

*Maladies and Medicine: Exploring Health and Healing 1540-1740*

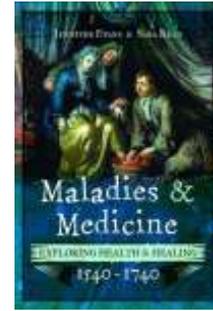
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Date of publication: 2017

Publisher: Pen & Sword History

Price of book: £12.99

ISBN number: 978 1 4738 571 5



This book covers medicine from the early sixteenth to early eighteenth century, and how it developed as understanding of the human body became clearer. The book is separated into four distinct parts: Head Complaints, Abdominal Maladies, Whole Body Ailments and Reproductive Maladies. Although you can read each section separately, it would be prudent to read the introduction because this sets the scene for the book in relation to the social, religious and cultural context of the time.

I am not an historian, but I am interested in history, especially in relation to midwifery and related topics. I found this book very interesting, informative and easy to follow. The authors have included some fascinating and relevant facts from archives such as court reports to support their discussion. This gives a rich depth to their work. There are some fascinating insights into reproduction as understood during this period. For example, Greensickness was a term used very commonly throughout the medical profession at this time. However, it is not certain what this disease might be in present-day terms, although it is thought by the authors to be either Anorexia Nervosa or delayed puberty (Part 4, Chapter 19).

There is also an essence of the social construct of the period, which I found interesting and thought-provoking. Particularly poignant is the way women were perceived and treated according to their social status. For example, a young maid lay down in the afternoon to help ease her terrible recurring headache and was raped by a man of the house, yet he was not convicted of the crime. Meanwhile, the lady of the house had the means to travel far and wide to find a cure for her own persistent headaches (Chapter 1 pages 2-3). There are also some striking similarities with today's society, such as how reluctant women were to discuss their intimate problems, i.e. vaginal discharges, with their physician, who of course was always a man. Chapter 21, 'Infertility', sets the context of this within the zeitgeist of the period, demonstrating how socially important having children was during this time for both women and men.

It is not necessary, in my view, to read this book from start to end: you could choose a single chapter or one of the four parts, and still get the core meaning of what is being discussed. I think this will be of interest to those who are researching medical history during this period or those who, like me, enjoy historical accounts. It could also be of use to those who are researching the origins of common diseases. This book demonstrates how ignorant the medical profession was during this time, and how much we have learnt and discovered since the period it covers. However, after reading the book it did make me wonder how future generations will judge our understanding of the human body: for example will they think it is strange that we poison people with chemotherapy in order to cure them of cancer?

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