

# Part I

## Introduction

[H]ow much happiness is gained, and how much misery  
escaped by frequent and violent agitation of the body.  
Rambler 851

Mention Dr Johnson, as he is always known, and most people will see a stout elderly-looking man in a wig, enthroned in a tavern chair or peering short-sightedly at a thick book; an indoor man, surrounded by other indoor men; and they may catch the echo of a sonorous ‘Sir . . .’ heralding some quotable pronouncement. If this book manages to modify these images, it will have achieved one of its aims. It grew out of a list of games and sports, jotted down while I was combing his *Dictionary of the English language* for exotic animals.<sup>2</sup> Words like handydandy, hotcockles, hoodman’s blind, blowpoint, spanfarthing, scotch-hoppers, prisonbase kept catching my eye, and the idea of an annotated anthology of these entries began to form.

Johnson’s definitions of words relating to sports and games fall roughly into five categories. There are children’s games, many of which – for example, ‘PU’SHPIN. A child’s play, in which pins are pushed alternately’ – are lost for ever. Others, whose names remain familiar, are seldom played today. How often does one turn into a cul-de-sac and find the road surface chalked up for ‘scotch-hoppers’, or hear the metronomic chanting of girls turning a skipping rope? Accounts of these games are being stored in archives as they fade from collective memory. A similar fate has befallen most of Johnson’s rural sports and traditional games. Madrigal singers may have heard of ‘BA’RLEYBREAK. A kind of rural play’, but need to turn to *The Oxford English dictionary* to discover the rules. Then there is a small group of words to do with cruel sports, such as cock fighting, hare coursing and animal baiting, which are often thought of as peculiarly eighteenth-century activities, until every so often a story appears in the papers showing that they persist to this day. The *Dictionary* is rich in words relating to card-games, board-games and

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1 Tuesday, 8 January, 1751. All the quotations from this essay have been taken from the first collected edition of the *Rambler*, London, 1752. See p. xx for the full text.

2 *Samuel Johnson’s menagerie*, Erskine Press, 2002

gaming, some of which have disappeared, but many – for example, ‘CHESS. A nice abstruse game, in which two sets of men are moved in opposition to each other’ – have gained in popularity. Finally, there is a large heterogeneous group of what are now loosely termed competitive sports, some involving bodily exertion, some skills of coordination between hand and eye. Here Johnson can be uninformative or even dismissive, as in ‘BI’LLIARDS. A game at which a ball is forced against another on a table.’ Or ‘TE’NNIS’ – which would, of course, have been real tennis not lawn tennis – ‘A play at which a ball is driven with a racket’.<sup>3</sup> Taken as a whole, Johnson’s games and sports definitions are not of his best; nor do his illustrative quotations, which are nearly all literary, open up the subject. But, as the list grew, another solution began to suggest itself: that of starting with the man himself.

Samuel Johnson had a large athletic frame – Sir Joshua Reynolds described his limbs as being ‘uncommonly well formed, & in the most exact & true proportion’<sup>4</sup> – and he drew an admiring comment when he plunged naked into the sea at Brighton. The man who ‘talked for victory’ also kicked off his slippers and ran for victory; and ‘no praise ever went so close to his heart’ as that of a Mr Hamilton, who called out one day upon the Downs, ‘Why Johnson rides as well, for aught I see, as the most illiterate fellow in England’.<sup>5</sup> Physical fear was unknown to him, to the consternation of his more cautious friends; and through sporadic bursts of ‘violent agitation of the body’ he managed to gain some respite from an habitual debilitating melancholy, which at times threatened to tip over into madness. Johnson’s life (1709–1784) spans three quarters of the century which for many people he personifies, so he provides a convenient lens through which to look at some of the ways eighteenth-century men took exercise, how they viewed it, and the medical reasons for taking it, together with the place of sport and recreation in daily life.

But what of the other half of the population? For an eighteenth-century woman life offered fewer opportunities of every kind, since society still operated like an unruly playground in which the biggest and strongest held sway. If she wanted to enjoy sport, or benefit from the healing powers of strenuous exercise, she had to abide by the rules laid down by the bully boys; decorum dictated what she should wear and what it was seemly for her to do. Johnson himself could write that ‘Beauty and the power of pleasing’ are ‘the greatest external advantages that a woman can desire or possess’.<sup>6</sup> A woman also had to cope with menstruation before the invention of sanitary aids and, after marriage, a series of unplanned pregnancies and the perils of childbirth. Of those who did

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3 Quotations from Johnson’s *Dictionary* throughout this book are taken from the first edition, unless otherwise stated, and in some instances reproduce his stress marks, which are placed immediately after the accented syllable. Johnson’s Saxon characters have been silently replaced with their modern equivalents.

4 Boswell IV, p. 465

5 *Johnsonian miscellanies* I, p. 288, *Pioŕzi Anecdotes*

6 *Life of Swift*



**Fig. 1** Dr Johnson, generally seen as a stout elderly-looking man in a wig.

not die young, many were left exhausted, if not physically damaged.

One of the luckier ones was Johnson's close friend Hester Thrale (1741–1821). Though slight and small – just 4 ft 11 ins (1 m. 49 cms) – she was both mentally and physically tough.

I have the best Health in the World; no Indigestions, no Head Achs, no Vapours: no Change of Weather affects me, nor did even the Loss of my only Son lay stronger hold on my Heart than it was utterly impossible to avoid. My Mind is an active whirling Mind, which few Things can stop to disturb, & if disturbed, it soon recovers its Strength & its Activity.<sup>7</sup>

The phrase 'breeding again' crops up throughout her early correspondence and records, for she survived 13 pregnancies in 15 years; just four daughters outlived her.<sup>8</sup> She was an accomplished horsewoman and dancer, an enthusiastic and fearless swimmer, and she ran races with her children. In addition to managing

<sup>7</sup> *Thraliana* July to Aug. 1778 p. 339

<sup>8</sup> She also records miscarrying a daughter by her second husband in January, 1788.

her household, supervising her children's education, electioneering for her first husband, taking a hand in the running of his brewery and holding her own in conversation with men who had some of the finest minds in Europe, she was a prolific letter writer and journal keeper. On her second marriage in 1784 – a love match – she became Mrs Piozzi, and in 1786 published her *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. during the last twenty years of his life*.<sup>9</sup> It is as Mrs Thrale that she is associated with Johnson and this is how she will be identified throughout the present book, except when she is writing after her second marriage. This should not cause confusion; it would be both anachronistic and impertinent to call her simply Hester. Her eldest daughter, Hester Maria, also appears in these pages; she will be referred to as Queeney, the name Johnson gave her.

Anecdotally, Johnson has been associated with various sports and forms of physical exercise: swimming, riding, dancing, running, leaping, boxing, climbing, cricket and 'sliding on the ice'. Much of this information comes from Mrs Thrale, who herself has plenty to say on these matters. Two of these activities, cricket and boxing, acquired sets of rules in the eighteenth century, which began to turn them into the sports we know today. Others, for example, skating, swimming, riding, were practised according to the techniques of the time and have since evolved into high-performance acts, but are also enjoyed by those with no great proficiency.

Sports have not only evolved, but new ones have come into being, and notions connected with sport and exercise have changed – sometimes radically – since the days of Johnson and Mrs Thrale; and there are excellent histories of every sport and recreation that chronicle these changes. The present book does not seek to compete with these histories but, rather, to complement them. My debt to their authors is great, for they led me to many of the eighteenth-century source materials – newspaper articles, diaries, treatises, manuals and medical texts – from which, while keeping comment to the minimum, I have quoted at length, in the belief that allowing the eighteenth century its own voice was the way to give it immediacy.

Reading is a powerful experience, as none knew better than Johnson: 'He that peruses *Shakespeare*, looks round alarmed, and starts to find himself alone', he wrote in his 'Observations on Macbeth'; and, 'when he was about nine years old, having got the play of Hamlet in his hand, and reading it quietly in his father's kitchen, he kept on steadily enough, till coming to the Ghost scene, he suddenly hurried up stairs to the street door that he might see people about him'.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, after a morning researching the great frost of 1739–1740 in the columns of the *General Evening Post*, I emerged blinking from the dark hood of the microfilm reader amazed to be back in the twenty-first century.

For much of the time, while writing this book, I have followed Lytton Strachey's recommendation: attacking my subject in unexpected places; falling

<sup>9</sup> The version of this work quoted from in the present book is that in G B Hill's *Johnsonian miscellanies*.

<sup>10</sup> *JM*, I, p. 158, *Piozzi Anecdotes*



**Fig. 2** The forty-year-old Hester Thrale in mourning dress after the death of her first husband.

upon the flank, or the rear; shooting a sudden revealing search light into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. I have rowed out over the great ocean of material on Johnson and the eighteenth century, and lowered down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which has brought up to the light some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with careful curiosity.<sup>11</sup> Some of these specimens will, I hope, offer new and surprising insights into sport, exercise, or, perhaps more importantly, into the every-day realities of eighteenth-century life. In the past, that ‘foreign country’, they did things ‘differently’; and if this book conveys something of the ‘foreignness’ of the age in which Dr Johnson and Mrs Thrale lived, it will have achieved its second aim.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See *Eminent Victorians*, Preface

<sup>12</sup> In his 1765 Preface to his edition of the works of Shakespeare, Johnson described notes as ‘necessary evils’. Most of the footnotes in the present book simply give the sources of the quotations; but a small number – particularly the definitions from Johnson’s *Dictionary* – provide a commentary or gloss. Readers whose minds are ‘refrigerated by interruption’ have only to ignore them. All quotations preserve the original spelling – including inconsistencies – capitalisation, italicisation and punctuation, and the occasional ‘grocer’s apostrophe’.

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E'XERCISE. *n.s.* [*exercitium*, Latin.]

1. Labour of the body; labour considered as conducive to the cure or prevention of diseases.

Men ought to beware that they use not exercise and a spare diet both; but if much exercise, a plentiful diet; if sparing diet, little exercise. *Bacon's Natural History*, No. 298.

The wise for cure on *exercise* depend;

God never made his work for man to mend. *Dryden.*

He is exact in prescribing the *exercises* of his patients, ordering some of them to walk eighty stadia in a day, which is about nine English miles. *Arbutnot on Coins.*

The purest *exercise* of health,

The kind refresher of the Summer heats.

*Thomson's Summer.*

3. Habitual action by which the body is formed to gracefulness, air, and agility.

He was strong of body, and so much the stronger as he, by a well disciplined *exercise*, taught it both to do and to suffer.

*Sidney, b. ii.*

The French apply themselves more universally to their *exercises* than any nation: one seldom sees a young gentleman that does not fence, dance, and ride. *Addison.*

To E'XERCISE. *n.n.*

To use exercise; to labour for health or for amusement.

The Lacedemonians were remarkable for the use of this sport, and Alexander the Great frequently *exercised* at it.

*Notes to the Odyssey.*

'The necessity of action is not only demonstrable from the fabrick of the body, but evident from observation of the universal practice of mankind', wrote Johnson in *Rambler* 85, composed while he was at work on the *Dictionary*; and although we may not express ourselves in such terms, we share the sentiment: exercise is natural and, as he went on to say, promotes health and a sense of wellbeing; conversely, lack of it leads to mental and physical malaise. However, Johnson's reasons for advocating exercise as an all-round beneficial activity differ from those we would give; and to grasp how wide that difference is we need at least a rudimentary understanding of eighteenth-century medical theory.

What did Johnson mean by 'the fabrick of the body'? Herman Boerhaave, whose influence on medical thinking and practice early in the eighteenth century was profound, believed that '[t]he living body had two primary components, the fluid and the solid. The fluids taken collectively formed the humors of many different types. The solids, apparently so diverse, were all composed ultimately of fibers'.<sup>13</sup> Johnson, in 1755, defined humour thus:

13 Lester S King, *The medical world of the eighteenth century*, pp 65–66



HU'MOUR. n.s. [*humeur*, French; *humor*, Latin.]

1. Moisture.

The aqueous *humour* of the eye will not freeze, which is very admirable, seeing it hath the perspicuity and fluidity of common water. *Ray on Creation.*

2. The different kind of moisture in man's body, reckoned by the old physicians to be phlegm, blood, choler, and melancholy, which, as they predominated, were supposed to determine the temper of mind.<sup>14</sup>

Believe not these suggestions, which proceed  
From anguish of the mind and *humours* black,  
That mingle with thy fancy. *Milton's Agonistes.*

Robert Burton in *The anatomy of melancholy*, first published 1621, enlarged in successive editions between then and 1651, describes the humours of 'the old physicians', Hippocrates, Galen and their followers:

*Bloud*, is a hot, sweet, temperate, red humour, prepared in the *Meseraicke*<sup>15</sup> veines, and made of the most temperate parts of the *Chylus* in the Liver, whose office is to nourish the whole body, to give it strength and colour, being dispersed by the veines, through every part of it. And from it *Spirits* are first begotten in the heart, which afterwards by the *Arteries* are communicated to the other parts.

*Pituita*, or Phlegme, is a cold and moist humour, begotten of the colder part of the *Chylus* (or white juyce coming of the meat digested in the stomacke) in the Liver; his office is to nourish and moisten the members of the body, which as the tongue, are moved, that they be not over dry.

*Choler*, is hot and dry, bitter, begotten of the hotter parts of the *Chylus*, and gathered to the Gall: it helps the naturall heat and senses, and serves to the expelling of excrements.

*Melancholy*, cold and dry, thicke, blacke, and sowre, begotten of the more fæculent part of nourishment, and purged from the spleene, is a bridle to the other two hot humours, *Bloud and Choler*, preserving them in the bloud, and nourishing the bones: These foure humours have some analogy with the foure Elements, and to the foure ages in man.<sup>16</sup>

As Johnson said, 'disposition of mind' or 'constitutional frame of mind' – two of his definitions of temper – depended upon which humour predominated in the body; and today the notion of the humours is kept alive when we use the epithets sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholy

14 Cholera and melancholy were also known, respectively, as yellow and black bile.

15 OED: '= mesenteric.' SJ: 'MESENTERY. That round which the guts are convolved.' 'MESENTERICK. Relating to the mesentery.'

16 Part I, Sect. 1, Memb. 2, Subs. 2

to describe temperament. Before and at the time Burton was writing it was believed that the four humours also ran through the animal kingdom, so dietary recommendations of which meats or fish to eat or avoid went along the same lines. For example,

All Venison is melancholy, and begets bad blood. . . . 'Tis somewhat better hunted than otherwise, and well prepared by cookery; but generally bad and seldom to be used. Hare, a black meat, melancholy, and hard of digestion: it breeds *Incubus*<sup>17</sup> often eaten and causeth fearfull dreames.<sup>18</sup>

Gradually, the ancient doctrine of the humours was modified and elaborated – a turning point came when Boerhaave, examining blood under a microscope, saw that it broke down into smaller and smaller components – and the word humour, by the early part of the eighteenth century, had come to mean any bodily fluid: blood still, but also secretions such as sweat, semen or tears. Despite the publication of William Harvey's discovery that blood circulated rapidly round the body, pumped by the heart through arteries, veins and capillaries,<sup>19</sup> the belief persisted that the humours also circulated in the body, though exactly how was not made clear. The general notion was that the solid parts of the body were constituted of fibres, which Johnson defines thus, quoting from Quincy's *Lexicon physico-medicum* or, a new medicinal dictionary, published in 1719:

FI'BRE. *n.s.* [*fibre*, Fr. *fibra*, Latin.] A small thread or string; the first constituent parts of bodies.

Now sliding streams the thirsty plants renew,  
And feed their *fibres* with reviving dew. *Pope.*

2. A *fibre*, in physick, is an animal thread, of which there are different kinds: some are soft, flexible, and a little elastick; and these are either hollow, like small pipes, or spongy and full of little cells, as the nervous and fleshy *fibres*: others are more solid, flexible, and with a strong elasticity or spring, as the membranous and cartilaginous *fibres*: and a third sort are hard and flexible, as the *fibres* of the bones. Now of all those some are very sensible, and others destitute of all sense: some so very small as not to be easily perceived; and others, on the contrary, so big as to be plainly seen; and most of them, when examined with a microscope, appear to be composed of still smaller *fibres*: these fibres first constitute the substance of the bones, cartilages, ligaments, membranes, nerves, veins, arteries and muscles. And again, by the various texture and different combination of some or all of those parts, the more compound organs are framed; such as the lungs, stomach, liver, legs and arms, the sum of

17 SJ: 'The night-mare.'

18 Burton, *op. cit.*, Part I, Sect. 2, Memb. 2, Subs. 1

19 First publicly stated 1618, *De motu cordis* published 1628



all which make up the body.

*Quincy.*

My heart sinks in me when I hear him speak,  
 And every slacken'd *fibre* drops its hold,  
 Like nature letting down the springs of life:  
 The name of father awes me still.

*Dryd. Spanish Fryar.*

Eight years before the publication of Quincy's *Lexicon*, Addison, in more 'Rustick' terms, had said much the same thing: that the body was

a System of Tubes and Glands, or to use a more Rustick Phrase, a Bundle of Pipes and Strainers, fitted to one another after so wonderful a Manner as to make a proper Engine for the Soul to work with. This Description does not only comprehend the Bowels, Bones, Tendons, Veins, Nerves and Arteries, but every Muscle and every Ligature, which is a Composition of Fibres, that are so many imperceptible Tubes or Pipes interwoven on all sides with invisible Glands or Strainers.

The fibres were believed to be, as Johnson put it, 'the first constituent parts of bodies' – a notion that persisted until the nineteenth century, when the cell became the ultimate structural unit<sup>20</sup> – they were also the ultimate locus of disease. Therefore, according to fibre theory, it followed that:

There must be frequent Motions and Agitations, to mix, digest, and separate the Juices contained in [the body], as well as to clear and cleanse that Infinitude of Pipes and Strainers of which it is composed, and to give their solid Parts a more firm and lasting Tone. Labour or Exercise ferments the Humours, casts them into their proper Channels, throws off Redundancies, and helps Nature in those secret Distributions, without which the Body cannot subsist in its Vigour, nor the Soul act with Chearfulness.<sup>21</sup>

Or, as Johnson wrote 40 years later:

EASE is the utmost that can be hoped from a sedentary and unactive habit; ease a neutral state between pain and pleasure. The dance of spirits, the bound of vigour, readiness of enterprize, and defiance of fatigue, are reserved for him that braces his nerves, and hardens his fibres, that keeps his limbs pliant with motion, and by frequent exposure fortifies his frame against the common accidents of cold and heat.<sup>22</sup>

When Johnson refers to bracing the nerves and hardening the fibres, he is

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20 This subject is treated in detail by L J Rather in 'Some relations between eighteenth-century fiber theory and nineteenth-century cell theory', *Clio Medica*, 1969, 4, pp. 191–202.

21 *Spectator* N° 115, Thursday, July 12, 1711

22 *Rambler* 85

not writing as a muscular moralist, but as one with wide medical knowledge. He goes on:

WITH ease, however, if it could be secured, many would be content; but nothing terrestrial can be kept at a stand. Ease, if it is not rising into pleasure, will be falling towards pain, and whatever hope the dreams of speculation may suggest of observing the proportion between nutriment and labour, and keeping the body in a healthy state by supplies exactly equal to its waste, we know that, in effect, the vital powers unexcited by motion, grow gradually languid; that as their vigour fails obstructions are generated; and that from obstructions proceed most of the pains which wear us away slowly with periodical tortures, and which though they sometimes suffer life to be long, condemn it to be useless, chain us down on the couch of misery, and mock us with the hopes of death.<sup>23</sup>

Physical and mental disease (dis-ease) – and the two were not separated as they were to be later – occurred when the humours got out of balance, became obstructed, or were produced to excess; and it will become clear from many of the medical texts quoted throughout this book that a large part of the eighteenth-century physician's treatment, and in particular his recommendation of exercise, was designed to get them back in balance, move them through the fibres around the body, or make the body excrete those that were toxic. For Johnson the tortured moralist, who, throughout his life was 'cankered by the rust of [his] own thoughts', exercise was additionally to be recommended for the welcome and necessary distraction it provided in those dangerous moments of 'vacuity', 'for he has lived with little observation either on himself or others, who does not know that to be idle is to be vicious'.<sup>24</sup> It is beyond the scope of this book to go deeply into eighteenth-century medical theory and practice; two among many works that do this are John Wiltshire's *Samuel Johnson in the medical world*, which also covers Johnson's wide-ranging medical knowledge, and Lester S King's *The medical world of the eighteenth century*.

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In the summer of 1779, Johnson wrote to two sick friends:

Chearfulness and exercise are your great remedies. . . . Labour is exercise continued to fatigue, Exercise is labour used only while it produces pleasure.

and

I hope you are diligent to take as much exercise as You can bear. I had rather you rode twice a day than tired yourself in the morning. I take the true definition of exercise to be labour without weariness.<sup>25</sup>

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23 *ibid.*

24 *ibid.*

25 To Henry Thrale after his stroke, 23 June, 1779; to John Taylor of Ashbourne, 3

William Buchan's *Domestic medicine, or the family physician* came out in 1769 and ran through at least 142 English-language editions before the final one, published in Philadelphia in 1871; it was also translated into French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swedish. Much of the advice contained in Part I, 'Of the General Causes of Diseases', is so timeless and sound that it is easy to see why the book remained in print for 102 years. Today, Buchan's revelations about the social conditions of his time are of equal, if not greater, interest than his advice. The quotations throughout the present book come from the third edition, 'with considerable additions', *Domestic medicine: or, a treatise on the prevention and cure of diseases by regimen and simple medicines*, London, 1774.<sup>26</sup>

MANY people look upon the necessity man is under of earning his bread by labour as a curse. Be this as it may, it is evident from the structure of the body, that exercise is not less necessary than food for the preservation of health: Those whom poverty obliges to labour for daily bread, are not only the most healthy, but generally the most happy part of mankind. . . . This is particularly the case with those who live by the culture of the ground. . . .

INACTIVITY never fails to induce an universal relaxation of the solids, which disposes the body to innumerable diseases. When the solids are relaxed, neither the digestion, nor any of the secretions, can be duly performed. In this case, the worst consequences must ensue. How can persons who loll all day in easy chairs, and sleep all night on beds of down, fail to be relaxed? Nor do such greatly mend the matter, who never stir abroad but in a coach, sedan, or such like. These elegant pieces of luxury are become so common, that the inhabitants of great towns seem to be in some danger of losing the use of their limbs altogether. It is now below anyone to walk who can afford to be carried. How ridiculous it would seem, to a person unacquainted with modern luxury, to behold the young and healthy swinging along on the shoulders of their fellow-creatures! or to see a fat carcass, over-run with diseases occasioned by inactivity, dragged along the streets by half a dozen horses\*!

\*It is not necessity, but fashion, which makes the use of machines so common. There are many people who have not exercise enough to keep their humours from stagnation, who yet dare not venture to make a visit to their next neighbours, but in a coach or sedan, lest they should be looked down upon. Strange that men should be such fools as to be laughed out of the use of their limbs, or to throw away their health, in order to gratify a piece of vanity, or

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August, 1779

26 In this section Chapter V, 'Of Exercise', pp. 87–93

comply with a ridiculous fashion.

Buchan's rosy view of the lot of the rural poor is questionable – although they fared better than the urban poor – but there are obvious parallels with our own time in what he has to say about the common 'use of machines' over walking, about social snobbery, and, later in the chapter, when he deplores the falling off of 'active diversions' and the rise of 'those of a sedentary kind'. He goes on to associate 'glandular obstructions' and 'weak nerves' with inactivity, adding:

THE inactive are continually complaining of pains of the stomach, flatulencies, indigestions, &c. These complaints, which pave the way to many others, are not to be removed by medicines. They can only be cured by a vigorous course of exercise, to which indeed they seldom fail to yield.

Readers who do not wholly endorse Buchan's pæan to exercise, should bear in mind that, while it may not possess the sovereign powers he claimed for it, unlike many of the eighteenth-century physician's remedies – purges and emetics, or potions, pills and powders containing such toxic substances as mercury and lead – it seldom did harm.

IT is absolutely impossible to enjoy health, where the perspiration is not duly carried on; but that can never be the case where exercise is neglected. When the matter which ought to be thrown off by perspiration is retained in the body, it vitiates the humours, and occasions the gout, fevers, rheumatism, &c. Exercise alone would prevent many of those diseases which cannot be cured, and would remove others where medicine proves ineffectual.

He lists the diversions that 'promote perspiration, and the other secretions' as: hunting, shooting, playing at cricket, hand-ball, golf\*, &c.

\*Golf is a diversion very common in North Britain.<sup>27</sup> It is well calculated for exercising the body, and may always be taken in such moderation, as neither to over-heat nor fatigue. It has greatly the preference over cricket, tennis, or any of those games which cannot be played without violence.

Buchan was addressing the middle and upper classes – Mrs Thrale kept a copy of his book in the house – because these were the people who could read and afford the 6 shillings it cost; they also had the opportunity to follow his advice and improve their health. When writing about the hazards of the back-breaking monotonous labour that underpinned society, he identifies the problems but offers only crude solutions, which, in any case, were beyond the power of those engaged in such work to implement.

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27 Johnson gives no definitions of hand-ball or golf; nor does he, or Boswell, mention the latter in their accounts of their tour of Scotland.



**Fig. 3** William Buchan, author of the influential *Domestic medicine*.

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Had Buchan forgotten – or merely chosen to disregard – those who took no part in ‘active and manly’ sports, yet made up one half of the population? Women are mentioned just once in Chapter V, and then in a footnote. After recommending that ‘sedentary artificers, shop-keepers, studious persons, &c.’ take exercise ‘as regularly as they take food’, he adds:

Sedentary occupations ought chiefly to be followed by women. They bear confinement much better than men, and are fitter for every kind of business which does not require much strength. It is ridiculous to see a lusty fellow making pins, needles, or watch-wheels, while many of the laborious parts of husbandry are carried on by the other sex. The fact is, we want men for laborious employments, while one half of the other sex are rendered useless for want of occupations suited to their strength, &c. Were girls bred to mechanical employments, we should not see such numbers of them prostitute themselves for bread, nor find such a want of men for the important purposes of navigation, agriculture, &c.

In Chapter I. ‘Of Children’, in the section *Of the Exercise of Children*, however, Buchan has some more enlightened things to say about the need

for girls to keep active:

NOR is the common education of girls less hurtful to the constitution than that of boys. Miss is set down to her frame, before she can put on her clothes; and is taught to believe, that to excel at the needle is the only thing that can intitle her to general esteem. It is unnecessary here to insist upon the dangerous consequences of obliging girls to sit too much. They are pretty well known, and are too often felt at a certain time of life. But suppose this critical period to be got over, greater dangers await them when they come to be mothers. Women who have been early accustomed to a sedentary life, generally run great hazard in childbed; while those who have been used to romp about, and take sufficient exercise, are seldom in any danger.

ONE hardly meets with a girl who can, at the same time, boast of early performance by the needle, and a good constitution. Close and early confinement generally occasions indigestion, head-achs, pale complexions, pain of the stomach, loss of appetite, coughs, consumption of the lungs, and deformity of body. The last of these indeed is not to be wondered at, considering the aukward postures in which girls sit at many kinds of needlework, and the delicate flexible state of their bodies in the early periods of life.

WOULD mothers, instead of having their daughters instructed in many trifling accomplishments, employ them in plain work and housewifery, and allow them sufficient exercise in the open air, they would both make them more healthy mothers, and more useful members of society. I am no enemy to genteel accomplishments, but would have them only considered as secondary, and always disregarded when they impair health.<sup>28</sup>

Next time we admire a sampler worked by a seven-year-old miss, in stitches so small they look as though they were made by Gloucester mice, let Buchan's words act as a reminder of the true cost of its creation. Perhaps 'plain work and housewifery' would have been welcome alternatives to needlework and yet more needlework; but all this was just to enable girls to become 'more healthy mothers, and more useful members of society' – of self-fulfilment or ambition, choice or opportunity, not a word. The eighteenth century was a man's century through and through; and Johnson, for all his delight in the company of intelligent women, was a man of his time.

I HAVE always admired the wisdom of those by whom our female education was instituted, for having contrived, that every woman of whatever condition should be taught some arts of manufacture, by which the vacancies of recluse and domestick leisure may always be

<sup>28</sup> Buchan, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30



filled up. These arts are more necessary as the weakness of their sex and the general system of life debar ladies from many employments which by diversifying the circumstances of men, preserve them from being cankered by the rust of their own thoughts.

...

For my part, whenever chance brings within my observation a knot of misses busy at their needles, I consider myself as in the school of virtue; and though I have no extraordinary skill in plain work or embroidery, look upon their operations with, at least, as much satisfaction as their governess, because I regard them as providing a security against the most dangerous ensnarers of the soul, by enabling themselves to exclude idleness from their solitary moments, and with idleness her attendant train of passions, fancies, and chimeras, fears, sorrows and desires.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the century, genteel girls were still being kept in what men considered to be their place. In his *A plan for the conduct of female education in boarding schools* (1797) Erasmus Darwin, the Lichfield physician and polymath, goes so far as to recommend their ‘playing at ball, at shuttlecock, swinging as they sit on a cord or cushion’, dancing and using very light dumb-bells, as these activities ‘promote the growth of the person in respect to height’, rather than rendering ‘the system more robust and muscular’; but he concludes:

There are other modes of exertion, which, though graceful in themselves, are not allow’d to ladies by the fashion of this age and country; as skating on the ice in winter, swimming in summer, funambulation, or dancing on the streight rope: but walking with a stately measured step occasionally, like the march of soldiers, and reading aloud frequently rather in a theatric manner, as well as dancing and singing, will much contribute to give strength and grace to the muscles of locomotion, and of vocallity.<sup>30</sup>

It would be wrong to pretend that a country woman had a ‘better’ life than a middle-class or aristocratic lady, but she would probably have had a robuster physique from having ‘to labour for daily bread’; her diet would have contained fewer contaminants – white flour was routinely adulterated with chalk, alum, and bone-ashes – or harmful substances like sugar; and, unrestrained by the heavy hand of propriety, she would have been able to take part in rural sports.

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Buchan believed that freedom of movement – if not actual exercise – should begin at birth. He claimed that the practice of swaddling new-born babies arose from midwives’ being overeager to demonstrate their dexterity, ‘seconded by the vanity of parents . . . desirous of making a shew of the

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29 *Rambler* 85

30 Darwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–70

infant as soon as it was born', with the result that:

the poor child, as soon as it came into the world, had as many rollers and wrappers applied to its body, as if every bone had been fractured at birth: while these were often so tight, as not only to gall and wound its tender frame, but even to obstruct the motion of the heart, lungs, and other organs necessary for life. . . . Hardly any method could be devised more effectually to stop these motions than bracing the body too tight with rollers\* and bandages.

\*This is by no means inveighing against a thing that does not happen. In many parts of Britain at this day, a roller, five or six feet in length, is applied tightly round the child's body as soon as it is born.<sup>31</sup>

To SWA 'DDLE. *v.a.* [swedan, Saxon.]

1. To swathe; to bind in cloaths, generally used of binding new-born children.

Invested by a veil of clouds,  
And *swaddled* as new-born in sable shrouds;  
For these a receptacle I design'd. *Sandys.*  
How soon doth man decay!

When cloths are taken from a chest of sweets,  
To *swaddle* infants, whose young breath  
Scarce knows the way;

Those clouts are little winding sheets,  
Which do consign and send them unto death. *Herbert.*

They swaddled me up in my night-gown with long pieces of linen,  
'till they had wrapt me in about an hundred yards of swathe.

*Addison.*

To SWATHE. *v.a.* [swedan, Saxon.] To bind, as a child with bands and rollers.

Thrice hath this Hotspur, Mars in *swathing* cloaths,  
This infant warrior, and his enterprizes,  
Discomfited great Douglas. *Shak. Henry IV.*

He had two sons; the eldest of them at three years old,  
I' th' *swathing cloaths* the other, from their nursery  
Were stol'n. *Shakesp. Cymbeline.*

Their children are never *swathed*, or bound about with any thing,  
when they are first born; but are put naked into the bed with their  
parents to lie. *Abbot's Descript. of the World.*

Swath'd in her lap the bold nurse bore him out,  
With olive branches cover'd round about. *Dryden.*

Master's feet are *swath'd* no longer,  
If in the night too oft he kicks,

31 Buchan, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–14

Or shows his loco-motive tricks. *Prior.*

In addition to swaddling, other, graver dangers beset an eighteenth-century baby in the first precarious weeks of life, not the least of which was losing its mother to child-bed fever. But of all the causes conspiring to render its life short and miserable, writes Buchan,

none has greater influence than the want of proper EXERCISE: Healthy parents, wholesome food, and proper clothing, will avail little, where exercise is neglected. Sufficient exercise will make up for several defects in nursing; but nothing can supply the want of it. It is absolutely necessary to the health, the growth, and the strength of children.

THE desire of exercise is coeval with life itself. Were this principle attended to, many diseases might be prevented. But, while indolence and sedentary employments prevent two-thirds of mankind from either taking sufficient exercise themselves, or giving it to their children, what have we to expect but diseases and deformity among their offspring? The rickets,<sup>32</sup> so destructive to children, never appeared in Britain till manufactures began to flourish, and people, attracted by the love of gain, left the country to follow sedentary employments in great towns. It is amongst these people that this disease chiefly prevails, and not only deforms, but kills many of their offspring. . . .

CHILDREN may be exercised in various ways. The best method, while they are light, is to carry them about in the nurse's arms. This gives the nurse an opportunity of talking to the child, of pointing out every thing that may please and delight its fancy. Besides, it is much safer than swinging an infant in a machine, or leaving it to the care of such as are not fit to take care of themselves. Nothing can be more ridiculous than to set one child to keep another: this conduct has proved fatal to many infants, and has rendered others miserable for life.

WHEN children begin to walk, the safest and best method of leading them about is by the hands. The common way, of swinging them in leading-strings fixed to their backs, has several bad consequences. It makes them throw their bodies forward, and press with their whole weight upon the breast: By this means the breathing is obstructed, the breast flattened, and the bowels compressed.

Leading-strings – or, back-strings – were used to support and hold a child upright as it was beginning to walk; sometimes they were stout tapes attached to the clothes – cutting them off marked a stage in the child's progress – sometimes they were a little harness worn over the clothes. In the latter case, if this was made of a wide tape or leather straps, it caused less

<sup>32</sup> SJ, quoting Quincy: 'The *rickets* is a distemper in children, from an unequal distribution of nourishment, whereby the joints grow knotty, and the limbs uneven: its cure is performed by evacuation and friction.' It is now known that the cause is vitamin D deficiency.

pain and damage than one improvised by poor parents from rope or string. Leading-strings were never intended to bear a child's full weight, much less to be used to swing it or pick it up. Mrs Thrale records using them on two of her daughters in her 'Family Book 1764–1778', transcribed in Mary Hyde's *The Thrales of Streatham Park*. Of two-year-old Queeney she writes: 'She can walk & run alone up & down all smooth Places tho' pretty steep, & tho' the Backstring is still kept on it is no longer of Use'. And of Cæcilia Margaret, aged seventeen-and-a-half months: 'She walks alone quite well, wants no Backstring & says some little Words as Papa Mama &c.— 18 : July 1778'.<sup>33</sup>

Buchan continues:

IT is a common notion, that if children be set upon their feet too soon, their legs will become crooked. There is reason to believe, that the reverse of this is true. . . .

MOTHERS of the poorer sort think they are great gainers by making their children lie or sit while they themselves work. In this they are greatly mistaken. By neglecting to give their children exercise, they are obliged to keep them a long time before they can do any thing for themselves, and to spend more on medicine than would have paid for proper care.

To take care of their children, is the most profitable business in which even the poor can be employed: But, alas! it is not always in their power. Poverty often obliges them to neglect their offspring, in order to provide the necessaries of life. When this is the case, it becomes the interest as well as the duty of the Public to assist them. Ten thousand times more benefit would accrue to the State, by enabling the poor to bring up their own children, than from all the hospitals that ever can be erected for that purpose.

WHOEVER considers the structure of the human body, will soon be convinced of the necessity of exercise for the health of children. The body is composed of an infinite number of vessels, whose fluids cannot be pushed on without the action and pressure of the muscles. But, if the fluids remain inactive, obstructions must happen, and the humours will of course be vitiated, which cannot fail to occasion diseases. ... [W]here exercise is neglected, none of the animal functions can be duly performed; and, when that is the case, the whole constitution must go to wreck.<sup>34</sup>

Early in the century, when Johnson was born, most people in England lived in the country; but during his lifetime there was a surge of migration to towns, and the living conditions of the rural and urban poor differed

<sup>33</sup> Hyde, *op. cit.* p. 21 and p. 207

<sup>34</sup> Buchan, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–27

widely. The children of agricultural labourers in Staffordshire would have been working in the fields – perforce taking exercise – at an early age, not cooped up in sunless tenements developing rickets. To what extent Sarah Johnson carried out the timeless precepts of Buchan's *Domestic medicine* sixty years before it was published is not known, but, whatever she did or did not do, her 'brave boy', whom she so nearly lost after a difficult birth, grew into a strapping lad and, despite serious health problems, survived for 75 years.

Over half a century later, Mrs Thrale, herself preternaturally active and energetic, saw to it that her children took plenty of exercise. In the diary of her visit to France in 1775 she wrote: '17 Oct I stole an Hour to give Queeney a Run in the Gardens of the Luxembourg as I think she uses too little Exercise for one who is used to so much.'<sup>35</sup> Queeney, who had just turned 11, lived on to the age of 92.

SAMPLE

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35 Tyson & Guppy, *The French journals of Mrs Thrale and Dr Johnson*, p. 123