

correctly stressed throughout that diet and nutrition in fact play critical roles in the development of our sense of self, and that historical analysis of this is necessary for understanding the deep historical meanings that underscore modern obsessions with conditions such as obesity. Yet, it is suggested, these themes are not just concerned with the medical alone. Tellingly, issues such as fat are also persistently discussed through moral frameworks, acting as an expression of personal character as well as ill health.

Spanning the entire modern period, the volume contains thirteen chapters detailing a varied array of themes ranging from the physiology of hypochondria in the eighteenth century, historical attitudes towards fat in twentieth-century America, as well as in-depth analysis of the responses of prominent historical individuals to the problems of their gut. In one particularly notable chapter, for instance, George Rousseau explores Samuel Taylor Coleridge's obsession with his gastric problems and the subsequent development of his dream theories generated by the poor state of his digestion at night. Further contributions analyse linkage between the development of chocolate as a commodity and the introduction of efficient sewerage in nineteenth-century Europe, while Ronald L LeBlanc explores Leo Tolstoy's use of bodily imagery stressing themes of diet, desire and denial. Ana Carden-Coyne, meanwhile, successfully argues that during the First World War, the abdomen acquired a meaningful status in America which confirmed the guts as the locus of masculinity, with military manhood from then on requiring particularly stronger inner resolve.

Inevitably, some of the pieces are more convincing than others. For instance, Joyce Huff's analysis of the interest in the elimination of bodily fat that resulted in the employment of scientists in the public relief system in the 1860s is particularly credible. But are we really to believe that the modern obsession with chocolate stems from its apparent historical associations with oral contact with excrement (coprophagia), as

Alison Moore provocatively argues? Overall what is most surprising about this volume is the number of topics left unexplored, although this is perhaps more the fault of historians generally, than that of the editors. We hear little on the role of the stomach in the development of the history of medicine. Nothing is said on, say, the significance of abdominal operations within the wider development of surgery, or shifting understandings of various prominent diseases of the digestive tract such as peptic ulcer. Ultimately, we are still left with no firm narrative about this which would complement our understandings of health, disease and the chronic conditions of the digestive tract, although it is fair to say that many pieces of the jigsaw have been slotted neatly into place. This is a minor criticism, however, and *Cultures of the abdomen* is a useful contribution to a heavily neglected area of medical and social history. In fact, what is presented here is a variety of highly complex, yet significant, themes with outstanding potential for further, fuller historical analysis.

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Eluned Summers-Bremner, *Insomnia: a cultural history*, London, Reaktion Books, 2008, pp. 176, £19.95 (hardback 978-1-86189-317-8).

In *Insomnia: a cultural history*, Eluned Summers-Bremner seeks to explore attitudes toward sleeplessness from ancient times to the present. Because her sources are drawn primarily from literature, the book makes little effort to probe popular beliefs, much less how people across time and space actually grappled with insomnia. Also slighted are the causes of sleeplessness and its consequences upon the cadences of daily life.

Summers-Bremner initially draws upon modern medicine to define insomnia "as the habitual inability to fall asleep or remain asleep when one wishes or needs to do so"

(p. 7). So far, so good. But within several pages, we are off on a disjointed, at times perplexing tour that takes us, in the ensuing chapters, from *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey* to Charles Dickens and Gabriel García Márquez. Nor are references wanting to East Asian authors. In short, the author brings little rigour or discipline to her narrative. Making matters worse is that the topic of insomnia all but disappears amid metaphors and digressions that are at best tangential, involving such diverse matters as the European colonization of indigenous cultures, the prevalence of boredom in eighteenth-century England, and the Atlantic slave trade (“like insomnia, the slave trade was an actively dark state—dark because unseen, often distant from the site of investment and dealing—as well as a lack: the inability to see how to run an economy without it” [p. 12]).

Not that the narrative is devoid of interesting insights, particularly in its discussion of modern sleep research; but these are obscured by prose that is often impenetrable, a grab-bag of jargon that undercuts the book’s appeal to either non-specialists or historians of medicine. What are we to make of the following: “To wake from sleep is to be found in the world and to have been remade by it, and to experience insomnia is to be kept from seeing, most often by means of excessive thoughts, how the productions of consciousness forestall the arrival of an unconscious state” (p. 12)?

The principal thesis seems to be that insomnia has become a growing problem given the decreasing amount of sleep enjoyed by industrialized societies—what Summers-Bremner refers to as the increasing demands of a “wired world” that rarely pauses for rest or relaxation (p. 131). This, in turn, presumably fuels over-stimulation and anxiety that render sleep both troubled and brief. Fair enough; but in actuality, we have probably never slept so well, due to the problems that typically afflicted our forebears. Had Summers-Bremner relied less on literature and sought instead to incorporate a larger number of empirical sources, such as diaries, memoirs,

legal records, and newspapers, she might have given greater credence to the impact of disease, hunger, frigid temperatures, noise, and lice, among myriad other sources of disturbed slumber—hence the chronic sleep deprivation that plagued labouring classes in pre-industrial western societies.

Such is the importance of the history of insomnia that it deserves systematic study in its own right rather than to serve as a device by which to reflect upon a disparate body of imaginative literature. An index might also have helped.

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Andrew Knox and Christopher Gardner-Thorpe, *The Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital 1741–2006*, Exeter, Andrew Knox and Christopher Gardner-Thorpe, 2008, pp. xiii, 222, £16.99 (hardback 978-0-9561700-1-9), £8.99 (paperback 978-0-956170-0-2).

This book has its origins in a series of Devon and Exeter Medical Society lectures in 2006–7. It successfully combines a scholarly approach with a very readable and accessible narrative that covers not just the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital (RDE) but the delivery of health care in the large area between Plymouth and Bristol. The surprisingly affordable price, with all profits going to the Medical Society for the promotion of medical research, combined with the carefully arranged text and the lovely images on the dust-jacket will ensure its appeal to a wide audience. The authors are both retired RDE consultants and they offer a warm insider view of the development of the institution. Building on past histories of the Hospital, this new work concentrates on the National Health Service era.

While many publications marking the sixtieth anniversary of the NHS have grappled with its problems and analysed its organizational structures, financial pressures and persistent inequalities, Andrew Knox and