

Sasha Handley

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF NIGHT:  
SLEEPING WELL IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

Sound sleep was one of the most treasured nocturnal activities in the early modern world, and yet its history has been obscured by scholarly preoccupation with sleep loss and sleep disorders of varying levels of severity, and by attempts to locate the historical roots of the 'sleep crisis' in which many industrialized nations now find themselves. Our project, *Sleeping well in the early modern world: an environmental approach to the history of sleep care\**, asks what it meant to sleep well in the years 1500-1750 and to explain how early modern communities in Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and early America tried to achieve this cherished state of being.


In common with our fellow participants in *The Bright Side of Night* conference, held in 2022 in Geneva, our research seeks to shed light on a cherished and sought-after nocturnal activity, namely the pursuit of restful slumber. Our project is rooted in the so-called 'positive turn' within the humanities – a phrase that was coined by Darrin McMahon in a history of emotions context, but which has been usefully adopted and adapted by medical humanities researchers such as Hannah Newton, who wish to uncover the positive agency and activities of a wide spectrum of healthcare practitioners in the past<sup>1</sup>. This 'positive turn' has encouraged us to shift focus away from the dominance of sleep

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1. Darrin McMahon, «Finding Joy in the History of Emotions», in Susan Matt and Peter Stearns (eds.), *Doing Emotions History*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2014, 104-19; Hannah Newton, *Misery to Mirth: Recovery from Illness in Early Modern England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

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disorders and endemic sleep loss among scholars of sleep from a variety of disciplines. These are topics that continue to direct our field's starting points for research questions and sustained efforts to identify apparent 'watershed moments' such as industrialization or the digital world in transforming human sleep fortunes – usually for the worse.

One of the consequences of this approach to the history of sleep has been a tendency to idealize and homogenize 'premodern' or 'pre-industrial' experiences of sleep – to speak, sometimes nostalgically, of 'sleep we have lost'<sup>2</sup>, and to obscure the active efforts of diverse early modern communities to *sleep well*, in a period that underwent its own wide-ranging environmental changes, from the so-called 'Little Ice Age' to transformations in land use, large-scale drainage of agricultural lands and processes of enclosure that curtailed people's opportunities to forage on common lands<sup>3</sup>.

In thinking about how these developments relate to sleep, we might start with ground moss. Ground moss was prized as insulation material for bedding and as mattress stuffing owing to its absorbency, and it was also commonly used in medical recipes to procure sleep. Given the varied applications of ground moss in relation to sleep, we must consider the impact of protracted processes of land reform that wiped out over 2.75 million hectares of waste and common land in England alone. Similarly, we might also ask what the impact was of forms of agrarian specialization such as convertible husbandry and the four-crop rotation system on regional and national food cultures linked to sleep. Such shifts are associated with increased and more varied food production and with an increase in dairying, which most likely impacted on dietary practices linked to healthy sleep. The shift from pasture to arable land cultivation introduced new systems of crop rotation, and controversial land conversion and reclamation projects.

2. Roger Ekirch, «Sleep We Have Lost: Pre-industrial Slumber in the British Isles», *The American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 343–86; Id., «The Modernization of Western Sleep: Or, Does Insomnia have a History?», *Past & Present*, 226 (2015), 149–92.

3. Gunhild Eriksdotter, «Did the Little Ice Age Affect Indoor Climate and Comfort? Re-theorizing Climate History and Architecture from the Early Modern Period», *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 13 (2013), 24–42.

Protests against the drainage of the English fens were partly driven by an appreciation of the ecological changes that would ensue, altering the customary range of foodstuffs and medicinal ingredients that people gathered to sustain and restore health. Similar projects in Cheshire and Lancashire also led to the depletion of mosslands, which provided fuel, insulation, and unique species of flora and fauna. Since drainage projects were accompanied by the widespread enclosure of common land, our project assesses the consequences of these changes for sleep management. Equally important is an assessment of increasing urbanization, and of the ecological and lifestyle challenges facing settlers in the English colonies of Virginia and Newfoundland. The way in which travelers and settlers adapted to the ecological profile of new habitats and attempted to adjust those environments to their own sleep requirements by transporting and growing ‘Old World’ crops and plants is a key concern, since it may uncover lively exchanges of medical expertise with indigenous communities<sup>4</sup>.

Our project, featuring Dr. Holly Fletcher, Dr. Leah Astbury, PhD student Lucy Elliott, and myself, seeks to offer a more nuanced explanation of what it meant for communities in early modern England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and early America to sleep well. It will be the first project to define and analyze sleep habits as historically situated environmental practices, and our chosen locations allow us to compare sleep-care practices across a range of early modern ecologies – from the boggy wetlands of Ireland and East Anglia, and the mountains of Wales and Virginia, to the temperate marine climates of coastal England, Scotland, and Newfoundland, all of which shaped their inhabitants’ motivations and opportunities for sleeping well.

Over the next four years, we aim to uncover an environmentally informed culture of ‘sleep care’, its conceptual underpinnings, and its manifestation in a range of everyday practices, from the selection of particular window coverings, bedding materials and heating devices to control temperature and light, to the sourcing of soporific foodstuffs, the cultivation of ingredients for

4. Pablo F. Gomez, *The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

sleep tonics, and foraging for materials to cleanse and scent pillows and mattresses. Investigating sleep-care practices thus opens an important pathway to understanding the geo-specific nature and dependence of these essential healthcare practices and we hope it will reveal that ‘sleeping well’ involved much more than simply avoiding sleep disorders or coping with sleep loss. It should also uncover the deep well of sleep-related environmental knowledge that communities, and especially women, developed to offset the potentially damaging effects of local ecologies, seasonal changes, and environmental change, and expand the range of actors that have populated the history of sleep in the early modern world to date. The aim then is to shift the tone of conversation from ‘crisis’ to ‘care’.

Communities in Britain and Ireland and settlers in England’s colonies of Virginia and Newfoundland c.1500–1750 offer the ideal testing grounds for our study. They shared an immersive knowledge of the natural world that was underpinned by concepts of embodiment and subjectivity that were acutely environmental in nature. Influenced by ancient medical works that were adapted, translated, and circulated in European vernacular languages from the late fifteenth century, early modern Europeans understood themselves as products of God and the natural world that He created. These works insisted that human bodies were highly sensitive to their physical surroundings, with which they shared a common elemental make-up. These elements in turn corresponded to astral influences and to the four essential qualities of heat, cold, dryness, and moisture, whose mixture determined the balance of bodily humors that was central to health, and to an individual’s ‘complexion’.

Ecological profiles of different places were critical components of this geo-humoral health paradigm in which bodies were assumed to become accustomed to particular locales over time. One practical implication of this paradigm was the geo-specific nature of healthcare knowledge and practices, which was reflected in the influential healthcare rules of the ‘six non-natural things’ that underpinned most early modern health regimens and which encouraged people to adapt to, or counteract, detrimental environmental influences, partly by understanding proximate

species of flora and fauna as beneficial resources for health preservation and restoration. The importance of place within pre-modern healthcare has been studied in a general sense, in relation to the medical framework of the six non-naturals and linked to urban centers and air quality<sup>5</sup>. The effect that different ecological profiles had on sleep-care practices nonetheless remains obscure.

By identifying the array of sleep-care practices that different sets of environmental relations fostered between c.1500 and 1750, our project expands the range of environmental changes that have been linked to the transformation of human sleep fortunes. We will assess the importance of early modern processes of environmental change on sleep habits and the ways in which people actively managed those habits. By its close, we hope to be able to offer a more complex and more positive analysis of the sleep-environment nexus than currently exists.

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5. Sandra Cavallo, Tessa Storey (eds.), *Conserving Health in Early Modern Culture: Bodies and Environments in Italy and England*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017; William Cavert, *The Smoke of London: Energy and the Environment in the Early Modern City*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016; Carole Rawcliffe, Claire Weeda (eds.), *Policing the Urban Environment in Premodern Europe*, Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam Press, 2019.

ABSTRACT

Sasha Handley, *The Bright Side of Night: Sleeping Well in the Early Modern World*

The following piece presents an overview of the new four-year research project 'Sleeping Well in the Early Modern World: An Environmental Approach to the History of Sleep Care', which is an Investigator Award funded by The Wellcome Trust [Grant number: 219834/Z/19/Z]. The project aims to uncover the myriad ways in which early modern communities in distinct locales within the early modern world (England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, coastal America) engaged with their physical surroundings to support healthy sleeping practices. We draw on herbals, recipe books, travel accounts, letters, diaries, archaeological remains and artefacts to understand how early modern knowledge about the material and botanical world shaped sleep practices, and how longer-term processes of environmental change from c. 1500–1750 influenced people's strategies for managing their sleep.

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