MISCELLANY

THE NATIONAL HEALTH SOCIETY ALMANACK, 1883

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The 'Almanack' folded inside the back cover of this issue of LPS, which has been reproduced by kind permission of the British Library, is an example of a form of improving literature which became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were of course vast numbers of commercial almanacs but as the British Library collection indicates they were produced by organisations of all kinds. These included churches, temperance and missionary societies, the police (called the On and Off Almanac), the National Union of Elementary Teachers and, an almanac of special interest to LPS readers, The Registrar's Kalendar which was published by the General Register Office. A single issue of The Registrar's Kalendar for 1852 has survived in the British Library and this will be reproduced in LPS in the near future. The note which follows brings together such background information about the work of the National Health Society it has been possible to collect in a brief investigation.

The significance of the battle against disease and insanitary conditions which was fought and largely won during the last century has long been recognised by historians. It was the viability of city life that was at stake and the close study which contemporaries and historians have made of the major environmental improvements which followed the Victorian sanitation and public health legislation is no more than these important events deserved. However, while the impact of legislative change has been closely examined, much less attention has been directed towards other developments which contributed to the successful outcome of the struggle for a clean, congenial and relatively healthy urban life. In particular the role of education in teaching the urban poor, many of whom were new to city life, rudimentary lessons of hygiene and nutrition has been largely overlooked. One educational organisation which played a part in the struggle for urban health was the National Health Society. It was formed in London in May 1872 at a meeting held under the auspices of the Social Science Association. The Times report of the inauguration described the gathering as a 'conference of ladies who have formed a Women's Society' but two days later published a letter from Elizabeth Blackwell M.D. taking them to task for giving the impression that the Society in any way excluded men. It was, she claimed, for men and women and its members were bound together by the belief 'that sanitary legislation can only be completely successful when supported by the enlightened sentiment of the people'. The Society's aim was to unite and organise voluntary efforts for the collection and diffusion of well established sanitary knowledge 'which bears on the physical and moral welfare of all classes of society'. The Society's activities were strongest in London but they were not confined to the metropolis. According to the annual report of the Society published in February 1880 the lecture programme reached such places as Watford,
Orpington, Basingstoke and Egremont. Many of the Society's lectures were deliberately informal; at Hertingfordbury lectures were held during the summer 'on the lawn in front of the rectory'. In London the society organised programmes of lectures many of which attracted a detailed report in The Times and which were known as 'Mayfair' or 'drawing room' lectures. The society had, as The Times reported appreciatively, attracted to its inaugural meeting 'many of the most experienced sanitarians in the country' but the wealth and social connections of the participants were equally evident and many of the Society's activities bear the hallmark of the enthusiastic amateur rather than the dour professional. The eighth annual report describes the achievement of a 'lady member of the committee' who had devised 'an exceedingly elegant drawing room ventilator — on improved scientific principles, though perfectly simple, by means of a double casement.' One can also detect a thrill of excitement in the report of Mr. Teale's opening lecture in a new series of drawing-room lectures when he said 'very few houses are safe to live in.' On the other hand it is rather more difficult to judge the practical value of the invention in 1883 of the fever proof costume; this was exhibited at the Society's London office in Berners Street. The Times described it as 'a novel dress intended for the protection of sanitary visitors, nurses and persons who have to enter the rooms of persons suffering from infectious diseases'; it was made of glazed mackintosh and, with a hood to cover the head, enveloped the wearer entirely except for hands and face.

However not all the Society's work was directed at London's drawing-room circle. The lecture programme reached some very different audiences being held in workingmen's clubs or in coffee taverns such as the Hammersmith Coffee Palace or the Walmer Castle Coffee Tavern. It was here Miss Barnett delivered her lessons on artisan cookery which nonetheless were attended by some ladies of the committee as well as by other ladies anxious to test the simplest, cheapest and most nutritious dishes that could be prepared by careful and intelligent cookery. Miss Barnett also ran an afternoon course for ladies at Braintree and an evening course for artisan's wives and daughters particularly associated with the large crape factory there (presumably this was Samuel Courtauld's works). On occasions the society aimed to stretch further down the social scale and successfully attracted poor working women to its lectures. Generally however outside Mayfair the lectures were directed towards the artisan class and in one series for plumbers and artisans included demonstrations after which prizes were awarded to those who gave most evidence of profiting from the experience. Even school children were brought into range by prizes for elementary physiology and domestic economy awarded through the London School Board, swimming prizes through the London Schools Swimming Club and other school prizes for pupils at the North London Collegiate and Camden School for girls. Efforts were also made in certain parts of London to experiment in opening school playgrounds for general public use and the promotion of schemes for London children to enjoy holidays in the country and in 1883 the Society's open space committee detached itself from the National Health Society to merge with the new Metropolitan Public Garden and Playground Association founded by Lord Brabazon.
The Society's publications exhibited the same range of interests as the lectures including pamphlets aimed at an educated audience as well as tracts for the poor. In the first ten years of the Society's life the subjects handled included The Water Supply of London, Domestic Sanitary Works, Compulsory Vaccination, Healthy Habitations, Health in the House, Open Spaces, Wholesome Food, Physiology, A Penny Cookery book of Artisan's Cookery, Short Rules for disinfection, Sanitary Maxims and A Short leaflet on Dust (many other titles are included in the 1883 Almanac). Among those who wrote for the society were some notable figures of the day including Professor Huxley, Charles Kingsley and Edwin Chadwick.

The Almanacs were the most overtly popular of the society's publications. It is not clear how many were produced but the British Library collection contains sufficient examples for the period 1879-1899 to suggest that the Almanac was an annual publication during these years. The Almanac reproduced here is fairly typical of the series. Each consists of a large page illustrated by a line drawing and contains a calendar embellished with improving advice and daily maxims. A century later some of the advice strikes a discordant note; 'reject the skins of all fruit', 'keep baby's legs and arms covered', 'wear flannel next to the skin', 'take a cold bath every morning'. This is advice which would now be considered at best unfashionable, at worst wrong; but for the most part what was offered was socially prudent and medically sound and covered a wide range of topics. The Almanac for 1880 advised readers not to buy cheap scented soap but stick to yellow soap at not less than 4d per lb. The same year the services of the coffee houses and cocoa taverns were promoted with a price list of the cocoa, coffee, tea, beef, ham, cake, milk and soft drinks they offered. As can be seen from the examples which follow some of the longer sanitary maxims would have been better suited to a textbook on Sanitation than a penny Almanac but others were pithy and apt.

'Whenever gas from sewers, or the emanations from a leaking drain, a cesspool, or a fouled well make their way into a house, the inmates are in imminent danger of an outbreak of typhoid fever, diphtheria or other febrile ailments classed together under the term "zymotic", not to speak of minor illness and depressed vitality, the connection of which with sewer gas is now fully established. Sewer gas enters a house most rapidly at night, when outer doors and windows are shut, and is then perhaps most potent in contaminating the meat, the milk, and the drinking water, and in poisoning the inmates'.

'If a rat appears through the floor of your kitchen or cellar, and a strong current of air blows from the rat hole when chimneys are acting and the windows and doors of the house are shut, feel sure that something is wrong with a drain'.

'A house in which children and servants are often ailing with sore throats, headache or diarrhoea is probably wrong in its drainage'.

In time and certainly by the early years of this century the National Health Society came to specialise in courses of lectures training candidates
for the Sanitary inspectors' Examination Board certificate and for the Society's own diploma. Other courses trained 'teachers of the laws of health and sanitary subjects under county council schemes of technical education' and also factory and sanitary inspectors, health lecturers and hospital nurses. The Society also retained its interests in popular education and continued to offer speakers for mother's meetings, working men's clubs and similar organisations and continued to publish leaflets and small books. The Society's greatest success seems to have been in training women for the jobs which new developments in public health and medical services opened to them. These included offices such as lady sanitary inspector, health visitor, infant life protection inspector, lady almoner, and LCC lecturer on health.

The later years of the National Health Society and its final demise are obscure but from an appeal for financial assistance which appeared in The Times in May 1927 it is clear it was by then in serious financial difficulty brought about by the lack of students following new and more stringent regulations for the training of health visitors. By this time more than 700 women had been trained to become 'engaged in the crusade against disease and infant mortality and the promotion of health'.

It is of course impossible to quantify or assess accurately the impact of the National Health Society's work in training officials and voluntary workers or in educating the community at large in public health matters. For the moment it must be sufficient to draw attention to the Society's publications and programme of work as an illustration of one element in a familiar story which has not received the attention it deserves.

NOTES

Please note additional copies of the Almanac are available from LPS, Tawney House, Matlock price 75p including postage and packing.

I am indebted to the staff of the University of Nottingham Library for their help in locating references to the National Health Society and to the British Library photographic department for the excellent quality of the photograph of the National Health Society Almanac.

I would be grateful for any further information about the National Health Society and the work of similar voluntary organisations.

1. British Library 1882 d.3.
2. The Times, 13th May and 15th May, 1872.
6. The Times, 9th February, 1883.
7. J. B. Haldane, (Editor), The Social Worker's Guide. A handbook of information and counsel for all who are interested in public welfare, 1911.
8. The Times, 2nd May, 1927.

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