



Alison Downham-Moore

Nineteenth-century French hygiene and the global origins of individual preventative health

Other Authors: Manon Mathias, Reader in French at the University of Glasgow

Preventative health is increasingly topical in current global contexts of ageing populations, with their rising levels of non communicable chronic diseases; while the concepts of ‘everyday health’ and ‘wellbeing’ are receiving increasing attention not only from medical humanities scholars but also from an ever-wider public, and often subject to misinformation. Efforts to look after one’s individual health to avoid the need for medical treatment was an idea elaborated throughout global cultures between the eighteenth century and early twentieth century, with even older antecedents extending into the Islamic Middle Ages and into ancient Greek and Vedic cultures. However, in France of the nineteenth century, there was a spectacularly significant, complex and publicly disseminated trend toward preventative health of the individual, referred to as *hygiène privée* (private hygiene), and this has never been the focus of sustained scholarly study. Although French hygiene of the nineteenth century has been subject to significant scholarly attention, existing studies have focused on public health measures, racial purification, or hygiene in the sense of cleanliness. This paper considers the explosion of medical texts about individual preventive health in nineteenth-century France that focussed on diet, sleep, exercise, light, beverages, therapeutic bathing, self medication, as well as self-regulation of intellectual and sexual activity. Hygiene was an official medical discipline, but it was also part of attempts at popularisation of medicine, attempting to give individuals their own tools to protect their health. This paper focusses on the peculiar French genre of hygiene manuals, considering they

emerged figured both within and beyond the medical establishment. Existing at the intersection of medicine and personal habits, the French tradition of private hygiene destabilises boundaries and raises questions about where health resides.