

in which the emerging profession of toxicology was embroiled.

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Wayne Wild, *Medicine-by-post: the changing voice of illness in eighteenth-century British consultation letters and literature*, Wellcome Series in the History of Medicine, Clio Medica 79, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2006, pp. 286, illus., €60.00, \$78.00 (hardback 978-90-420-1868-6).

The practice of consulting medical practitioners through letters has provided invaluable insights for historians of medicine. The resulting collections of letters contain detailed accounts of the constantly adjusted therapeutic regimes prescribed for patients. More importantly, consultation letters have revealed the power relations between elite practitioners and wealthy patients, and the different approaches accorded to upper-class clients and poor hospital patients. The sheer volume of consultations by post also vividly shows the low importance accorded to physical examination at the time.

Medicine-by-post is a detailed study of medical correspondence over a long time span—from 1720s to the 1790s. Framed by an introductory chapter on patients and practitioners, and a concluding chapter on the portrayal of medical encounters in novels, the three central chapters focus on consultation letters written by well-known names in the medical world—James Jurin, George Cheyne and William Cullen. Wild uses this range of sources to explore the shifting rhetoric of medical consultation. He argues that rhetoric is far from being mere flourish but is the key to understanding the exchange between patient and practitioner. A shared style of writing mediated and allowed the construction of the patient–practitioner relationship. Common rhetoric as well as common medical knowledge allowed patients to represent their ailments, and to test their physician’s competence. Equally, it

allowed practitioners to establish their status (at a time when their standing was far from certain) and their authority. Wild convincingly shows that though therapeutics remained fairly constant, rhetorical style mirrored new theories of body function and dysfunction. Jurin and his correspondents used a dry, objective “scientific” reporting of symptoms and applied iatromechanical theory to devise curative strategies. Nervous theories, with the language of sensibility allowed Cheyne’s and Cullen’s clients to describe their feelings and experience of ill health, and the physicians to proffer rational diagnoses combined with ready sympathy. In his final chapter, Wild argues that this rhetoric spilled over into the public arena. Wild shows that consultation letters were quasi-public documents, passed among family and friends, and might even appear in print in medical texts. More significantly, they informed the depiction of practitioner–patient encounters in literature, where physical illness became a metaphor for a wider social decay.

Wild’s study of medical correspondence is engaging and thought-provoking. His detailed analysis of consultation by post shows that the intercourse between patient and practitioner is even more complex and nuanced than earlier historians have suggested. Power did not lie entirely with the paying patient. Clients were sometimes pathetically anxious to obtain an opinion from distinguished physicians, expecting responses within a matter of days. Physicians had a degree of authority in the exchange, chiding patients who failed to adhere to their prescribed regimen, although their reproofs were tempered by the need to flatter and maintain the client’s business. The book is aimed at multiple readers, and while Wild’s background history and short biographies of his main protagonists will be useful to students of eighteenth-century literature, they are familiar territory to medical historians. Many of the letters used have been published, but for the reader not familiar with medical correspondence, more substantial quotations would have made the text even more engaging. Nevertheless, *Medicine-by-post*

greatly adds to our understanding of this aspect of medical practice.

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Ted Dadswell, *The Selborne pioneer: Gilbert White as naturalist and scientist, a re-examination*, 2nd rev. ed., London, Centaur Press, 2006, pp. xix, 256, illus., £14.95 (paperback 978-0-900001-56-7).

Gilbert White is one of the few eighteenth-century writers to have gripped both academic and popular audiences. His *Natural history of Selborne*, published in 1788, has never been out of print, and his portrayal of a pre-industrial, perhaps prelapsarian, Britain has inspired generations of readers in search of lost times. Selborne—the Hampshire village in which White was born, lived and died—has become something of a shrine to this unassuming, Austen-esque country curate.

But Ted Dadswell, a teacher turned freelance historian, takes an ambivalent view of White's posthumous reputation. The "popular mythology" of White as an enthusiastic ingénue, and his charm as a "gifted and an unspoilt stylist" (p. x), have, Dadswell argues, hampered assessments of his work as a naturalist. Dadswell's aim is to rehabilitate White as "an early and quite extraordinary exponent of modern behavioural biology" (p. xvi), an innovator comparable in stature to Gregor Mendel or Charles Babbage. *The Selborne pioneer* is a modern "field guide" to the many faces of this gentleman-naturalist: the gardener, the theorist, the antiquarian, the sky-watcher, the consummate correspondent.

Dadswell approaches this task with the mindset of a modern naturalist. He explores the ways in which White both worked within and transcended the eighteenth-century taxonomical tradition. Record-keeping, a massive correspondence network and White's own "outdoor method" were central factors in the development of his idiosyncratic approach to natural history. Dadswell insists upon White's "self-contradictory" character (p. 8) as the key to understanding his writings, and highlights the

often-overshadowed socio-economic aspects of his life. Market gardening, for example, became a crucial means of supplementing White's clerical stipend and Oriel fellowship, helping him to "fulfil his responsibilities as a senior family member" (p. 14).

For the most part, however, Dadswell follows what might in his terms be called the "historical mythology" of White—the tendency to view his work primarily as a precursor to nineteenth-century natural science in general, and the work of Charles Darwin in particular. He frames White's natural history in terms of its relationship to current scientific thinking, correcting his "mistakes" and praising his anticipations of modern practices such as the use of "controls" in experiments. Though White was a professional Anglican for most of his life, Dadswell tries to interpret his work as an essentially secular scientific project, divorced from the wider context of eighteenth-century natural theological thought. There are clear problems with applying the concept of secular science, an ideology of the mid-nineteenth century, to the work of a clergyman-naturalist who died in 1793. Dadswell acknowledges this problem in his introduction but, despite repeated invocations of Locke, Hume and Paley, never really gets to grips with it.

Those who read White for pleasure will find little here to enhance their enjoyment. *The Selborne pioneer* is too descriptive, lacking focus, often content merely to repeat White's own observations. Historians will balk at the anachronistic appeals to present scientific practice. And even if modern naturalists—apparently Dadswell's intended audience—find his spirited polemic convincing, it is difficult to see what this presentist redescription of White as an exemplary field biologist will bring to their work. There remains a crying need for historians to return White to his own historical habitat, without any irritable reaching after contributions or "firsts". Much is lost when the Selborne curate is fixed and wriggling on a pin.

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