

## Introduction

One of the most intriguing changes in the orientation of medicine this century has been the decline and fall of the spa and water cure in the English-speaking world.<sup>1</sup> It is a demise that has been dramatic: even as late as the turn of the present century, doctors, patients, and therapeutic systems alike were commonly ardent advocates of the healing powers of water—whether pumped, imbibed, bathed in, swum in, sat in, splashed through, or whatever. And the change has been hardly less comprehensive. Few regular physicians these days make much of hydrotherapies; water cures and hydros are equally conspicuous by their relative absence from the armoury of contemporary fringe medicine and alternative medical philosophies; and, not least, the culture of the spa-resort—so vital even in the gilded age of Edward VII—has fossilized into a facet of “heritage”. There are, of course, exceptions to this trend—one is discussed at length in David Cantor’s essay below, and another is touched upon by Audrey Heywood. But in general it seems as if today’s regular medicine and its devotees seek therapeutic agents and regimes more potent than water, and followers of the fringe look to more exotic or occult manifestations of the curative powers of Nature.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the eclipse of the spa and of its attendant hydrotherapeutics reveals itself in another way: the paucity of modern historical research into balneology in its widest sense, and upon the historical phenomena of the spa city, spa life, and the water-cure establishment. Once again, there are exceptions,<sup>3</sup> but in general the still-consulted histories of water-treatments and spa-centres date from some decades, even generations back—from the time when the “cures” themselves were still in full spate.<sup>4</sup> One has the suspicion that would-be historians fear that investigation of such

<sup>1</sup> These comments do not, of course, apply to many parts of Continental Europe, especially, perhaps, the East, where spa treatments continue to flourish, as readers of Milan Kundera’s novel *The farewell party* (transl. Peter Kussi, London, Penguin Books, 1974) will not need to be reminded.

<sup>2</sup> For the modern fringe see R. Coward, *The whole truth. The myth of alternative health*, London, Faber & Faber, 1989; B. Inglis, *Fringe medicine*, London, Faber & Faber, 1964; *idem*, *Natural medicine*, London, Collins, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, V. Waite, *The Bristol Hotwell*, Bristol, Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, 1960; Robin Price, ‘Hydrophathy in England 1840–70’, *Med. Hist.*, 1981, 25: 269–80; Kelvin Rees, ‘Hydrophathy in Matlock’, in R. Cooter (ed.), *Studies in the history of alternative medicine*, London, Macmillan, 1988, pp. 27–44; M. Neve, ‘Natural philosophy, medicine and the culture of science in provincial England: the cases of Bristol, 1796–1850 and Bath, 1750–1820’, University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1984; Roger Rolls, *The Hospital of the Nation: the story of spa medicine and the mineral water hospital at Bath*, Bath, Bird Publications, 1988; and on spa cities, R. S. Neale, *Bath 1680–1850. A social history*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. Fundamentally valuable as a research tool remains C. Mullett, ‘Public baths and health in England, 16th–18th century’, *Supplement to Bull. Hist. Med.*, vol. 5, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Thomas Linn, *The health resorts of Europe, a medical guide to the mineral springs, climatic, mountain, and seaside health resorts, milk, whey, grape, earth, mud, sand and air cures of Europe*, New York, D. Appleton, 1893; S. Sunderland, *Old London’s spas, baths, and wells*, London, J. Bale, Sons & Danielsson, 1915; W. W. Addison, *English spas*, London, B. T. Batsford, 1951. The fullest history of Bath life is still A. Barbeau, *Life and letters at Bath in the XVIII century*, ed. A. Dobson, London, Heinemann, 1904. There is also a more lightweight modern historiography. See e.g., K. Denbigh, *A hundred British spas: a pictorial history*, London, Spa Publications, 1981; J. Wechsberg, *The lost world of the great spas*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979; T. Hinde, *Tales from the Pump Room: nine hundred years of Bath: the place, the people and its gossip*, London, Gollancz, 1987.

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subjects would be discounted as somewhat frivolous, no better, perhaps, than investing vast effort upon the history of such quaint complaints as gout—another, and not unconnected, lacuna in the scholarship.

This volume of essays, based (with the exception of those by Christopher Hamlin and Ralph Johnson) on papers delivered at a one-day conference held at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 22 April 1988, has emerged out of a perception of the existence of this gap in inquiry, and a desire to re-establish spas on the research agenda. After all, one of the deepest and most enduring preoccupations, both of the sick and of the medical profession, from the baths of antiquity through to the Victorian deluge of “hydros”, has been water. This concern has taken a multitude of forms. Physiological interest traditionally centred upon water as an “element”, macrocosmic and microcosmic, constitutive of the balance of fluids in the economy of nature and the human body alike, and drawing upon the religious and mystical properties of the cleansing “waters of baptism” and, perhaps, the unconscious associations of amniotic fluids.<sup>5</sup> Within the Hippocratic tradition of “Airs, Waters, and Places”, the diagnostic imagination long pondered the pernicious potential of standing waters, humid vapours, excessive rainfall, pestilential miasmatic fogs, and subterranean aqueous abysses.<sup>6</sup> Clinical and pathological inquiries have investigated the economy of body fluids, notably exploring the efficacy of water treatments for such disorders as dropsy. Regimes for health have advocated the drinking of water (sometimes to the exclusion of other beverages), and urged exercise through immersion in it—for some, everyday fresh water was sufficient, while others have touted the particular virtues of sea water or mineral waters.<sup>7</sup> From the eighteenth century, the discipline of hygiene increasingly saw copious supplies of water as essential to effecting that cleanliness which was next to godliness.<sup>8</sup> And, above all, the curative powers of water have been widely celebrated, often engendering ferocious local disputes as to the desirable mineral constituents of particular healing springs, wells, streams, and spas, and the precise technologies of expert treatment appropriate for diverse diseases and particular cases.<sup>9</sup>

The following essays, taken together, explore themes such as these over the span of two thousand years, from the ancient Mediterranean to twentieth-century New Zealand. Ralph Jackson demonstrates that antiquity possessed no mere blanket, unthinking faith in the wholesome and health-giving powers of water, but

<sup>5</sup> For meanings of water see I. Illich, *H<sub>2</sub>O and the waters of forgetfulness: reflections on the historicity of 'stuff'*, Dallas, Texas, 1985. See also D. Hartley, *Water in England*, London, Macdonald & Jane's, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> J. Riley, *The eighteenth century campaign to avoid disease*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987. See also G. Miller, 'Airs, waters and places in history', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1962, 17: 129–38.

<sup>7</sup> On temperance see B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: the temperance question in England, 1815–1872*, London, Faber & Faber, 1971; for water as the best drink, G. Cheyne, *An essay on health and long life*, 8th ed., London, Strahan and Leake, 1734, 1st ed. 1724; for uptake of the virtues of sea-water see C. Marsden, *The English at the seaside*, London, Collins, 1947; J. A. R. Pimlott, *The Englishman's holiday: a social history*, Hassocks, Harvester Press, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> V. Smith, 'Cleanliness: the development of an idea and practice in Britain 1770–1850', University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1985; *idem*, 'Physical puritanism and sanitary science: material and immaterial beliefs in popular physiology 1650–1840', in W. F. Bynum and R. Porter (eds), *Medical fringe and medical orthodoxy*, London, Croom Helm, 1986, 174–97.

<sup>9</sup> G. S. Rousseau, 'Matt Bramble and the Sulphur Controversy', in *Tobias Smollett. Essays of two decades*, Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1982.

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adumbrated a subtle and well-differentiated philosophy, which was translated into those extraordinary technological achievements of the Roman (aqueducts, baths, “saunas”) whose remains, if increasingly ruinous, served to keep the water-cure idea visible before the eyes of the medieval imagination. As the papers by Richard Palmer and Lawrence Brockliss, focusing upon Italy and France, respectively, demonstrate, “taking the waters” was an activity with deep therapeutic rationales and multi-faceted social ramifications through the Middle Ages and the early modern period within the former Roman imperial domains.<sup>10</sup> But attitudes towards waters differed from nation to nation, and also mutated over time.

Culturally and regionally, the fortunes of water-cures depended heavily upon complex configurations of values, the laws of land-ownership, and the curves of economic development—to say nothing of the mere accidents of topography and geology.<sup>11</sup> In medieval and Renaissance Italy, taking the waters was associated with gentlemanly ideals of rustic retreat, expressed within a pastoral mythology of leisure and pleasure. In France and Germany, people seem to have resorted to waters for more directly therapeutic purposes. The French spa remained rather sober and austere, not least because of the perduringly religious belief framework within which water cures were undertaken in Catholic Christendom.<sup>12</sup> The reasons for French backwardness were also partly economic and legal. The system whereby land rights resided ultimately with the king or feudal nobility, and royal licences were issued to franchise-holders via the dictates of Colbertian mercantilism, inhibited rampant commercial exploitation.

Precisely the opposite applied in Britain, where city fathers and individual estate-developers were quick to capitalize upon the opportunities for the creation of a speculative hedonic culture surrounding the spa.<sup>13</sup> Eighteenth-century France could boast no Bath, though, of course, the German and Belgian spa-resorts developed along Bathonian lines in the nineteenth century, not least in their emphasis upon the

<sup>10</sup> For Italy, see also L. Costa, *De aquis Rioli. Cenni storici sulle terme di Riolo*, Faenza, Lega, 1967; and B. Agrimi, *I colli e le terme: nuova guida euganea*, Montegrotto Terme, Turlon, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> For the survival of differential national and regional faith in spa treatments see Lynn Payer, *Medicine and culture: notions of health and sickness in Britain, the U.S., France and West Germany*, London, Gollancz, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> For the religious dimension see J. Devlin, *The superstitious mind. French peasants and the supernatural in the nineteenth century*, London, Oxford University Press, 1987; M. Ramsey, *Professional and popular medicine in France, 1770–1830*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988. For France see Michel Jaltel, *La santé par les eaux: 2000 ans de thermalisme*, Clermont-Ferrand, L’Instant durable, 1983; *Villes d’eaux en France*, ouvrage réalisé par l’Institut français d’architecture sous la direction de Lise Grenier, Paris, F. Hazan, 1985; L. Moret, *Les sources thermominérales; hydrogéologie-géochimie-biologie*, Paris, Masson, 1946; B. Desgranges, *Histoire des thermes de Luxeuil*, Luxeuil-les-Bains, B. Desgranges, 1981. Compare, for the Pyrenees, R. Olacchia, *Viajeros españoles del XVIII en los balnearios del Alto Pirineo francés*, La Rioja, Colegio Universitario de La Rioja, 1985. For German spas see Reinhold P. Kuhnert, *Urbanität auf dem Lande: Baderreisen nach Pymont im 18. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984. For the religious dimension in Protestant literature see D. Harley, ‘Religion and professional interests in Northern spa literature, 1625–1775’, *Bull. Soc. soc. Hist. Med.*, 1984, 35: 14–16.

<sup>13</sup> R. S. Neale, *Bath 1680–1850. A social history*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981; Gwen Hart, *A history of Cheltenham*, 2nd ed., Gloucester, A. Sutton, 1981. For Cheltenham see also W. Butler, *The Cheltenham guide, or useful companion, in journey of health and pleasure*, London, J. Ridley, 1781. For metropolitan waters, see, for instance, George William Potter, *Hampstead Wells: a short history of their rise and decline*, London, G. Bell, 1907.

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casino, originally pioneered by Beau Nash.<sup>14</sup> Critics of Bath, Buxton, and Harrogate, of Brighton and Scarborough, naturally thundered that the therapeutic imperative was being countermanded by the pleasure principle.<sup>15</sup> But the proof of the pudding lay in the propensity of the English, as Horace Walpole put it, to continue to waddle to the waters. By 1800 Bath had grown to become, astonishingly, the seventh largest city in the kingdom. In more recent times, support for spas could be represented as aiding the tourist industry, as Ralph Johnson's discussion of New Zealand indicates.

Thus, with the medicine of the waters, it was *cuius regio, eius aqua*: each nation of Europe, and North America too, got the spas and baths it deserved, hot and cold, strict or luxurious.<sup>16</sup> The essays printed here furthermore bring out a transformation over time in the nature of medicinal attitudes towards waters. Chronologically, the sixteenth century seems to have constituted a watershed. The rather casual medieval indulgence in unisex water-bathing for pleasure increasingly came under fire from religious and moral authorities: communal bathing was now represented not as cleansing but as *dirty*. Fears of syphilis were in part to blame, but the broader moral rigorism of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation played its part.<sup>17</sup> One consequence was that bathing ceased to be a relatively spontaneous activity: instead it was increasingly prescribed under meticulous and "expert" medical direction. As Noel Coley and Christopher Hamlin argue below, the new chemistry of the scientific revolution offered fruitful stimulus to the chemical analysis of the mineral content of different waters.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A. Wallon, *La vie quotidienne dans les villes d'eaux: 1850–1914*, Paris, Hachette, 1981; K. Jörger, *Sagen der Trinkhalle Baden-Baden*, Baden-Baden, F. W. Wesel, 1965.

<sup>15</sup> For this criticism humorously expressed see C. Anstey, *The new Bath guide*, Bath, 1766; P. Thicknesse, *Valetudinarian's Bath guide*, London, Dodsley, 1780; B. Mitchell and H. Penrose (eds), *Letters from Bath 1766–1767 by the Rev. John Penrose*, London, Alan Sutton, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> The absence of any essays in this collection upon North American water cures is regretted. For an excellent recent analysis, see Susan Cayliff, *Wash and be healed: the water-cure movement and women's health*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1987; and also H. B. Weiss and H. R. Kemble, *The great American water-cure craze: a history of hydropathy in the United States*, Trenton, Past Times Press, 1967; Jane B. Donegan, "Hydropathic highway to health": *women and water-cure in antebellum America*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Vigarello, *Le propre et le sale: l'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen Age*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1985; translated as *Concepts of cleanliness. Changing attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> For instances of this genre see Edward Jorden, *A discourse of naturall bathes and minerall waters*, (London, 1631), Amsterdam, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, New York, Da Capo Press, 1971. Robert Wittie, *Scarborough-spaw: or a description of the nature and vertues of the spaw at Scarborough Yorkshire. Also a treatise of the nature and use of sea, rain, dew, snow, hail, pond, lake, spring, and river-waters, where more largely the controversie among learned writers, about the original of springs is discussed. To which is added a short discourse concerning mineral waters. Corrected and augmented throughout the whole, together with an historical relation of cures done by the waters*, York, Printed by A. Broad for Tho. Passenger . . . and are to be sold by Richard Lambert . . . 1667; W. Simpson, *Hydrologia chymica, or, the chymical anatomy of the Scarborough, and other spaws in York-Shire; wherein are interspersed some animadversions upon Dr. Wittie's lately published treatise of the Scarborough-spaw: also a short description of the spaws at Malton and Knarsbrough: and a discourse concerning the original of hot springs and other fountains: with the causes and cures of most of the stubbornest diseases . . . also a vindication of chymical physick . . . lastly is subjoyned an appendix of the original of springs*, London, Printed by W.G. for Richard Chiswel, 1669; N. Grew, *A treatise of the nature and use of the bitter purging salt contain'd in Epsom and such other waters*, London, 1697; *A journey from London to Scarborough, in several letters from a gentleman there, to his friend in London . . . With a list of the nobility, quality, and gentry at Scarborough, during the spaw season, in the year 1733. Taken from the subscription-books . . . To which is annex'd an account of the nature and use of the*

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Such investigations, as Audrey Heywood shows, became enwrapped in characteristic collective institutional and therapeutic initiatives, such as the foundation of specialist hospital facilities deploying mineral waters to treat particular maladies such as lead poisoning or gout. But the individualistic, competitive nature of what Thomas Beddoes dubbed the “sick trade” meant that, as David Harley demonstrates, in Britain at least, rival claims over the efficacy of special waters, and rival techniques for utilizing them became the focus of disputes between doctors far more murky and sulphurous than the waters whose virtues they were touting.<sup>19</sup> In the eighteenth century, such balneological battles were rather nakedly self-serving. By the nineteenth, as Hamlin shows, they had assumed a higher veneer of principle, as hydropathy became a conspicuous symbol in the attempt of “alternative medicine” to create forms of physick visibly natural, pure, and unadulterated by the apothecary’s shop.<sup>20</sup> In her analysis of Charles Darwin’s moving attempt to find faith in hydropathy (when all his other faiths were melting away), Janet Browne charts the cultural journey from the image of the Georgian spa-town sink of pleasure to the bracing, uplifting, intensely earnest regime of the Victorian water establishment, and offers further insights into the hypochondriacal interplay between organic medicine and the half-acknowledged underground realm of the psychosomatic placebo cure.<sup>21</sup>

Collectively, these ten essays testify to the enduring vitality of water treatments and spa regimes over the course of two thousand years. They show the lasting faith of the sick in water as the avatar of purity, operating coterminously with the growing

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*Scarborough spaw-water*, London, Printed for Caesar Ward and Richard Chandler . . . and sold at their shop in Scarborough, 1734; M. Nessel, *A treatise concerning the medicinal spaw waters*, London, J. Downing, c. 1715; Robert Boyle, *Short memoirs for the natural experimental history of mineral waters. Addressed by way of letter to a friend*, London, Printed for S. Smith, 1684/5; Thomas Short, *The natural, experimental, and medicinal history of the mineral waters of Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, and Yorkshire, particularly those of Scarborough: Wherein, they are carefully examined and compared, their contents discovered and divided, their uses shewn and explained, and an account given of their discovery and alterations*, London, Printed for the author, 1734; T. Garnett, *A treatise, on the mineral waters of Harrogate, containing the history of these waters, their chemical analysis, medicinal properties, and plain directions for their use*, 3rd ed., with an appendix by John Jaques, Leeds, 1799; James Johnson, *Pilgrimages to the spas in pursuit of health and recreation; with an inquiry into the comparative merits of different mineral waters: the maladies to which they are applicable, and those in which they are injurious*, London, Highley, 1841. Specifically for Bath waters, see, for instance, W. Baylies, *Practical reflections on the uses and abuses of Bath Waters*, London, A. Millar, 1757; W. Falconer, *An essay on the Bath Waters*, London, G. G. J. & J. Robinson, 1770; W. Oliver, *A practical dissertation on Bath Waters*, London, A. Bell, 1707; J. Quinton, *A treatise of warm Bath Water*, London, n. p., 1733.

<sup>19</sup> See also B. B. Schnorrenberg, ‘Medical men of Bath’, *Stud. eighteenth cent. Culture*, 1984, 13: 189–203.

<sup>20</sup> For an earlier instance see John Hancocke, *Febrifugum magnum, or, common water: the best cure for fevers and probably the plague: with a discourse of curing the chin-cough by water*, London, Sold by J. Roberts . . ., 1726, and J. Smith, *The curiosities of common water: or, the advantages thereof in preventing and curing many distempers . . . to which are added some rules of preserving health by diet*, 3rd ed., London, J. Roberts, 1723. For a typical nineteenth-century version see John Harvey Kellogg, *The uses of water in health and disease: a practical treatise on the bath, its history and uses*, Battle Creek, Mich., The Office of the Health Reformer, 1876.

<sup>21</sup> For the intellectual context see Sebastian Kneipp, *My water-cure. Tested for more than 35 years and published for the cure of diseases and the preservation of health*, Kempton, Bavaria, J. Koesel, 1892; Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Confessions of a water patient: a letter to W. Harrison Ainsworth*, London, Colburn, 1845; James Manby Gully, *The water cure in chronic disease: an exposition of the causes, progress, and terminations of various chronic diseases of the digestive organs, lungs, nerves, limbs, and skin, and of their treatment by water and other hygienic means*, New York, John Wiley, 1850.

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capacity of the medical profession to commandeer the specific (reputed) powers of mineral-saturated fluids, taken internally and externally. They demonstrate the degree to which past cultures of health were complex performances—enterprises shared between the sick and the medical profession (itself intricately stratified); operating within a matrix of resources, institutions, amenities and physical buildings; and drawing upon elaborate rituals of regimen.<sup>22</sup> The bizarre aspects of such procedures did not escape the eye of the satirist or the unmasker of quackery; yet they lasted—at least until the era of modern scientific, professional medicine—because they satisfied a deep desire that the healing enterprise should proceed within frameworks essentially sociable in their nature, and suffused with symbolic cultural meanings. As such, the histories of the spa and of its surrounding balneological disciplines can serve as illuminating epitomes of medicine itself in the world we have lost.

<sup>22</sup> For these aspects see N. Jewson, 'Medical knowledge and the patronage system in eighteenth century England', *Sociology*, 1974, 8: 369–85; *idem*, 'The disappearance of the sick man from medical cosmology, 1770–1870', *ibid.*, 1976, 10: 225–44; Roy Porter and Dorothy Porter, *In sickness and in health*, London, Fourth Estate, 1988; Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, *Patient's progress*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989.