

Bagpipes and Dyspepsia

from a newspaper article ca. 1885.

It appears that it is all a mistake to assume that oatmeal is the cause of the national Scotch dyspepsia. The natural interpretation of the facts that the Scotch eat oatmeal and suffer from dyspepsia is that oatmeal produces dyspepsia. When *THE TIMES* expressed this opinion it did so in perfect good faith but now that a real Scotchman, who is an expert in dyspepsia, not only denies that oatmeal is indigestible, but explains in a perfectly satisfactory way the true cause of Scotch dyspepsia, it would be dishonest not to proclaim the innocence of oatmeal. Dyspepsia among Scotchmen is the result of listening to bagpipes, and the moment this assertion is made its truth becomes almost self-evident.

It may be urged by ignorant persons that the impression of a sound received on the tympanum of the ear cannot affect the stomach. This is, of course, entirely untrue. It is a well-established fact that certain songs produce nausea on the part of sensitive hearers. Excursionists on their way to Rockaway-by-sea have often been made violently sick by hearing the steamer's band play *Whoa Emma*, and a physician of this city has frequently prescribed *Dites lui* as an emetic in cases of poisoning.

It is a well-attested fact that the bagpipes, when heard by persons who are not accustomed to them, give rise to violent griping pains in the stomach which closely resemble the pains of Asiatic cholera. During the Sepoy Mutiny the Scotch regiments more than once placed large bodies of sepoys *hors de combat* by the use of bagpipes alone. Had not Havelock's little army included a strong corps of pipers it could never have made its way into Lucknow through the vast besieging force. Mr. Whittier speaks of the pipes at Lucklow as "stinging all the plain to life." The sepoys would hardly have described in that way the effect of pipe playing. As a matter of fact, thousands of rebels as soon as they heard the bagpipes clasped their hands to their abdominal regions and rolled on the plain in agony. Even those whose stomachs withstood the sound imagined that the sepoy camp had suddenly been smitten with cholera, and became so demoralized that Havelock forced his way through the midst of them almost unmolested, and reached the Residency without other casualties than the death of two wounded Englishmen, who were officially reported to have died with joy at seeing the relieving force, but who were really too weak to withstand the bagpipes.

Scottish children suffer severely from the bagpipe colic, and no careful mother will allow a baby in arms to hear the pipes. When the Scotch children reach the age of 3 or 4 years they are gradually hardened to the sound of bagpipes, and thought at first they are fairly doubled up with pain – for which whisky seems the only antidote – they are able in time to listen to *The Wild McGregor Clan-call* without betraying any signs of uneasiness. The bagpipe colic is never fatal except to infants and persons in a very weak condition, and Scotch physicians occasionally prescribe a course of pipes to patients suffering from obesity. Her Majesty the Queen has tried this remedy with apparently good results, though it is difficult to believe that is permanent effect upon her health can be beneficial.

No man, not even a Scotchman, can suffer for years from colic without having his digestive organs impaired. When a young Scotchman has accustomed his stomach to bear bagpipes without pain it may be safely assumed that his stomach is so weakened as to be totally unfit to digest ordinary food. In these circumstances it is possible that oatmeal is well adapted to the abnormal state of his digestive organs. At any rate, oatmeal can no longer be held as the cause of Scotch dyspepsia, and there is good reason to believe Carlyle owed his dyspepsia to his early exposure to bagpipes.