

VIEWS & REVIEWS

BETWEEN THE LINES

A healthy island

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The first tourist guidebook to the island of Sark, as far as I know, was written by a doctor, G W James, in 1845. The guidebook is understandably short, the island being so small; but the author, being a doctor, devotes an eighth of it (14 pages) to medical matters.

Sark, on the face of it, was not an exciting place to visit: "To those whose minds are only kept in motion by the aid of others, or by the attractions of the billiard-table and news room, Sark might, after a cursory view, prove a source of *ennui*."

But Dr James offered some reassurance to nervous visitors to so remote a destination: "It may here be observed as important to visitors in the event of sickness or accident, that a surgeon now resides on the island, which was not the case until the year 1840."

Till then, islanders and visitors had to send to Guernsey for medical assistance. The combination of "the general healthy condition of the inhabitants" and the complete absence of medical advice spoke well of the island's climate, in Dr James's view, but not necessarily ill of the medical profession, as some ignorant and superstitious islanders had concluded, for whom "fatalism very nearly usurped the place of reason."

The value of medicine as a profession was established beyond reasonable doubt for Dr James by a section on death rates on the island, which is unusually detailed for a such a short guidebook. In the four years from 1807 to 1810, he tells us, there were 33 deaths for 300 inhabitants; in the four years from 1840 to 1843, there were 33 deaths for 750 inhabitants.

To no one more than the medical profession is the public good indebted for a diminution of the general mortality. Dr James,

the author of *The Sark Guide*, omits to say so in so many words, but the doctor who arrived on the island in 1840 was Dr James, the author of *The Sark Guide*.

Sark was just the place for those worried about their health. There were no epidemics: "During the prevalence of epidemics, this island has escaped miraculously. In the year 1832, when Indian cholera prevailed so fatally, there were in Jersey 341 deaths out of 787 cases, and in Guernsey 100 persons were carried off, but not a case occurred on Sark."

Dr James thought this might be because of the disinfecting iodine and chlorine released into the air by the seaweed, used both for fuel and fertiliser, as well as the constant sea breeze that diluted the infective miasma.

So healthy indeed was Sark that some bad habits might be indulged in with relative impunity: "Irritation of mind and body is known to be a dread destroyer of the human race, but with the prophylactics of simple diet, exercise and tranquillity, even the consequences of excess are kept at bay; in proof of which some of the natives, who are habitual spirit drinkers, have attained a very advanced age. Indeed, if they survive childhood, their most common age of death is between 70 and 90, with as many dying between 80 and 90 as between 70 and 80."

Above all, Sark was an excellent place for cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise for the hypochondriacal: "Brace up the nerves and muscles of a timid valetudinarian by a gentle and systematic course of exertion on the hills, and he will gradually become more bold and energetic."

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