ENGLISH DOMESTIC MEDICINE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY—III

From the Letters of Josiah Wedgwood

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'In the Straw'

In life nothing stirs the emotions of the family circle more deeply than the birth of a child, and in medicine there are few more fascinating studies than the habits and customs pertaining to the woman with child and in childbed.

On January 25, 1764, at Astbury Church, Cheshire, Josiah Wedgwood, then aged 34 years, married his cousin Sarah Wedgwood (Sally) who was four years younger. Almost exactly a year later, on January 17, 1765, their first child Susannah (Sukey) was born. 'A pretty numerous family' was the custom of these times and so in the 13 years between 1765 and 1778 Mrs. Wedgwood bore her husband eight children, four sons and four daughters. In addition, early in September, 1772, she suffered a serious miscarriage, which no doubt was not unrelated to her debilitated state of health arising from an attack of acute rheumatic fever six months previously. As a result she nearly died and her recovery was slow and fraught with much anxiety to her friends and physician.

Wedgwood's letters to Bentley and to his brother John reveal the joyous anticipation of a happy event and later the pleasures of the table and the merrymaking which marked the christening parties. To the woman 'in the straw' there are many remarkably illuminating allusions.

During the carrying period the expectant mother dared not venture far from home even in a chaise as the roads were very bad and the carriages poorly sprung. Besides there was always the risk of attacks by 'gentry' (highwaymen). So we learn:

'Mrs. Willet is too forward in the world to venture upon such a journey (Newcastle-under-Lyme to Manchester) for fear of consequences.'

As the time of confinement approached the husband had to remain at home, and on more than one occasion Wedgwood had to postpone visits to London. The nervous excitement and sense of dependence of the young wife is here revealed:

'I would not say anything to you about Mr. Swifts return before he is well got to Town, but

may just hint that he left poor Mrs. Swift in tears, she was very loth to part with him at this time having only a few weeks to count, she therefore hopes that *whatever he has to do he will do it with all his might*, that he may return in time for the merry meal, and to nurse and comfort the poor Woman in the straw. I hope he had a safe journey to Town, Minshall and Holland were thrown off the Coach, and were very near breaking both their necks, they both pitched upon their heads and were some time before they recover'd the stunn it gave them.'

In the course of pregnancy slight upsets were liable to occur. On one occasion Mrs. Wedgwood became temporarily unwell and her husband slyly comments to his friend:

'Mrs. Wedgwood is sick, but I hope not *unto Death but unto Life*.'

The hope was fulfilled for Sarah was born three weeks later. Mrs. Wedgwood's confinements were easy and required only the attendance of a midwife, not a 'man-midwife' as surgeons were then described. Labour was usually short and, indeed, in later pregnancies delivery was precipitate. On April 17, 1771, Wedgwood writes:

'Yes, I will come to your assistance as soon as I can, but that time must depend on an event which we cannot command, it may be a week, or it may be three or four weeks, for I do not hear of any symptoms denoting the time to be immediately at hand, but I hope you will not want me much before I shall be ready to attend you.'

The sequel appears on May 15:

'This is chiefly to tell stories of my Wife—wod you think, my dear friend, she could have serv'd me so slippery a trick, after my waiting here so long to recieve a certain present, that she should bring it forth in my absence when I had only turn'd my back of home for a few mom^{ts} without thinking anything of the matter. I left her at near 8 last night, to go for an hour to our Club, quite well as usual, came home before ten, and just as I came into the house, little Tom (for

so they call him) came into the world, and a very fine lad they tell me he is, a month old at least and all are *well as can be expected*.'

Catherine, the sixth child, was born on November 30, 1774, and the story of her birth is of great interest in reference to the customs of the lying-in period.

'My dear Girl gave me, as usual, a very short notice of the approaching critical moment. At (half) past four this morning she gave me a gentle notice to quit her Bed, and call the Midwife; and a quarter before five news was brought to me that I had another Daughter, and all was well. Mrs. W. continues in a good way, and I hope to see her below again in a few days; for it is becoming fashionable here for the Ladies in the straw to become well, and leave it as soon as they are able; and even a Lady of Fashion may be seen in her Carriage again, without shame, in ten days, or a fortnight after delivery.'

Apparently he felt justified in a little prolonged celebration for he adds in a postscript:

"Will you be so good to desire Mr. Jennings to send me two Barrels of Good Porter, and a Barrel of Oysters, of the smallish blue kind, every other week.'

'There is an exquisite delicacy of expression in a note 12 days later:

'Mrs. W. and her little Lass are purely.'

The word purely is significant rather than a happy choice for at the end of the lying-in period it was the custom for the mother to attend church for purification, and if for any reason this was not possible then she was privately 'churched' in her own home. This was the case with Mrs. Wedgwood after the birth of Susannah, her first child.

The coming of their next child was equally expeditious:

'When I was going to bed, a little before 12 she talked of some pains which I thought it wo^d

not be in my power to remove, so I immediately sent for better assistance, and amongst them they presented me with a fine Girl in her Cap etc. before two. Mrs. W. is as well as she can fashion to own herself to be, and I expect to have a Pool at Quadrille with her to-morrow.'

Five days later in a postscript we learn:

"All goes well with the good Woman in the straw.'

Perhaps the most exciting observation of all attaches to the birth of their last child, Mary Ann, on August 18, 1778. The letter is dated the day following the happy event.

'I now have the pleasure to acquaint you that Mrs. Wedgwood yesterday morning presented me with another fine girl and with as little trouble to herself and family as could be expected. She sent for the midwife whilst we were bowling (after making tea for us as usual in the afternoon) without so much as acquainting me with the matter, slept upstairs just before supper, and we had not risen from table before the joyfull tidings of a *safe delivery*, and *all well* was brought to us and as soon as the young visitor was dress'd she join'd the company in the dining room. The mother eat her supper, went to sleep, and all are in a very fine way this morning but from a sort of decorum establish'd amongst the sex, originally intended, no doubt, to improve upon us poor men, and make us believe what sufferings they underwent for us and our bantlings, I believe she does not come down to dinner to-day, but I shall endeavor to persuade her that the farce will no longer pass upon us in this enlighten'd age, and as for mere etiquette it is not worth preserving. Mrs. Bent, our first surgeon, and man-midwife's wife has made some bold strokes at the silly custom, and Mrs. W. follows her up pretty closely, but these innovations do not pass without much whispering and shaking the head amongst the good gossips of the country.'

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