

ENGLISH DOMESTIC MEDICINE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY—I

From the Letters of Josiah Wedgwood

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When friends meet or exchange letters there are almost sure to be kindly enquiries about the health and doings of the family and mutual friends. So it was in the 18th century, and by a fortunate chance the letters of Josiah Wedgwood, the renowned Staffordshire potter, to his friend and partner, Thomas Bentley, have been preserved and collected for us by Wedgwood's great granddaughter, Katherine Euphemia Farrer.

Josiah Wedgwood was born in the year 1730 and died in 1795. The correspondence, which began in 1762, continued until Bentley's death in 1780. The letters are characterized by a great depth of friendship and intimacy and provide a very revealing picture of the developments in England during the early years of the Industrial Revolution. At the same time, they discover for us something of the industrial and political activities of the period and in the exchange of news about the respective families and acquaintances we get a glimpse of family life in the middle classes as it existed two centuries ago.

In this contribution, for which no originality is claimed, an attempt is made to reproduce as a continuous discourse these passages in the letters which relate particularly to social and medical practices of the time. As far as possible the present author has avoided comment or speculation on their meaning and import. The excerpts quoted are often necessarily extensive and are reproduced precisely as written by Wedgwood. It is a simple chronicle of domestic medicine at a time remote from our own and, indeed, almost at the dawn of English scientific medicine. Now after 200 years, when we have arrived at the threshold of social medicine, we may pause for a moment to ponder just how far we have travelled in that time.

Cripples and their Ailments

As the visitor to Stoke-on-Trent emerges from the station his attention is immediately arrested by a statue, but he will fail to discover in this fine massive figure of a man any indication that Josiah Wedgwood was a cripple from early life.

In the year 1741, when aged 11 years, he con-

tracted smallpox, which was early complicated by a serious affection of the right knee, resulting in a stiff joint with wasting of the leg. When he resumed work as a potters' thrower this proved a serious handicap, which was only partially overcome by adjusting the bench. From this time onwards this lame leg was peculiarly liable to sustain knocks, as a result of which the condition, whatever it was, flared up and compelled him to rest. While in partnership with Whieldon he suffered one of these accidents and for several months was confined to his lodgings at Stoke. In a way this proved a blessing in disguise, for he was enabled to devote himself to a course of intensive study of history, chemistry, natural philosophy and Latin under the careful tuition of his scholarly brother-in-law, the Rev. William Willett, who had a charge in the neighbouring town of Newcastle. On a later occasion in 1762, while on a business visit to Liverpool, he was again laid up in his hotel where he was attended by Mr. Turner, a surgeon of high repute in that city. Through him he was introduced to Thomas Bentley, a Manchester warehouseman and a man of wide culture, who was later to be his business partner and life-long friend. Sprains of this bad knee were recurrent and a cause of great annoyance and frustration in his work. The crisis came in 1768, when he suffered a particularly bad sprain. Mr. Bent, surgeon, of Newcastle, was summoned:

'He order'd me a Vomit, and told me then he had known wonderful effects from it. I took his advice, and had immediate ease of my knee, but whether the absorption was too sudden,—The matter absorb'd too much, or too much vitiated, I know not; but the pain had no sooner left my knee, than I was very ill in other respects, attended with great heat, and difficulty of Breathing, insomuch that I was glad to feel the pain return again into the Knee and as the Pain return'd into that part the other symptoms left me.'

Apparently the treatment was unsuccessful, for on May 31, 1768, attended by Bentley and Mr. Bent, the leg was amputated through the thigh.

This was long before the era of general anaesthesia and antiseptics, while the control of primary and secondary haemorrhage involved grave risk. The operation called for great courage and endurance in the patient and from the surgeon great dexterity and speed, measured by a few minutes. Even so, it is clear that the operation was not uncommon, for a few months later he refers to the engagement of a new workman:

'He is a Mathematical instrument maker, a Wooden-leg maker, a Caster of Printers types, and in short a Jack of all trades. His name is Brown and he wears a wooden leg, at present he is making me some legs.'

Wedgwood, in his letters from the sick-room, has given us a glimpse of the treatment and management following the operation. Apparently he was kept under the influence of laudanum for about three weeks, but he was pleased when it was discontinued, for he records, 'I do better without it.' By this time he was able to be taken out:—

'I have been at the Workhouse (factory) and had two airings in a chaise. The skin of the upper part of the wound is healed and got down to the bone, which I tell you to confute all those who deny the present to be an age of Miracles'. During this period of healing he was not idle, but undertook a considerable amount of private and business correspondence. In his recovery he was greatly helped by the unremitting tender care of his wife and by the many tokens of affection from his friends. On June 20 he writes:—

'At present I am well even beyond my most sanguine expectations, my leg is almost healed, the wound is not quite 2 inches by one and $\frac{1}{2}$, I measur'd it with the compasses this morning when I dress'd it—yes, *when I dressed it*, for I have turned my surgeon adrift and Sally (his wife) and I are sole managers now, only we give him leave to peep at it now and then, when he lifts up his hands and eyes, and will scarcely believe it to be the wound he dressed before.'

Despite this exultation, however, these weeks for him and his wife were clouded with anxiety and sadness, for in the meantime their infant son, Richard, aged 10 months, sickened and died of acute gastro-enteritis. This was the first break in the family.

By July 6—that is, just five weeks after the operation—he is taking rambles into Cheshire and his wife has gone for a rest (and perhaps to escape the sad associations of her recent loss) to her brother's home at Smallwood. A week later he is back at the works and engrossed in negotiations about the canals.

His subsequent history proves that the operation was highly successful, for throughout his life he regularly undertook long journeys on horseback without inconvenience. Moreover, he was able to enjoy long walks, which suggests that the wooden-leg (pegleg) makers were highly skilled in their craft. Stairs, as might be expected, were a very real difficulty, so for this reason among others he modified the layout of the works:—

'I have alter'd my opinion about the turning room, and unless you think of any objection shall fix the Lathes in the lower corner room under that we before proposed. Here the lights are high enough and a ground floor is much better for Lathes than a Chamber story, the latter are so apt to shake with the motion of the Lathe, and as we shall want so very often to be stepping into the Lathe room, for there the *outline* is given, it will be more convenient, especially for me, to have it without steps to it.'

Eight years after the operation, in September 1776, he met with an accident to his 'wooden leg'

'A stupid *man animal* throwing a bundle of Weeds over an hedge into the Highway, just before my Horses Head, upon which he turned about so hastily, as to whirl me out of the Demi Peak, and I toss'd upon the hard ground just upon the point of my Hip bone.'

After lying up for a few days he took an airing or two in the chaise, but he writes:—

'The motion was too much for my Hip and made it too sore to be moved again of two or three days. My Surgeon recommends *Patient* to me very strongly, and I must be content to "make haste slowly".'

In reports on his progress these observations are interesting:—

'This has given a terrible shake to the joint, and made it too sore to be mov'd without extreme pain, but I have no constant pain, nor any symptom of inflammation in the part, and I am very thankfull that the joint is not dislocated, for my Surgeon tells me it could not have been reduc'd again, for want of a Leg to pull by, and I should probably never have been able to put on my Artificial one again, which would have been a terrible accident to me.'

Three days later, however, he is able to ride out in the chaise again without any inconvenience, but feels it will be some time before he is able to put on another leg. But the sick-room and enforced idleness engender a philosophic acceptance of misfortune, which he commends to Bentley, who is suffering from knee trouble:—

'We must have patience with many things, if we mean to make our passage thro' this World tolerably easy to ourselves or those about us.'

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To bear and forbear, is our great business, and he is the happiest Man, who is the best proficient in this very necessary science.'

Nevertheless, he was anxious to be out at business, but dared not leave home, as Mrs. Wedgwood was 'expecting and due to take to her Bed soon.'

The leg continued to gather strength, but until the end of September he had to be content to get around on two crutches, for, having tried his wooden leg, he found it of no use, but rather a burden, which impressed him that 'he must use himself to it by degrees.'

From such long intimate personal experiences and, no doubt, chats with his surgeons during their visits, Wedgwood was something of an authority on knee troubles and kindred ailments. While he was laid aside with this injury to his great trochanter, Bentley in London suffered from knee trouble, 'Gout or Rheumatism,' which greatly irked and depressed him, especially as it did not readily respond to the homely ministrations of his wife with 'Blue Flannel.' After two months, in which there was little improvement, Mr. Turner, of Liverpool, their mutual friend and 'a surgeon of no small degree of professional knowledge,' sends this advice through Wedgwood:—

'He desir'd me to tell you in the most earnest manner that *rest* was absolutely necessary for the part *if you want* to save it—That you must not even stand upon it, or let it bear the weight of your Body whilst any *pain* or *soreness*, or in other words, inflammation remained.'

Several weeks elapsed and Bentley's knee was no better, and so Wedgwood recalled the regimen prescribed for him by Mr. Bent before amputation was advised. Here the account ends, but three years later, in November 1779, they are both again concerned about the subject of knee troubles. Wedgwood recounts his recent experiences, from which it is clear that a distinction was made between 'white swellings' and those accompanied by the redness of inflammation, and further between white swellings of recent and remote development:—

'I mention'd to you some time since Mr. Bents practice of vomiting for recent white swellings, and a case or two at this time within

my knowledge seems to confirm very much what I then mention'd to you.

'One of my men at the works was laid up about six weeks since of a painfull and swell'd knee. I examin'd it myself and found it considerably swell'd—He could scarcely bend it and was oblig'd to lift it up to a bench for me to look at it with his hands. His pain was constant, and quite through the joint and it had been growing worse and worse for two or three years, from all which circumstances and the appearance of the joint I was convinc'd of its being a true white swelling.

'Mr. Bent was sent for, and was of the same opinion. He order'd two strong pukes, but did not neglect the other usual remedies prescribed in such cases. The man found immediate benefit and is now at his work again and he says quite well.

'The other patient is my postillion who was treated in the same way and is getting better.' Fits of the gout were so commonplace as not to occasion serious worry, but the treatment and management of an acute attack seems to have been something of an ordeal.

'Our T. Wedgwood has been Ill for some time. We did not think so much of it at first as we all expected it would be a fit of the Gout which you know no body minds. But the Gout would not pay him the expected, and desired visit, and the symptoms became so serious that we thought proper to call in Doctr Darwin. He had omitted this a few days longer, I verily believe my Cousin would have been demolish'd, for under the idea of keeping the Enemy out of his Stomach, and coaxing him into the extremities, his ignorant Apothecary, with Drams, Strong Wines—Flannels, hot baths and a close stove of a Room had almost melted his Patient down into a Mummie, and his whole Mass of Fluids were in so high a state of Inflammation that our Esculapius had but little hopes of his Patient at first. However by unswathing him, giving him a little fresh air and ordering a little blood to be taken from him, he regenerated him in a few minutes, and we hope he will recover, but he may not be able to come to the Works of a month or two.'

(To be continued)

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