Sickroom Cookery and Disease

Lisa Haushofer

Lisa Haushofer is a Senior Research Associate at the Chair for History of Medicine at the University of Zurich. She holds a PhD in History of Science from Harvard University and an MD from the University of Witten-Herdecke, Germany. Her research examines the history of nutrition and therapeutics in modern biomedicine.


Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, 22.N.296

https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/contagion/catalog/36-990022082380203941

During the 19th century, most diseases were attended to in the home. The hospital had not yet assumed the central role it holds today in the treatment of the sick.[1] Nor was the demarcation between professional expertise and lay medical knowledge as clear cut as it is now. Domestic medicine therefore played an important role in the care of the sick.

Sickroom cookery constituted an important branch of domestic medicine and developed into an increasingly specialized subfield of invalid care during the course of the 19th century. It evolved alongside the professionalization of nursing, the establishment of hospital cookery, and the rise of home economics (the discipline of household management), and overlapped considerably with all three of those areas. At the same time, women had long been considered responsible for the medical care of their families and neighbors; male medical practitioners with formalized training were summoned only in severe cases of illness, and thus remained “in a functional sense always consultants.”[2] The majority of contagious and noncontagious diseases alike would be encountered, diagnosed, and treated by women in the home. As such, women were often the audience of the advice manuals or lectures by male physicians. When women took to authoring similar texts, they often included signs of deference to male medical authority. *The Invalid's Tea-Tray* (1885) contains a dedication to “the
family physician” and an excerpt of a poem by physician and polymath Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809 –1894) about a family physician's visit. These choices likely reflect the gendered reality of 19th-century medical care.

Sickroom cookery texts like *The Invalid's Tea-Tray* were important tools in women’s efforts to treat disease in the home. In the 19th century, the development of cheaper printing technology, advances in transportation, a rise in literacy, and an increasingly national market for books and other printed materials enabled a proliferation of scientific and medical texts aimed at a broad public.[3] These developments also allowed for an increasing specialization of distinct genres of medical advice literature, including sickroom cookery texts. In turn, the sickroom itself became a protagonist in Victorian literature, cementing the close relationship between print and pathology, between medicine and a growing lay readership.[4]

Of course, invalid cookery had existed long before 19th-century print culture turned it into a mass cultural phenomenon. Early modern recipe collections blended the culinary and the medicinal and often contained instructions for preparations intended for the sick.[5] Recipes were recorded and passed on through informal, oral, and handwritten channels as much as through formal expertise and print culture. Printed books of domestic medicine and household advice were among the prized possessions many European colonists carried with them when they first arrived in North America during the 17th and 18th centuries.[6] The genre of sickroom cookery was therefore marked by considerable continuity. As Juliana Adelman has suggested in her study of Irish sickroom cookery, the new invalid cookery of the 19th century “retained a substantial flavor of the old.”[7] This was especially true of American texts, which even in the 19th century contained British recipes, or were, in some cases, entire (or slightly altered) reprints of classic British domestic medicine manuals.

The *Invalid's Tea Tray* reflects these historical trends. With its beef teas, jellies, gruels, and porridges, it assembles a collection of recipes rooted in British sickroom cookery tradition, albeit printed in Boston.[8] Its emphasis on “absolute neatness”[9] recalls longstanding middle-class moral values but also the 19th-century hygiene movement, bolstered by the rise of bacteriology and public health. Like other sickroom cookery texts of the same period, it showcases a new kind of specialized female expertise grounded in modern science and technology, while at the same time drawing on longstanding practices and beliefs involving the sick body.

One central idea of the text, and of sickroom cookery more broadly during this period, was that invalids needed strength, but their digestive powers were reduced during a state of sickness. The empirical observation that sickness often brought loss of appetite was nothing new, but during the 19th century it was reinforced and
reinterpreted through new insights in digestive physiology and thermodynamics. There was only so much “energy” in a body during sickness, physics had shown, and this went almost entirely towards staving off the malady. Digestive physiology had revealed that digestive enzymes operated through finite energetic processes, and therefore ought not to be called upon to perform too much labor during sickness.[10] Whether a patient was incapacitated by a contagious illness or a noncontagious malady, the right diet would be a crucial means of restoring strength and health.

The goal of The Invalid's Tea Tray and other invalid cookery texts was therefore to help women everywhere to produce “nourishing” but “palatable” and “digestible” foods. What exactly was meant by palatable, digestible, and nourishing changed significantly over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and this change is visible in the text. Jellies, for instance, conformed to older beliefs about the nourishing character of gluey substances because they “stuck to the ribs,” but also to 18th-century notions of “gelatinous” matter, a term originally used in plant chemistry, as the nourishing essence of animal and vegetable matter.[11] Beef tea was an old remedy that relied on longstanding cultural associations of beef with strength, but also on the belief (both iatrochemical and Galenic) that liquid foods were more digestible than solid foods.[12] Essences and extracts of beef, by contrast, became increasingly popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.[13] They attest to the growing influence of chemistry and physics on the question of nourishment, but also to the rise of mobile food (for armies, voyages of exploration, and increasingly, imperial food supply chains) and its emphasis on light and compact forms of nourishment.[14] Like the illnesses they were meant to prevent or cure, the dishes in The Invalid's Tea Tray reflected changing beliefs about how food related to bodies, health, and disease.

Whereas many earlier popular domestic medicine texts had been written by men, the late 19th century saw a growing number of female authors of medical manuals and other domestic advice books. Particularly with the rise of home economics programs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the audience for such texts grew, and women increasingly mobilized their domestic expertise as authors. The Invalid's Tea Tray was no exception. Its author, Susan Anna Brown, wrote a number of books on household management, including on domestic thrift and cookery. She also wrote a number of children’s short stories. Sadly, not much else is known of Brown, except that she was born in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1850, and only lived until the age of 35, when she died suddenly of an illness while visiting friends.

Like the book’s author, its owner, too, was a woman. The name of Anna L. Moring (Anna Louisa Möring, 1833–1891) is inscribed on the book’s title page. Möring was the daughter of Charles (or Karl) Beck, a German-born classics and theology scholar who emigrated to the United States to escape political persecution in 1824. For 18 years, he
taught classics at Harvard University. According to his student (and later United States Senator) George Frisbie Hoar, Beck was a Free Soiler and an Abolitionist, as well as a liberal contributor to the United States Sanitary Commission, a philanthropic relief agency founded in 1861 to care for wounded and sick soldiers during the Civil War.[15] Aside from his interest in politics and medicine, he was also an ardent literary scholar and book collector. He amassed a considerable collection of mostly European and classical texts.

Anna Möring inherited her father’s book collection and continued to expand it, with a particular focus on foreign books. She shared her father’s interest in philanthropy and medicine, and, upon her death, left her considerable estate to a number of Boston libraries as well as the Boston Homeopathic Hospital and Society. She made a large bequest of 1182 volumes, as well as a number of artworks and sculptures, to Harvard University Library in 1890.[16] The copy currently held at the Countway Library may well have been part of this gift. However, a stamp on the copyright page also marks the book as a gift of the Cambridge Historical Society to Harvard College Library at an illegible date (likely in the 20th century). Whether the book found its way to Harvard directly from Anna Möring’s 1890 bequest, or via the Cambridge Historical Society, is unclear. There can be no doubt, however, that it constitutes a treasure in the current collection, and has much to teach us about the history of contagious and noncontagious disease alike.

**Notes**


