disembodied texts stuck on the shelf to be rifled whenever an apposite quotation is required to back a case. Much work remains to be done on the social and intellectual meaning of the appearance of all these popularized ideas in print. But for helping us to grasp once more what it was that the literate classes of early Georgian England were reading about their well-being, we should be very grateful for this series.

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