

and physically active years pushing through the eighties for most people.

In every age some branch of learning has imagined much longer lives. Today geneticists and geriatric researchers, and scholars from other fields impressed by their findings, are fashioning their own version of exceedingly long lives, ending at age 150 or even 200. Childhood will remain the same; old age measured by physical capabilities will be compressed; the physical and intellectual attributes of the middle years will be stretched out by decades, even by more than a century.

David Boyd Haycock gives us a history of prolongevity thinking during the last 400 years and of the sources of inspiration for such hopes. Deliberately, without irony, he links the modern expression of this idea, based on science, to past expressions based on the Old Testament and the belief that the patriarchs lived hundreds of years; on hope in the perfectibility of humankind, not just in morality but also in immortality; on the supposed long lives of some individuals who understood secrets about ageing; on the belief that disease would be conquered, leaving people to discover how long their natural lives could be.

Scholars and the curious among the general public will be delighted by this book. Haycock writes engagingly about an intriguing topic, and is always ready to re-seize the reader's attention with a digression or an apt illustration. Indeed historians of science may want to use this book as a text. Haycock knows how to introduce scientists from Bacon, Boyle, Descartes, and Condorcet to Hayflick, Kirkwood, and Walford in ways that fix them in the mind. He knows how to present the serious and still today important parts of their thought even when it is embedded in language that seems merely fantastic, spiritual, credulous, or impenetrable. Undergraduates will discover useful things about how science proceeds when, armed by little more than curiosity, scientists probe the unknown.

In the early parts of this account, prolongevists experimented mostly on themselves. In the twentieth century they

began to experiment on volunteers, some from their laboratories and some from the credulous public. To date, their work has had no specifiable effect on human longevity, except for maiming some lives and cutting others short. All the while prolongevists went ahead, always, it seems, lacking any sense of the history of the idea. Until now, when an historian sympathetic to these ideas has arrived.

Major steps forward in knowledge engender confidence that ageing can be understood and manipulated. Most of the time science demands that we sacrifice for these longer lives, for example, not just watching our diet but eating only a fraction of the recommended intake. The persuasive sign that something is afoot will probably lie in steps that extend cancer treatment from management to reversal, cure, or prevention. Haycock is not a sceptic; for him super long lives of perhaps 200 years are a plausible expectation that will be delivered by science now in progress.

James C Riley,
Indiana University

Christopher E Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne (eds), *Cultures of the abdomen: diet, digestion, and fat in the modern world*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. vi, 264, £40.00 (hardback 1-4039-6521-8).

Christopher E Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne rightly assert in their introduction to this edited edition that the abdomen is an area of the body left relatively unexplored by historians of medicine. We have little in the way of a full historiography of matters related to digestion, diet and gastric illness. Yet, as the editors argue, this gaping hole in the literature does not reflect the historical importance placed upon that particular region of the body and its component organs, as well as the significance of the complex relationship between the digestive system and far wider social, cultural and medical discourse. It is

correctly stressed throughout that diet and nutrition in fact play critical roles in the development of our sense of self, and that historical analysis of this is necessary for understanding the deep historical meanings that underscore modern obsessions with conditions such as obesity. Yet, it is suggested, these themes are not just concerned with the medical alone. Tellingly, issues such as fat are also persistently discussed through moral frameworks, acting as an expression of personal character as well as ill health.

Spanning the entire modern period, the volume contains thirteen chapters detailing a varied array of themes ranging from the physiology of hypochondria in the eighteenth century, historical attitudes towards fat in twentieth-century America, as well as in-depth analysis of the responses of prominent historical individuals to the problems of their gut. In one particularly notable chapter, for instance, George Rousseau explores Samuel Taylor Coleridge's obsession with his gastric problems and the subsequent development of his dream theories generated by the poor state of his digestion at night. Further contributions analyse linkage between the development of chocolate as a commodity and the introduction of efficient sewerage in nineteenth-century Europe, while Ronald L LeBlanc explores Leo Tolstoy's use of bodily imagery stressing themes of diet, desire and denial. Ana Carden-Coyne, meanwhile, successfully argues that during the First World War, the abdomen acquired a meaningful status in America which confirmed the guts as the locus of masculinity, with military manhood from then on requiring particularly stronger inner resolve.

Inevitably, some of the pieces are more convincing than others. For instance, Joyce Huff's analysis of the interest in the elimination of bodily fat that resulted in the employment of scientists in the public relief system in the 1860s is particularly credible. But are we really to believe that the modern obsession with chocolate stems from its apparent historical associations with oral contact with excrement (coprophagia), as

Alison Moore provocatively argues? Overall what is most surprising about this volume is the number of topics left unexplored, although this is perhaps more the fault of historians generally, than that of the editors. We hear little on the role of the stomach in the development of the history of medicine. Nothing is said on, say, the significance of abdominal operations within the wider development of surgery, or shifting understandings of various prominent diseases of the digestive tract such as peptic ulcer. Ultimately, we are still left with no firm narrative about this which would complement our understandings of health, disease and the chronic conditions of the digestive tract, although it is fair to say that many pieces of the jigsaw have been slotted neatly into place. This is a minor criticism, however, and *Cultures of the abdomen* is a useful contribution to a heavily neglected area of medical and social history. In fact, what is presented here is a variety of highly complex, yet significant, themes with outstanding potential for further, fuller historical analysis.

Ian Miller,
University College Dublin

Eluned Summers-Bremner, *Insomnia: a cultural history*, London, Reaktion Books, 2008, pp. 176, £19.95 (hardback 978-1-86189-317-8).

In *Insomnia: a cultural history*, Eluned Summers-Bremner seeks to explore attitudes toward sleeplessness from ancient times to the present. Because her sources are drawn primarily from literature, the book makes little effort to probe popular beliefs, much less how people across time and space actually grappled with insomnia. Also slighted are the causes of sleeplessness and its consequences upon the cadences of daily life.

Summers-Bremner initially draws upon modern medicine to define insomnia "as the habitual inability to fall asleep or remain asleep when one wishes or needs to do so"