

# REVIEWS

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*The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York. With suggestions for its improvement. A discourse (with additions) delivered on the 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1844, at the Repository of the American Institute. By John H. Griscom<sup>1</sup>, M.D., Fellow of the College of Physicians and Surgeons; Physician of the New York Hospital; late Physician of the city and eastern dispensaries. New York; Harper & Brothers, 82 Cliff street. 1845.*

If any evidence were needed to prove the utter incapacity of the men into whose hands the government of this great city has fallen, to discharge the duties of their fearfully responsible station, the following extract from the preface of this important pamphlet would furnish it.

“The subject matter of the following pages was originally addressed, in the form of a letter, to the Chief Magistrate of the city. Its preparation was undertaken, principally with a view to an exposition of the true principles which should regulate the action of public bodies, in matters relating to the health of cities, in a knowledge of, or concern for, which, recent events had shown our own municipal legislature to be somewhat deficient. Appreciating fully the importance of its facts and suggests, the Mayor transmitted the communication to a co-ordinate branch of the City Government, recommending it to their serious attention. After several weeks’ deliberation upon it, the committee to whom it was referred arrived at the conclusion, embodied in the following language quoted from their report: ‘Your committee do not press to be judges of the subject, or in other words, they do not think it proper at this time, to go into such a measure,’ and they recommended that the paper be returned to its author.”

We do not intend to case any peculiar blame on the Native American party<sup>2</sup>, as the politicians are called who have the welfare of our citizens in their hands at present, because we

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Griscom (1809-1874) was a leader in the early public health movement. He served as the city inspector of New York City, starting in 1842. Griscom pushed for better sanitary conditions in the city and made recommendations towards this goal, which led to his removal from office. Three years after his election, in 1845, he published *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York*, upon which this review is based. Griscom continued to work with health and sanitation issues, and spoke at a number of conventions about the matter. Eventually, sanitary reforms began to be put into place.

<sup>2</sup> A U.S. political party that later came to be known as the Know Nothing Party. Originally the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner. Called Native American Party due to the party’s nativist views in response to the influx of Catholic immigrants to New York. The party was gaining strength in New York around this time, though it would eventually decline after 1856. The party’s political goals likely took away support for the sanitation movement.

believe that either of the two parties who strove for the management of our municipal affairs would have acted in the same manner. In truth, our politicians have yet to learn their alphabet in the art of government; but the misfortune of it is, that their instructors, the people, are woefully deficient in this kind of knowledge themselves. The happiness of the people seems never to be thought of in municipal legislatures. The exact objects aimed at by our Common Council it would be difficult to ascertain. The spending of a good deal of money, and the best way of getting it from the people, seem to be the only definite notions of government that any of our boards of aldermen have had during the past twenty years. The present party in power regard the reading of some particular books in the district schools as the great point to be settled by them; and while the people are literally dying in consequence of inhaling the unhealthy miasma of filthy streets, the party that has the power to purge the atmosphere, and make the city a desirable residence, waste all its energies in forcing a certain part of the children under their charge to take their first lessons in reading out of particular books<sup>3</sup> which are repugnant to the feelings of their parents. It matter not a whit to a denizen of our streets what the city fathers have done or are doing, so long as the thoroughfares and byways are nearly impassable for filth. If it were an object to the citizens of this metropolis, to tax themselves at the enormous rate which they were compelled to do for the sake of pure water, it is quite as much of an object to them to tax themselves for the sake of pure air; and we have no doubt that taxation would be submitted to as cheerfully in one case as in the other. Clean streets would keep many a family in New York that now is compelled to seek for a healthier home in Brooklyn, or Jersey City, or Staten Island. Gentlemen who have moved over upon Long Island, after living many years in the city, find that they make a very great saving in their doctor's bills.

Dr. Griscom says; "a highly respectable friend, a distinguished advocated, informed me lately, that some of his children had not had a day's illness during the two years they had been at school in the country, while the others, residing at home, though in a comparatively salubrious position in the city, cost him from twenty to thirty dollars each<sup>4</sup>, for medicine and medical attendance."

And yet in spite of this experience on the part of this distinguished advocate, he will continue to reside in the city, when he might by a very trifling sacrifice live in the country, and preserve his own and his children's health. We know several distinguished advocates whose families live ten or twelve miles from the City Hall, who contrive to be pretty constant in their attendance at the courts. There is very little more inconvenience, for a lawyer, in living on Staten Island, than in living in Chelsea or Union Square; while the increased vigor which they derive from daily crossing the water and breathing the pure air of the country, enables them to accomplish quite as much labor as the time lost in traveling to and from their office would do. It is an unaccountable delusion that keeps men confined in the city when business will allow of a residence in the country. Setting aside all the enjoyments of a rural home, the cheapness of it should induce a prudent man to prefer it. A

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<sup>3</sup> The textbook being used in schools was known for promoting anti-Catholic sentiment. Additionally, public schools used the King James Bible during in school prayer time. Schools in New York were, at this time, allowing Catholic students to be excused from prayer time because of the use of the Protestant King James Bible. Around 1842, the use of the King James Bible was required in all public schools in New York. However, the increase of European Catholics in the public school systems caused there to be resistance to the law, especially once the Know Nothing Party started to push for the law to be applied in states other than New York. Riots broke out between the Catholics and Protestants, causing the Know Nothing Party to lose popularity in New York City.

<sup>4</sup> This amount would be roughly equal to \$625 to \$937 today.

tolerably respectable house in town costs from four hundred to eight hundred dollars per annum<sup>5</sup>. Within ten or twelve miles of the Batrery, a comfortable country house with an orchard, garden, and so forth, may be had at from one to two hundred dollars<sup>6</sup>; an extra hundred dollars will cover all the expenses of travel, while the gain in health would be worth a sum which cannot be estimated in dollars and cents. Dr. Griscom very clearly proves that a city residence cannot be healthy, even in the most favorable situations; what it must be then, in the least favorable, the following appalling statement will show.

“Almost every one can recall to mind, some proof of the effects of nauseous odors, of the inhalation of foul air, or of sleeping in a small confined apartment, upon his own health and feelings. These effects may have been only temporary, but they will serve to that a prolonged continuance of them, must, in reason, produce permanently bad results upon the mental and corporeal powers. If the inhaled air (one great source of the life, health, and vigor of the animal structure) is deteriorated in quality, or diminished in quantity, below the standards necessary for a perfect decarbonization of the blood in the lungs, the blood necessarily becomes burdened with impurities, and fails to impart to the system the qualities demanded by nature for the due maintenance of health and strength. Every city resident who takes a stroll into the country can testify to the difference between the two atmospheres of the two situations; —the contrast of our out-door (to say nothing of the in-door) atmosphere, loaded with the animal and vegetable exhalations of our streets, yards, sinks, and cellars— and the air of the mountains, rivers, and grassy plains, needs no epicurean<sup>7</sup> lungs to detect it. The superior corporeal activity, and the mental exhilaration imparted by it, are the *prima facie*<sup>8</sup> proofs of its superiority. Compare the pale face of the city belle, or matron, after the long confinement of the winter and spring, with the same countenance in the fall, upon her return from a ‘few weeks’ tour to the Springs and Niagara, and observe whether the return of the long absent rose upon the cheek is not accompanied with a greater elasticity of frame, and a happier and stronger tone of mind.

“Descend a few steps further, from the airy and well-lighted chamber and parlor, to the confined apartments of the pent-up court, and the damp, secluded cellar; draw a contrast between the gay inhabitant of the former, and the attenuated tenant of the latter, and we may then judge of the influences of the air which they respectively respire.

“Observe, further, the vast difference in the development of frame, healthiness of countenance, and power of endurance, between the children of the farmer, and offspring of the city resident.

“The following facts show, by figures, the sad condition in which a very large number of our people may be said barely to exist.

“As a great part of the population of these places are destitute of the means of paying for medical assistance, the duty of ministering to them in hours of sickness, falls upon the Dispensary Physicians. I find, upon, examining the records of their labors, the reports of the three medical

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<sup>5</sup> This amount would be roughly equal to \$12,500 to \$25,000 today. An estimated \$10.40 was the average amount made per month, which would be roughly \$325.00 today. So, approximately, the average working man would make around \$3,900 a year.

<sup>6</sup> This amount would be roughly equal to \$3,125 to \$6,250. Compared to the cost of a town house, a country house is a much more reasonable price, though likely still high for the average working man.

<sup>7</sup> Relates to the philosopher Epicurus, whose philosophy emphasized the pursuit of pleasure, though the adjective is usually capitalized when used in relation to him. The word can also be used to describe someone who is primarily devoted to pleasure and enjoyment.

<sup>8</sup> *prima facie*: as it appears at first without investigation. A French phrase used primarily in law.

charities for the year ending March, 1844, there were prescribed for at the offices, and the homes of the poor at the

Northern Dispensary, 13,317 Patients,

Eastern “ 17,107 “

New York “ 23,858 “

Total, 54,282

From this number a deduction is to be made of those vaccinated, beginning 4505. In visiting the sick poor at their homes, however, it happens very frequently that some are prescribed for whose names are neglected to be entered, so that it is perfectly safe to estimate the number of sick persons who received aid from these charities, to be over 50,000 in one year. In the corresponding year there were admitted into the Alms House Hospital 2332 patients, and into the City Hospital about 1000, exclusive of seamen, making a total of over 53,000, without enumerating the sick poor attended by private charity.”

[To be continued.]



## EDITOR'S NOTE

This article was written as a review for Dr. John H. Griscom's *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York*. Griscom's work was written in an effort to increase awareness of sanitary issues in a metropolis area, particularly in regards to the working class. The anonymous author of the review seems to be in agreement with Griscom's statements regarding sanitation conditions. The author also seems to disagree with the popular political platform of New York; that is the issue of the recent increase of Catholic Irish and German immigrants. More on Griscom and the Native American Party can be found in the end-notes of the article. An additional area of interest is the author's assumption of "cheapness," which the author presses as a benefit of country life, alongside the better air and living conditions. The target audience of Griscom's essay was, as the name of the essay suggests, the laboring class. Because of this, there is an emphasis on cheapness and cost of living for the readers.

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