

[Conf. Report: "Gut Feelings," University of Aberdeen](#)

Discussion published by Kristen Ann Ehrenberger on Thursday, June 15, 2017

Editor's note: This report on a nutrition-adjacent conference may be of interest to our readers. Topics covered include the gut-brain axis, poisons, indigestion, vegetarianism, hangriness, the digesting body, ascetic intellectuals, and excrement.

A Conference Report on "Gut Feeling: Digestive Health in Nineteenth-Century Culture"
May 26-27, 2017 at the University of Aberdeen
By Kristen Ann Ehrenberger (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center)

On May 26-27, 2017, Manon Mathias (French, University of Aberdeen) led an interdisciplinary workshop on the nineteenth-century origins of the contemporary buzzword "gut health." Called "[Gut Feeling: Digestive Health in Nineteenth-Century Culture](#)," its key questions were "What changed in the understanding of digestive health in the nineteenth century?" "What were the implications of these changes for the understanding of self and other?" and "How did that influence the development of modern Western society?" Attendees from the United Kingdom, the United States, Norway, France, and Australia gathered at Scotland's third oldest university, in its third largest city, to discuss (in)digestion and excrement in fictional literature, the popular press, and medical history from about 1750 to 1930.

The conference was preceded by a series of posts on the History of Emotions blog on [French writers trying to transcend their digesting and excreting bodies](#); [Norwegian doctors debating whether neurasthenia gastrica was a primary or secondary disease](#); ["bitterness" as a taste and emotion during World War I rationing in Germany](#); and [dyspepsia in the English-speaking world](#).

There was also a public panel as part of the University of Aberdeen's open house, called the May Festival, that demonstrated a continued pattern of waxing and waning attention to gut-brain awareness. Evelien Lemmens (Centre for the History of Emotions, Queen Mary University of London) opened with a history of ideas about digestion, primarily in Britain. Drs. Karen Scott & Alan Walker then discussed gut bacteria and suggested that the average human adult poops his or her body weight in bacteria every 1-2 years. Professor Lora Heisler & Dr. Giuseppe D'Agostino's concluding presentation (unconsciously and conflictingly) reflected the archetypes of the nineteenth-century human body as a simple calorie bomb when it comes to gaining weight but a twentieth- or twenty-first-century hormonal body in which adipose tissue is metabolically active when it comes to losing weight. Reflecting the sometimes depressingly presentist bias of much popularization work, the public then directed their questions to the four scientists from [the University of Aberdeen's Rowett Institute](#) for human health and nutrition, as they were more interested in the health of themselves and their contemporaries than the historical roots thereof.

The conference program started at one end of the digestive system and worked its way to the other.

Larry Duffy (French, University of Kent) kicked things off with a discourse on food, eating, and nourishment gone horribly wrong, as in the case of poisoning by powdered arsenic, which can look uncannily but sometimes conveniently like sugar or flour. He demonstrated how French pharmacists and toxicologists used debates over arsenic crimes and accidents to further their goals of professionalization.

One recurrent theme was what we call the gut-brain axis today and what might reasonably be described as the connections between digestion and emotion in the nineteenth century. Evelien Lemmens argued that the strong emotions that caused dyspepsia in mid-1800s Britain were not a holdover from pre-modern times but rather were engendered by the stresses of modern life. The cure for fear of dyspepsia was said to be cheer at the dinner table. Emilie Taylor-Brown (Diseases of Modern Life Project, St. Anne's College, University of Oxford) explained that her historical subjects understood that to be "hangry" (her word) was to be somatically unbalanced. Her paper joins the duo of articles at Nursing Clio about whether the concept of "hangriness" is an anachronism or an accurate reading of (in their cases) eighteenth-century American texts.^[1] As for the French, Bertrand Marquer (French, University of Strasbourg) described a gastrology on the model of Dr. Gall's craniology, a middle-class model of an imagined physiological connection between the stomach and the brain.

Catherine L. Newell (Religious Studies, University of Miami, FL) added two intriguing concepts to the discussion. One was characterizing Sylvester Graham's treatment of the gut as a site of magical thinking about different foods' effects on the body so subtle that it could be mistaken for science. Unsurprisingly, Graham's ideas about depriving the body of excess stimuli (food, sex) came up frequently. Molly Laas (History of Medicine, University of Wisconsin) showed how comparative anatomy and the case study of feral German boy Kaspar Hauser led Graham to decide that humans were fit for a vegetarian diet. However, Dr. Luther Bell won the 1835 Boylston Prize from the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* for arguing that whatever New Englanders were already eating was what was best for them. Because in Bell's mind reason trumps nature, his body-society metaphor required conformity with social norms. Going to the other extreme, Tripp Rebrovick (Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University) spoke about Walt Whitman's solution to "THE GREAT AMERICAN EVIL—INDIGESTION" being a carnivorous diet. If a too-varied diet was over stimulating but vegetarians (like Graham) were scrawny, then moderate amounts of one, meaty dish was his answer. In a series of essays in 1858, Whitman seems to have followed Justus Liebig's ideas about nitrogen and animal chemistry.

The other rewarding concept that Newell introduced was the "imagined community" (à la Benedict Anderson) that is created when individuals discuss their bodily experiences and ailments. Lemmens and Taylor-Brown had both described dyspepsia as Britain's "national ailment," and Kristen Ann Ehrenberger (Internal Medicine/Pediatrics, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center) compiled Germans' complaints about indigestion during World War I rationing into a shared, implied theory on the limits of the human digestive tract. Cristiano Turbil (King's College, London) told us about surgeon Paolo Mantegazza, who popularized science and medicine in newly unified Italy, because health-literate individuals would make better citizens; Mantegazza later saw elected office as an extension of his medical work. One commenter fruitfully reminded us that in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault posits that the system of ancient dietetics enabled the commensurability that allowed people to talk about their bodies with each other.

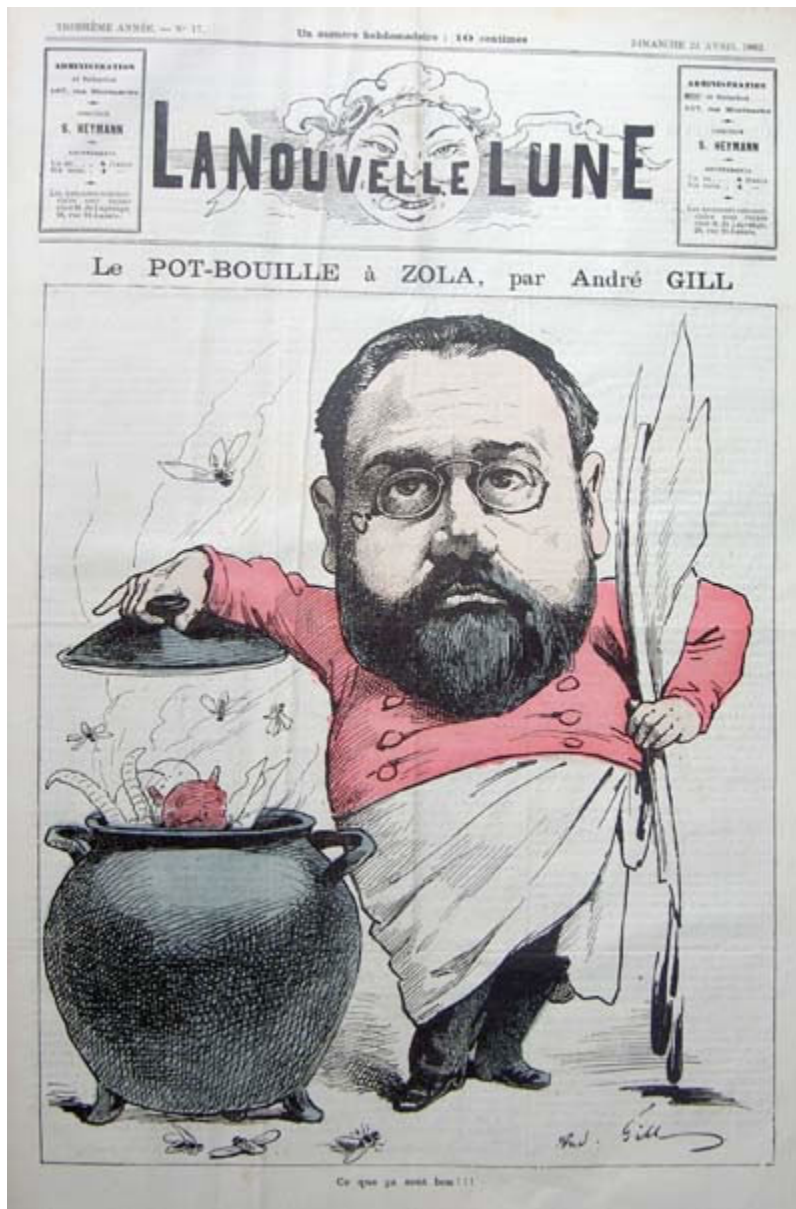
One group who analyzed the dietary indiscretions and maladies of themselves and each other were intellectuals. Anne Vila (French, University of Wisconsin-Madison) explained how Balzac & Company glamorized the dyspeptic scholar. They railed against the popular consumption of stimulants like coffee and tea, as well as the physicians who increasingly prescribed them after the discovery of blood circulation. Apparently they felt that the problem was with *solitary* consumption; thinkers needed to re-enter society after their lonely mental labors. The question then arose during discussion: Did chemical digestion exhaust scholars in the nineteenth century, the way extractive digestion did in the eighteenth century? Another possibly over-analyzed group were neurasthenics. As Kristine Lillestøl (Medicine, Department of Community Medicine and Global Health, University of Oslo) outlined in her presentation, Norwegian physicians used German theories and clinical tests to try to answer the question of whether their patients' gastric complaints were the primary problem or merely a symptom of their nervous disorder.

Caitríona Ni-Dhuill (German, Durham University) took an ecological approach from her survey of nineteenth-century biographies, whose subjects spent considerable time searching for the perfect climate to alleviate their dyspepsia. She found that the digesting body was a common metaphor for thinking about bodily experience, history, even theory, whereas in the twentieth century the body of reference was much more likely to be a sexual and/or reproducing body. Alison Moore (European History, Western Sydney University) agreed in her analysis of the Anal Freud. For instance, he described the pleasure of defecating as one of the first things modern man must learn to sublimate, and anthropologists found native cultures without taboos around excrement as signs of the lag in social and cultural evolution. Ni-Dhuill also challenged us to consider non-human digestion. If dyspepsia is a disease of civilization, then animals must not suffer from it. Assuming a high-modern dichotomy between the two, is the answer more civilization or more nature?

A final theme was that of excretion and excrement as products of the digestive process. In her paper, Manon Mathias illustrated how both French novels and hygiene treatises drew attention to the scholar's gastric ailments as a way of highlighting this figure's superiority. But in the novels themselves the writers practically wallowed in digestive and excretory processes, and ultimately even the most idealistic writer was bound to a life in the body. Hélène Sicard-Cowan (French, University of St. Andrews) concurred in her reading of food and excrement in *The Belly of Paris*. In his descriptions of Les Halles, Zola personifies plants and animals, such that foods become characters and animals are actors in this novel. Zola himself was often depicted on a chamber pot, as he seemed to have diarrhea of the pen.

The workshop was organized in association with the University of Aberdeen Centre for History and Philosophy of Science, Technology and Medicine. Funding was generously provided by the University of Aberdeen School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Cultures; the British Society for the History of Science; the Society for French Studies, the Society for French History; the British Society for Literature and Science; and the British Academy. The group hopes to have a continued online presence, an edited volume, and another conference in the future.

[collectiana.zola-pot-bouille-1882.jpg](#)



[1] Rachel Herrmann, "We lost our appetite for food': Why Eighteenth-Century Hangriness Might Not Be a Thing," *Nursing Clio: Bites of History* (18 April 2017): <https://nursingclio.org/2017/04/18/we-lost-our-appetite-for-food-why-eighteenth-century-ha...> Carla Cevasco, "Why Eighteenth-Century Hangriness Might Be a Thing (And Why It Matters)," *Nursing Clio: Bites of History* (19 April 2017): <https://nursingclio.org/2017/04/19/why-eighteenth-century-hangriness-might-be-a-thing-and-....>