

William Buchan and Domestic Medicine; or The Family Physician

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Abstract: The present research paper provides an overview of the main causes of children's diseases discussed by one of the most representative medical texts of the eighteenth century, *Domestic Medicine; or The Family Physician* (1769), that was written by the reputed physician, Dr William Buchan. The late-eighteenth century is often considered a watershed period in the history of medicine. This article intends to familiarize its readers with some of the key popular ideas regarding child health in the medical writing of the period.

Keywords: Eighteenth Century, Literature and Medicine, William Buchan

In this paper, I will provide an overview of the main causes of children's diseases discussed by one of the most representative medical texts of the eighteenth century, *Domestic Medicine; or The Family Physician* (1769), that was written by the reputed physician, Dr William Buchan.¹ Sharon Ruston has previously noted that medical writing in the Romantic era was a product of its historical moment and was employed knowingly for political purposes.² A close reading of Buchan's text reveals some of the political ideas of the contemporary medical writing. Buchan concerned himself with similar debates on childhood that were taken up by contemporary politics, religion, philosophy, pedagogy and literature. All of them debated on how to guarantee the 'proper' development of children. While emphasizing the great concern for protecting children from sickness, texts like *Domestic Medicine* also popularised the idea that children required a greater degree of attention and scrutiny for their own health and benefit. Buchan's

¹William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine Or, a Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Disease by Regimen and Simple Medicines*, 2nd edn (London: T. Cadell, 1772).(Hereafter *DM*, further references from this text will be made parenthetically in the chapter.)

²Sharon Ruston, *Creating Romanticism: Case Studies in the Literature, Science and Medicine of the 1790s* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.

position was different from several philosophers in the sense that he proposed children's physical bodies – not their minds – to be different from adults.

William Buchan can be seen as the most popular representative of the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century medical knowledge about child health. His book, *Domestic Medicine*, enjoyed enormous reputation among the public making him a household name for nearly sixty years in Britain.³ Janis McLarrenCaldwell agrees that the medical profession began 'seriously' to address child-rearing in the late eighteenth century with the publication of Buchan's *Domestic Medicine*.⁴ Another critic, Neil Vickers, agrees that *Domestic Medicine* was not only an 'immensely popular' book, but its position in households was parallel to the Bible.⁵ Similarly, Christopher Lawrence notes that 'before the twentieth century, no single health guide enjoyed as much popularity as *Domestic Medicine*.'⁶ Between the first edition in 1769 and the final edition, published in Philadelphia in 1871, *Domestic Medicine* was printed in 142 English language editions and translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Russian and Swedish.⁷ The book initiated the trend of health advice manuals in Britain where physicians simplified medical knowledge to be consumed by the common public rather than subject experts. Selling for as little as '6 shillings', the book sold 'more than 80,000 copies' and received wide appreciation for its comprehensiveness, simple explanations of a technical field of knowledge and its lucid language.⁸

Domestic Medicine combined prevention and cure. The text guided people on how to preserve their health; it trained them to identify diseases by their symptoms and prescribed different cures. The foundational belief that ran through the entire book was that people's health was very much in their own hands. Though the book focused on diseases of all age groups, it had a long first chapter devoted solely to the causes of children's diseases and later in the book, a further chapter covering their prevention and cure, thus acknowledging the greater importance attached in the period to children's health. Moreover, the other chapters discussed how each disease affected children and adults differently and how their symptoms, as well as their treatments, varied. This discussion of children's health was the outcome of, as the historian of medicine, George Frederic Still, states, Buchan's access to 'large opportunities of observing

³ Christopher Lawrence, 'William Buchan, Physician and Author', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Published on 23rd September 2004).

⁴ Janis McLarrenCaldwell, *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain: From Mary Shelley to George Eliot* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 69.

⁵ Neil Vickers, *Coleridge and the Doctors, 1795-1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 13.

⁶ Lawrence, 'William Buchan'.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

children and their management' at the Foundling Hospital at Ackworth.⁹ It was proposed that attention to a proper regimen of managing children was of much more value than resorting to medicine. Asking people to trust their own endeavours, Buchan laid stress on the need for families to equip themselves with professional medical knowledge about children's sickness. His text demystified the technicalities of the subject and presented it in a lucid language making it easily accessible for laymen. Buchan's text was radical in the sense that it attempted to break, in Paul Starr's terms, 'the conception of medicine as a high mystery.'¹⁰ Buchan wrote in a familiar tone, using the personal pronoun 'we', to narrow the distance between the general public and the professional practitioners who held medical knowledge about childhood in their hands.

Although motivated by a genuine concern for the well-being of children, Buchan's text was quite political in nature, as Andrew O'Malley suggests.¹¹ While studying the medical management of children in late eighteenth-century Britain, O'Malley describes how Buchan and other advice manual writers configured themselves as the possessors of the specialized knowledge. The patient was interpellated by these texts as the subject under the authority of the medical expert.¹² In light of O'Malley's suggestion, *Domestic Medicine's* interpellation of the child patient as an ignorant subject lacking authority over her health cannot be ignored. On the one hand, parents were interpellated as laymen in need of medical guidance. On the other hand, children got doubly interpellated both as one in need of expert advice as well as subjects needing parental assistance to understand this advice. They were put under the constant surveillance of not one or two but, in Buchan's terms, 'every attentive observer' (*DM*, 669). While claiming to disseminate scientific knowledge among the general public, Buchan adhered to his belief in the superiority of modern medical experts over lay readers and popular practitioners. Since 'observation, keen attention and the meticulous recording of data were proposed at the root of the empirical methodologies upon which the rationalized sciences were predicated', the implied absence of these qualities among traditional medical practitioners, nurses and old women confirmed them as unfit practitioners.¹³ *Domestic Medicine* represented an orthodox effort to displace traditional methods of treatment and healing.

Buchan emphasized the need for a text like his by underscoring the current number of children's deaths in Britain. Attempting to bring to his readers' notice children's utility as public goods, he outlined how the country was losing a valuable resource. Underlining the importance

⁹George Frederic Still, *The History of Paediatrics: The Progress of the Study of Diseases of Children Up to The End of the XVIIIth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 410.

¹⁰Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 32.

¹¹ Andrew O'Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 67-86.

¹² Ibid., p. 73.

¹³ Ibid., p. 70.

of childhood health under a claim regarding their future uses, Buchan linked children's fitness to national prosperity and saw the heavy child mortality rates of late-eighteenth-century Britain as a dire warning that needed people's careful consideration. Shifting from the idea of original sin, Buchan laid stress on the problems of 'our own creating' (*DM*, 1). In his chapter, Buchan noted that 'nature' had been blamed for the inherent weakness of children, and he attempted to debunk this notion (*DM*, 13). According to him, babies of 'savage nations' and animals had all the necessary vigour and strength (*DM*, 13). The weakness of British babies was the result of a fashionable rearing (*DM*, 13). Comparing Britain's gross error in this matter with the error-free behaviour of the 'savage' nations, he apparently attempted to bring a sense of humiliation home to his non-native readers (*DM*, 13). The solution he offered was to learn from 'brutes' who were 'guided by instinct' and 'never err[ed]' in the matter of children's health (*DM*, 2). Buchan's desire for children to be as natural as animals, on the one hand, privileged their 'original' animality and animal-like behaviour. On the other hand, it was a call for discarding every fashionable dictate and cultivate close proximity to nature and the natural. *Domestic Medicine* was another form of political writing which criticized the upper-class values and circulated the middle-class ideal by medicalizing the extravagance of upper classes and linking it with children's ill-health.

Buchan's text imagined children to be tender-bodied, soft, supple, and delicate. According to him, nature had given children a flexible body to make way for their growth. But this was the external view of children's bodies. Internally, they were described as *simple bodied* by which Buchan referred to the uncomplicated nature of their organs. Citing the example of the internal atmosphere of a mother's womb, Buchan explained how nature had 'surrounded the fastusevery where with fluids' so that they would not 'receive any injury from pressure' of any kind (*DM*, 14). Management of children outside the womb had to approximate this 'great care' of nature (*DM*, 14). Buchan's idea of pressure included any physical pressure that disturbed the internal environment of children's bodies as well as affected them externally. For example, he said, tight clothing could wound a child's 'tender frame' and 'obstruct the motion of the heart, lungs, and other organs necessary for life' (*DM*, 12). The body of a child was 'a bundle of soft pipes', and the bones were 'soft and cartilaginous' (*DM*, 14). To summarize, Buchan believed that children were tender and simple in physical terms and should be protected against the pressure of all kinds because it influenced their external bodies as well as internal organs and vital processes.

It should be noted here that by 'plain and simple', Buchan did not mean 'weak' (*DM*, 14). The view that children's bodies were inherently weak was present, among others, in the treatise written by the seventeenth-century philosopher and physician, John Locke, whose influence on

eighteenth-century paediatrics has been discussed by several scholars.¹⁴ Locke prescribed extreme measures to harden children's weak bodies and asked children to run barefoot and bareheaded on cold days in order to grow sturdier. Similarly, he suggested that children should 'wear shoes so thin that they might leak and let in cold water.'¹⁵ Buchan claimed to follow several of Locke's suggestion. For example, he echoed Locke in encouraging his readers to allow children 'the full use of every organ', to carry them abroad in the open air, and to wash their bodies daily in cold water (*DM*, 13). It was, Buchan suggested, by this method of management that 'children [of the Savage Nations] become so strong and hardy' (*DM*, 13). However, as was evident in their contradictory prescriptions regarding food, Buchan deviated from Locke in many instances. Whereas Locke suggested feeding children at irregular hours so that they did not 'grow peevish' by expecting food at 'fixed periods', Buchan vehemently criticized ill-feeding children with insufficient as well as low-quality food.¹⁶ While Locke's emphasis was on training children's weak stomach, Buchan's prescriptions were based on sympathy towards a tender child. Though *Domestic Medicine* criticized the upper-class fashionable habit of overprotecting childhood, Buchan was equally against Lockean extreme measures. 'Plain', 'simple' and 'weak' were distinguished from each other in *Domestic Medicine*: every child was plain and simple but only those were pre-disposed to ill-health and were weak whose parents were themselves unhealthy (*DM*, 14).

It is evident from the discussion so far that Buchan considered children's bodies to be susceptible to pressure. Therefore, he was against subjecting them to any kind of suddenness and abrupt changes. For example, an abrupt transition from 'hot weather to cold [caused] mortal cold' (*DM*, 17). Overall, he prescribed simplicity in every sphere – from children's clothes to food – in his text. He also believed that 'most of the diseases' among children proceeded from the 'heat of their humours' therefore everything of a cooling quality benefited them (*DM*, 20). Keeping the children physically active was equally important (*DM*, 27). Imagining children's bodies as composed 'of an infinite number of vessels which is full of fluids,' he graphically explained how muscle activity during exercise pushed the fluids forward inside the valves of these vessels (*DM*, 30). In the absence of exercise, fluids remain inactive, causing obstruction and spoiling humours, thus causing disease (*DM*, 30). His criticism of early schooling was based primarily on this absence of exercise at schools and the sedentary lifestyle of children at the institutions. At school, he noted: 'the poor child is fixed to a seat seven or eight hours a day, which time ought to be spent in exercise and diversions' (*DM*, 31-32). 'Sitting so long cannot,' he wrote, 'fail to produce the worst effects upon the body; nor is the mind less injured' (*DM*, 31).

¹⁴During 1683 and 1685, Locke wrote to Mr. Edward Clarke to guide him on child rearing. In 1692/3, he published these letters in the form of a treatise on managing children's health. Still, *The History of Paediatrics*, p. 318.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 319.

The long hours of confinement, as well as a large number of children in public schools, made these spaces unhealthy. Since the ideal that he was popularizing was based on nurturing the animal – by which he meant the physical – qualities of children, his anthem was that children’s ‘good constitution ought certainly to be our first object’ (*DM*, 31). The development of children’s mind and their early education – something other pedagogical Romantic-era writers concerned themselves greatly with – was secondary for him. In fact, children’s early schooling was a potential ground of their lifelong illness and unhappiness. Buchan outlined the importance of a small number of factors which could influence children’s health. The healthiness of parents and their due attention to their natural roles, adequate quantity as well as good quality of food, sufficient exercise, plenty of wholesome air and cold baths – these were the major factors. The overall thesis that emerged from *Domestic Medicine* was that children were more susceptible to diseases than adults because of their extremely simple and tender bodies and their bodies demanded constant supervision of the modern medical authority as well as parents.

The political nature of *Domestic Medicine* was visible when Buchan, in his capacity as the modern medical expert, constructed parents as ignorant subjects lacking specialized knowledge about the ‘proper’ way of managing their own children’s health. Even when the nurses were hired, he wrote, mothers should pay attention to the nursery because ‘a child, by being brought up under [his] mother’s eye, [would] not only secure her affection, but [might] reap all the advantages of a mother’s care’ (*DM*, 4). Similarly, he proposed that fathers had ‘an equal interest in [children’s] welfare, and ought to assist in *every thing* that [respected] either the improvement of the body or mind’ of children (emphasis mine) (*DM*, 5-6). The medical texts such as *Domestic Medicine* participated in the Enlightenment critique of the upper classes and were motivated by similar debates on childhood that were taken up by contemporary politics and pedagogy. For example, those mothers who ‘lived on tea and other slops’ produced children with a ‘feeble frame’ (*DM*, 8). Similarly, fathers who had ‘irregular lives’ equally damaged children’s health (*DM*, 9). While Buchan claimed to disseminate the previously ‘hidden’ medical knowledge with his lay readers and empower them, he still retained his authority as an expert. Nowhere in the text, he was downsizing the importance of the orthodox medical authority over children’s health. Indeed, he was critical of those families that did not seek contemporary modern medical advice and stated, ‘when a child [was] taken ill, some person of skill ought immediately to be consulted’ (*DM*, 7). He was clear that ‘old women’ were not ‘person[s] of skill’ because, according to him, families that consulted ‘old women’ played with their children’s lives (*DM*, 6-7). Historians of medicine such as Roy Porter have argued that in eighteenth-century England the establishment of a medical orthodoxy did not proceed without

resistance.¹⁷Traditional forms of medicine and the medical fringe remained resilient against the advance of Enlightenment medical theories and practices.¹⁸When Buchan criticised, traditional, alternate therapeutically practices, he was standing up to this medical fringe that Porter and others have talked about. Buchan's text engaged in the criticism of the popular practices and he took great efforts in underscoring how he and, more generally, the texts written by university-trained medical men were superior from what he believed were the outsiders.

Equally political a move was to call out physicians who were not 'sufficiently attentive to the management of children's health'(DM, 6-7). Buchan's rhetoric to invite physicians was, in fact, an alarm to take interest in a field that could escape the reach of the Enlightenment's medical revolution. It was driven by a desire to consolidate the province of the modern medical authority by incorporating the unregulated field of paediatrics. Criticizing the widely-held belief by physicians that children's diseases were 'hard to discover and difficult to cure', Buchan convinced them that the diseases of children were 'by no means so difficult to be understood as many imagine' (DM, 7). Though children '[could] not tell their complaints' correctly, their diseases were 'less complicated' and could be cured 'earlier' than those of adults whose minds and bodies were much developed in comparison (DM, 7). Like the claim about simpler minds of children, proposed by many contemporary philosophers, Buchan noted that children had simpler and tenderer bodies too compared to adults, thus finding new grounds for exercising authority over children. Such rhetoric exaggerated the simplicity of children's bodies that was much easier to examine even in an absence of communication.

Buchan's recommendations reflected an emerging concern in the modern medical discourse to carefully investigate children's physical health. While the opening chapter was completely devoted to the causes of children's sickness, their symptoms and treatment were discussed in the last part of the book. Major diseases were: small-pox, fevers, whooping-cough, itch, skin conditions, rickets and scurvy. The cures were more about changes in the regimen than medicine. The concept of children's psychology was not fully developed in this book. Even in the chapter on nervousness and melancholy in children, the causes were mostly physical: fatty diets, oily and hot foods, hot weather, too much reading and thinking, lacking exercise, among other factors. The treatments to cure nervous disorders were also mostly related to the body: cold baths, long journeys, gardening – remedies which could discard superfluous humours from children's bodies. Nightmares were produced, for instance, among other causes, from sleeping in a particular position and grief affected digestive organs.

¹⁷Roy Porter, *Health for Sale: Quackery in England 1660-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 43.

¹⁸Ibid.

Buchan's perspectives on children's bodies and their health demonstrated that the late-eighteenth-century medical writing laid enormous stress on prioritizing children's health. Children's bodies were said to be different from adults and parents were advised to treat and consider them differently, often using different regimen for care. These popular texts revised many ideas that were popular since the Enlightenment, circulated specifically by the writings of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Yet, these texts also subscribed to many similar ideas, especially when emphasizing the importance of prevention than cure among others.

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