



Gout

By Dr. Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, Roy Porter G.S. Rousseau

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Gout has fascinated medical writers and cultural commentators from the time of ancient Greece. Historically seen as a disease afflicting upper-class males of superior wit, genius, and creativity, it has included among its sufferers Erasmus, the Medici, Edward Gibbon, Samuel Johnson, Immanuel Kant, and Robert Browning. Gout has also been the subject of powerful medical folklore, viewed as a disease that protects its sufferers and assures long life. This dazzlingly insightful and readable book investigates the history of gout and through it offers a new perspective on medical and social history, sex, prejudice, and class, and explains why gout was gender specific.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In their study of an ailment that has tormented the big toes of some big men--Kant, Samuel Johnson, Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson--Porter and Rousseau turn the argument of Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* on its head. Sontag thinks disease should be freed of its freight of cultural associations and stigmas.

But disease and metaphor inevitably go hand in hand. This was especially true in the days when gout was mysterious, before Queen Victoria's future physician showed it was caused by uric-acid crystals producing excruciating pain in the extremities. Milton told a friend that if he were only free of gout pain, blindness would be tolerable. The pain felt "as if I was walking on my eyeballs," writes one sufferer. Since one had to be rich to live long enough to get gout, and most victims were males (many of whom drank port laced with gout-intensifying lead), it won a reputation as just punishment for high living, and even a kind of badge of meritocratic honor. It was God's gift to caricaturists like Hogarth, Cruikshank, and Gillray. George Eliot used gout as a symbol for a sick society in *Middlemarch*. The data fascinates, but the professors don't wear their learning lightly. Still, they do score some good phrases. Explaining that there aren't many portraits of gout sufferers because few victims would pose, they write, "Who wants to be remembered as a septuagenarian freak of Falstaffian glob?" --*Tim Appelo*

From Library Journal

Porter is a well-known medical historian at the Wellcome Institute in London and author of *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (LJ 2/15/98), perhaps the best general history of medicine available today. Rousseau is an English professor at the University of Aberdeen. Together, they have written a thorough and enlightening history of gout, whose most famous sufferers included Samuel Johnson and Edward Gibbon. They explore the medical establishment's changing views of gout and the public's reaction to the disease. They also examine the idea that gout was a disease of the wealthy and the graphic images of gout in the media. Particular attention is paid to the disease's literary aspects and how it has been portrayed in the novels of such authors as Dickens and Thackeray. While this book is highly recommended for medical history and large academic libraries, its scope may be too narrow for most public and college libraries, which should consider Porter's *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* instead. ?Eric D. Albright, Duke Medical Center Lib., Durham, NC

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From Scientific American

Gout has a long tradition as the disease of high living--"just deserts for toppers and gluttons," as Porter and Rousseau put it. Indeed, some sufferers saw it as a mark of their high social standing and wealth. But suffer they did; the 19th-century English essayist Sydney Smith said an attack of gout felt "like walking on my eyeballs." (The disease is marked by painful inflammation of the joints of the extremities, particularly the big toe) The authors' focus is on the cultural history of the disease. They present an abundance of quotations from sufferers (many of them famous men), physicians trying to treat the disease, and quacks offering cures, many of which strike the modern reader as bizarre. But the medical story of how the disease came to be understood and how effective treatments were found is here, too. One should not conclude, however, that gout is a bygone affliction. The "underlying trends are not encouraging, in view of the protein- and fat-rich diets now typical of Western populations." Moreover, the occurrence of gout is rising worldwide "as a consequence of the Westernization of diet and habits."

Users Review

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