Preserving Health,
or a Few Plain and Easy Rules

Observe all the time the greatest exactness in your regimen or manner of living. Abstain from all mixed, all high-seasoned food. Use plain diet, easy of digestion; and this as sparingly as you can, consistent with ease and strength. Drink only water, if it agrees with your stomach; if not, good clear, small beer. Use as much exercise daily in the open air, as you can without weariness. Sup at six or seven, on the lightest food: go to bed early, and rise betimes. To persevere with steadiness in this course, is often more than half the cure. Above all, add to the rest, (for it is not labour lost) that old fashionable medicine, Prayer. And have faith in God who *killeth and maketh alive, who bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.*

John Wesley, ‘The Preface’, *Primitive Physic*

It is easier to preserve than recover health, to prevent than to cure diseases.

George Cheyne, *An Essay of Health and Long Life*

Regimen and the non-naturals

Commitment to a constant regimen or ‘Rules for Health’ achieved harmony, and harmony was the resolution of contradictory forces. It was the golden mean in life, hence Wesley’s injunction to ‘observe all the time the greatest exactness in your regimen or manner of living’. By some quirk of historical fate, Wesley’s rule for living here paralleled that of the ancient Methodists; a sect of physicians under Nero so-called because of their insistence on a specific method of diet and exercise in the treatment of illness.

The resolution of contradictory forces involved harmonising mind, body and spirit. The positive pursuit of health, hygiene and temperance via regimen went beyond medicine and extended into the spiritual realm of morality, virtue, healing, purity and wholeness. This was something that Cheyne had been keen to stress in the ‘Preface’ to his *An Essay of Health and Long Life.*
The infinitely wise author of Nature has so contrived things, that the most remarkable rules of preserving life and health are moral duties commanded us…³

Regimen and temperance were moral duties, and Cheyne asked the reader to consider the example of those early eastern Christians who lived on very little food while maintaining a temperate lifestyle. He makes this same point in his An Essay on Regimen, Together with Five Discourses, Medical, Moral, and Philosophical, the subtitle of which indicated that the work contained moral, as well as medical and philosophical lessons:

[T]here is no possibility of happiness here or hereafter, without purity of heart and life; and that the true reason of the present darkness, both in Providence and Revelation, is the difficulty of recovering this purity of heart and life, to its utmost perfection…⁴

Those who ‘wantonly’ transgress the ‘self-evident rules of health’ were guilty of:

[A] degree of self-murder… and consequently the greatest crime he can commit against the author of his being; as it is slighting and despising the noblest gift he could bestow upon him….⁵

‘Slighting’ and ‘despising’ the ‘noblest gift’ had moral and physical consequences for the body, which could bring innumerable agonies. Men needed to control the gratification of their appetites, passions and desires in order to ‘enjoy a greater measure of health than they do….⁶

Of crucial importance in Primitive Physic is its recommendation of an exact manner of living or sensible regimen. Emphasising preventative strategies was how Wesley, like Cheyne, sought to increase awareness about health and hygiene in a way that was cost-effective and safe. This consisted of a sparing diet supplemented by copious amounts of fresh water and as much exercise as possible, preferably in the open country air. Cold bathing was an essential part of Wesley’s regimen, but another major aspect of preserving health was for individuals to keep clean their clothes, houses and furniture. Following a Priestley-esque mode of pneumatic chemistry, Wesley identified the malodorous effect of poorly ventilated houses, hospitals and gaols.

The six non-naturals consisted of air, diet, sleep, exercise, evacuations or obstructions and the passions. Avoidance of excess in the non-naturals increased longevity, and Wesley constantly preached the importance of avoiding all extremes in food, drink and the passions. Cheyne argued that the non-naturals are so called: