NOTES AND QUERIES

John Huxham's Medical Diary: 1728–1752

Dr. John Huxham was a Devonian who spent the whole of his professional life as a medical practitioner in Plymouth. He had been trained at Leyden, under Boerhaave, from whom he seems to have derived his conviction that the seasons and the weather were of the greatest importance “as an exciting and, yet more, as a modifying cause of disease.” He had been born at Totnes in 1692, and died at Plymouth, in August, 1768. He was a flamboyant personality, and might have seemed little more than a quack were it not for his considerable corpus of published works.

His medical reputation is based mainly on “An Essay on Fevers” (1755). This work went through several editions, and was translated, according to Munk, into most European languages. The writer has, however, found evidence of only Latin, French and Portuguese editions. From 1728 until some date in the 1750's Huxham kept a diary in which he recorded both the weather and the incidence and severity of disease as he experienced them in Plymouth. The first ten years, digested into monthly summaries, was published in Latin in 1739, and this was followed by a similar diary for the next ten years, which appeared in 1752. An unauthorised translation of the first was published in 1759, and his son, John Corham Huxham, translated and published the second volume in 1767.

Huxham continued his meteorological and medical observations at least until 1752. I have not been able to find a copy of the original edition of this last section of the diary, but the text is available, in Latin, in the two German editions of Huxham’s collected works and a summary of it appears (in English) in his treatise on diphtheria.

This note is concerned only with the medical sections of the diary. Huxham’s medical record is concise and in general states clearly the nature of the prevailing complaints and the degree to which they were fatal. Occasionally he uses expressions which are somewhat less than clinical, such as the “great Lowness of Spirits” which marked the beginning of 1728. The principle difficulty is the uncertainty regarding his medical terms. “Peripneumonies” is to be interpreted as bronchitis; angina, as quinsy; the ulcerous sore-throat, as diphtheria, and morbilli, as measles. Fevers of one kind or another were rarely absent, though it is not in every case easy to identify the names given them by Huxham. Cholera appeared not infrequently, and was generally associated by Huxham with the arrival in Plymouth of a ship from the tropics. But the commonest of the more serious complaints was unquestionably variola, or smallpox. A not infrequent complaint was the “Devonshire colic”. Huxham published a short treatise on the illness, which he linked with an overconsumption of cider. He failed, however, to discover its cause, which was lead-poisoning, brought about by fermenting cider in leaden vats.

Many of these diseases grew in virulence until they became epidemic, and then subsided. As a general rule, Huxham traces these movements with considerable care, so that one can trace their course. This is especially so with smallpox. It is, of course, difficult to translate his qualitative statements into comparative expressions of the severity of an epidemic. It is, however, evident that terms like “here and there” (passim) or “some”, as applied to the manifestation of a disease, implies a lesser degree of severity than “everywhere” and “severe”, and the latter terms probably indicate something a good deal short of “epidemic”.

It is tempting to compare Huxham’s record with the burial registers of the Plymouth
parishes. There were three: St. Andrews, Charles and Stoke Damerel, in the last of which the naval dockyard of Devonport was at this time being developed. The burial register of St. Andrews indicates “child” burials throughout the period under consideration; this is particularly important because Huxham refers more than once to the severity of measles and other illnesses amongst children.

The registers allow one to distinguish a series of mortality crises, of which the most severe occurred in 1729, 1734–5, 1739–41, 1746–7, 1749 and 1752. Those of 1729 and 1740 were, by and large, summer crises; the others occurred in winter and spring. The period of abnormally high mortality in 1729 (August–December) coincides precisely with that when smallpox “rages” or was “epidemic”. In 1734, mortality increased steadily during the autumn months. In September, Huxham noted that smallpox was “slight”, but in the following months it became “epidemic” and indeed remained so until March before it was downgraded to “pretty common”, and in late summer ceased to appear in the diary. Again, the rise and decline of the epidemic coincides exactly with the duration of the period of high mortality, though this latter must have owed something to fevers. Huxham wrote that “epidemic fever” had caused a heavy mortality in the summer of 1734, while a year later “many die of fever.”

The crises which lasted from the beginning of 1739 until the early months of 1741 was more complex. It began with epidemic measles, “fatal to many children.” The St. Andrews register shows a high child mortality for this period; 51 out of 84 burials in the first four months of the year were of “children.” Thereafter smallpox prevailed. By October, 1739, “the small-pox now reigned every-where.” Until 1742 there was not a month in which Huxham did not record smallpox more or less serious. The most severe mortality in the period studied was recorded in the spring and summer of 1740. That this was not entirely due to smallpox is clear from the diary. In March there was “a very terrible Asthma;” in April, “a most terrible kind of Pleurisy.” In July, “pestilential fever destroyed many,” and “the common Burials were increased to at least six Times.” but by September, fevers were “less violent”, and the most severe mortality crisis of the period covered by the diary was at last passing, though the following winter was marked by “terrible Asthma,” and the smallpox still lingered on. Indeed, Huxham wrote in May, 1741: “I scarce ever remember the Small-pox to have been every-where more rife.”

The mortality crisis of 1746–7 was less intense than that of 1739–41, but, like the latter, was marked throughout by epidemic smallpox. Measles were common, and pneumonia, pleurisy and bronchitis, acute. In July, 1746, Huxham wrote: “not only Small-pox, but almost every other Disorder, was now of a worse kind than during the Spring.” This situation continued until the summer of 1747, when mortality fell to a low level, and in July and August Huxham was able to record “very few disorders”.

Mortality was high in late 1749, bordering the crisis level, but the only other severe crisis during the period was in the last three months of 1752. Both these periods were marked by epidemic smallpox. Other illnesses do not seem to have been unduly serious, though chest complaints were common. In December, 1752, he wrote plures phthisici moriuntur. With this the portions of the diary now extant come to an end.

One dwells on the periods of crisis mortality. They were, however, interspersed with periods when serious illnesses were relatively few. 1731–3 was such a period. Huxham several times comments on the “exceeding healthy” conditions, with “very few diseases”. Much of 1737 and 1738 were “not unhealthy” or “far from sickly”, and the later 1740’s were relatively healthy, with “very few disorders.”
For a period of 25 years we thus have a record of what, in the opinion of a highly intelligent and perceptive practitioner, were the most important causes of illness and death. It does not allow us to say what fraction of all deaths was due to smallpox, pneumonia or measles; it does permit us to say what, in each of the mortality crises, was the predominant cause of death. Throughout the record this appears to have been smallpox, with measles an important cause of death amongst children.

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Notes


2. Observationes de Aere et Morbis epidemicis, ab anno 1728 ad finem anni 1737 Plymuthi factae. His accedit opusculum de Morbo colico Damnnoniensi, London, 1739.


5. See Edward E. Meeres, "Plymouth in the Eighteenth Century, from a Medical Point of View," The Western Antiquary, VI (1886–7), 89–92, who claims to have searched in vain for this volume. The British Museum does not have a copy.


3. The registers are held in the Plymouth Record Office, and the writer acknowledges the help of Mrs. B. Cluers, archivist of Plymouth, in making them available.
Burials in the three urban parishes of Plymouth and Devonport, 1728–41, with the incidence of major ailments. The year is shown as beginning in January.