

BOOK REVIEW

Sleep in Early Modern England *by Sasha Handley*

Hardback, 256 pages
Yale University Press
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Given the amount of time we spend asleep, doctors know surprisingly little about sleep's normal and abnormal patterns. Similarly, our understanding of how sleep and its problems have been perceived through history is scant. So *Sleep in Early Modern England*, which deals with these subjects in the 17th and 18th Centuries, is a welcome contribution that fills a gap in the literature.

Handley starts with a review of sleep as being an essential part of a regimen for health but with the warning that one's defences are greatly lowered when asleep, so that the body is then open to demonic and diabolic threats. From there she moves easily to a discussion of how religious beliefs and prayer might protect the sleeper. These influences could be enhanced by the furnishings of the "sleeping chamber" and what the sleeper wore during the night. The role of nightwear and different kinds of bed and bedding are discussed at length: "Sleeping bodies and uncleansed souls were secured each night by the warmth of familiar sheets, blankets and quilts that were often invested with spiritual and health giving qualities". The problems of sleeping away from home – from unfamiliar beds and noises to infestations of bed bugs – are also graphically discussed.

The early development of attempts to understand sleep at a time when rudimentary neurology and philosophy were often bedfellows is reviewed with particular emphasis on the work of Thomas Willis (1621-1675). Sleepwalking and dreams merit discussion as do the curative benefits of sleep.

Overall, the book is a well presented and authoritative review of the subject that is laced with fascinating titbits of information embedded in a scholarly monograph. A few more illustrations would have helped to lighten the text.

What is in it for the reader? If you look at medical history as a progression of people, dates and events, this book is not for you. On the other hand, if your interest is in understanding the daily lives and beliefs of our ancestors, then there is a great deal of thoughtful and fascinating information in this ground-breaking text.

John MT Ford
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