Background. Just like life expectancy in developed countries has increased significantly over the past two centuries, so the notion of old age has had to undergo changes not only as regards its chronological definition but especially in the description of what it entails and the expectations that surround it. Early modern medicine in England has been investigated by different scholars in a plethora of studies; in particular, eighteenth-century medicine in England has been thoroughly researched, among others, by Porter (1985/2002, 1992), Bynum (1990) and Taavitsainen (2014). However, as Porter (1985/2002: 285) underlines, “[t]he real watersheds are generally seen as occurring before or after the eighteenth century, with for example the Scientific Revolution, or the emergence of the family doctor in the early nineteenth century, or the coming of medical registration in 1858.” It is precisely this latter period, the onset of the late modern era spanning the beginning to the mid-nineteenth century, that is of interest to the present investigation.

Aims. The aim of this paper is to study how old age was defined and described in British dissemination tools, i.e. popular texts from specialist to layperson, directed at advising people on medical practices aimed at aging well, or at curing specific ailments in old age. What was their understanding of ‘good’ ageing? What conditions were associated with it and, in general, what was the discursive rendition of this stage of life?

Sources. For this purpose, the UK Medical Heritage collection of the Wellcome Library has been searched for the key term “OLD AGE”. The results have then been screened, keeping self-help texts published in England, which their authors openly state to be addressed to lay readers.


Primary sources


Forster, Thomas 1829. Medicina simplex, or, Practical rules for the preservation of health : printed at the request of some friends, for popular use. Chelmsford: Meggy and Chalk.

Anonymous 1832. Twenty minutes’ advice on diet, regimen, and other matters connected with health. With an essay on indigestion, and rules, by the observance of which, persons may live to a good old age, without consulting any medical man. A non-medical treatise. London: W. Kidd.

Secondary sources


