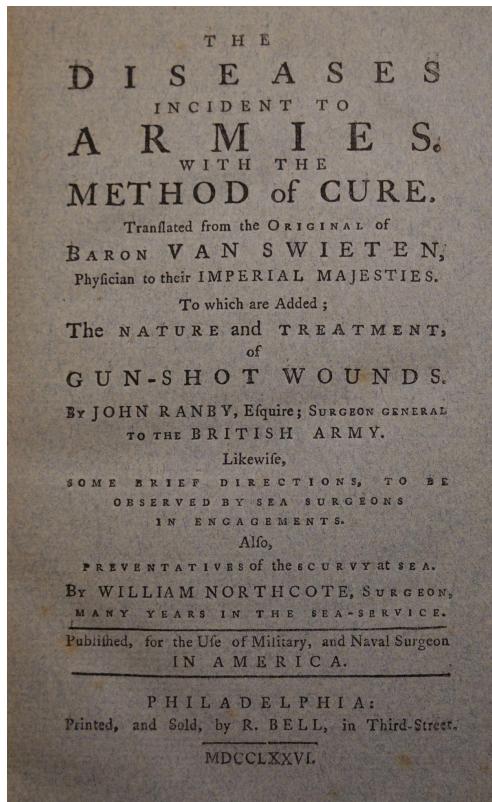


Noa Ryan

INFO 689 Rare Books & Special Collections

Prof. Kyle R. Triplett

Publishing, Paper, and the American Enlightenment
Robert Bell's 1776 edition of *The Diseases Incident to Armies*



Imprint Information

Diseases incident to armies with their method of cure... was originally written by Baron Gerard van Swieten and widely translated throughout the 18th century throughout Europe. This version was printed in English, in Philadelphia, by printer Robert Bell in 1776, and appears to be the first edition. Bell is first and foremost notable in U.S. printing history as the first printer of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, a catalytic text of the revolutionary period and to this day one of

the bestselling titles in the history of publishing in the United States, which was published in the same year as *Diseases*. Both texts reflect their context in the midst of an occupied territory. In a United States that hasn't seen widespread war waged within its own territories since the mid 19th century, it's easy to lose sight of what it means that these books were published in the time and place that they were. They were wartime pamphlets, printed quickly for urgent dissemination and immediate use. Van Swieten's original text was authored in a different context, that of the War of the Austrian Succession and the ensuing conflicts between Austria and neighboring Germany over the years that followed. It is a highly practical medical text that succinctly describes the most common diseases observed in army camps at the time and assigns simple and clear protocols for their treatment, including recipes for remedies. In this light it is unsurprising that the book proved so popular across many countries and contexts.

Descriptive and Analytical Bibliography

The book is an octavo bound chiefly in fours, printed in a Caslon-like roman typeface with occasional italics throughout for emphasis. It is bound in a late 19th or possibly very early 20th century collector's binding with a marbled paper cover and black goatskin at the corners and around the spine, on which the title, author, printer, and publication year are imprinted in gilded roman typeface lettering. The inside cover, also lined with marbled paper, bears the bookplate of Samuel W. Pennypacker, the jurist, historian, and former governor of Pennsylvania from 1903-1907, according to the Pennsylvania Museum & Historical Commission. Given the importance of Robert Bell to the revolutionary and printing history of the state, Pennypacker's collection makes sense as a place for the book to have ended up prior to arriving at the NYPL.



Another important feature of this book is the paper, whose qualities are reflective of the colonial and specifically revolutionary-era papermaking industry. The paper is blue, due to its impurity and likely high wool content, as visible in the large fibers in the image above. Papermaking had a longstanding history in the colonies, but largely went underground in the revolutionary era as the Stamp Act and Townshend Act heavily taxed colonists on paper by requiring them to purchase imported British paper subject to exorbitant tariffs.

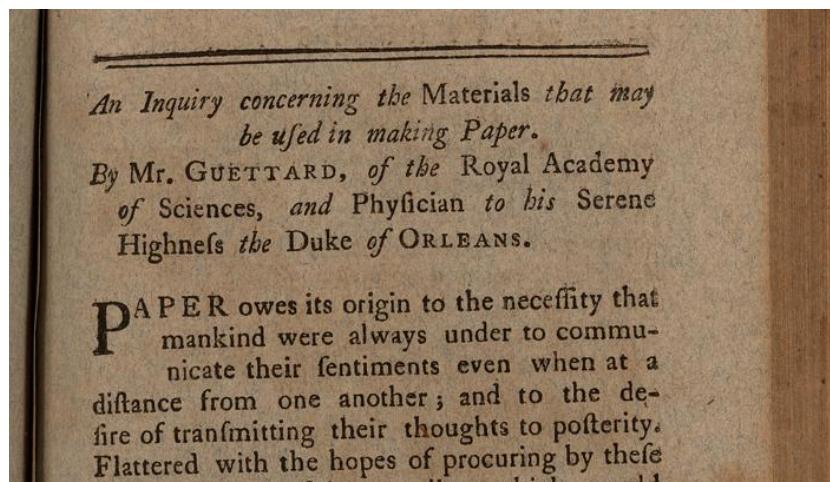
There are no watermarks on this paper due to the conditions under which it was produced, as many papermakers may not have wished to sign their work due to the illegal and politically risky nature of the work of papermaking at the time. This was common in paper at the time, though watermarks were used widely in American papermaking before and after the revolutionary period (and sometimes during). Dard Hunter's *Papermaking in Pioneer America*, general trends in these watermarks are described as follows:

In early American papermaking the watermarks were in the form of fanning and household implements, tools, utensils, crests, arms, leaves, flowers, trees, doves, eagles, animals, human figures, and the names or

initials of the papermakers. Two common watermarks in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American paper are the phrases "SAVE RAGS" and "WORK AND BE RICH," the latter lettering usually in connection with the design of a plow. (p. 18)

Robert Bell, printer of the book, was heavily involved in the domestic paper industry, particularly in efforts to mobilize the masses to donate their rags for paper production. Efforts to do this involved introducing a system of incentives sponsored by members of the printing industry and advertising these schemes heavily in the printed news media of the time (Wroth, 149-150).

In 1777, a year after publishing both *Common Sense* and *The Diseases Incident to Armies...*, Bell published a book that contained what Lawrence Wroth refers to in his *The Colonial Printer* as “the first writing on the subject of paper making to come from the American press.” (p. 150)



Source: www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/exhibitions/printer/pages/materials.html

The collation formula, signing statement, and pagination statement I determined for the book are as follows:

8⁰: [A]⁴ B² C-P⁴ 2P-U⁴ [W]²

[\$1(-W¹) signed]; 84 leaves, pp. [1-5] 6-8 [9-13] 14-103 [104]
105-112 [113-117] 118-128 [129] 130-150 [151] 152-164
[165-168]

This short book was printed and bound according to a straightforward and logical structure, with few outright mistakes other than the repetition of the signature “P.” To me, this was reflective of an efficiency likely borne of high demand. This is the same print shop that earlier in the year of 1776 had printed *Common Sense*, a publication so popular that there are estimates floating around that something north of 70% of literate adults had read it within the year. They were operating in wartime conditions and with real urgency to get the materials they were printing done fast and done right, albeit with no frills.

Research Value

I believe (along with the 69 other libraries around the world that hold this volume in their special collections) that the book, both as object and vessel for its contents, holds significant research value with relevance to a number of different fields. Scholars of the history of science and the history of medicine will find the content of the book useful to their research, and may find this volume particularly insightful for its unique place in a genealogy linking European medical science of the Enlightenment era to the practice and development of this science in colonial America. Those working in the (in my view) particularly fertile historiographic field concerned with relationships between philosophy, science, and economy will find this text useful for its reflection of the same genealogies that link not only European Enlightenment science to medical practice in colonial America, but also link this tradition of science to more humanities-based Enlightenment philosophies on both continents – Bell’s printing of *Common*

Sense mere months before this medical text makes the material proximities of these traditions clear for the attentive researcher. Van Swieten himself said, in his treatise on vampirism that earned him a fictionalized portrayal in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, that "the more science progresses, the smaller will become the number of miracles." (Vampire Film Reviews) Students of critical history and theory may find this text and its history an instructive artifact of the famed de-enchantment of the world in its incipience.

My own academic research in the field of art history has centered on the co-constituencies of the long shadows cast by Enlightenment ideologies and their manifestations in material culture of the 19th century. I find this text a rich object for the kind of analysis that this kind of work calls for, one that employs ideological and material analyses as consubstantial rather than discrete modes of inquiry, and imagine that other researchers would, and indeed have, felt the same.

Given the large number of copies available, I would consider lending the object to another institution for an exhibition, though for the same reason I'm not sure that it would realistically come up as a request. Assuming that the borrowing institution would follow all conservation related protocols for exhibition of rare materials, and that their exhibition added something to the public understanding of the book in its contextualization, I would be willing to lend it.

Valuation and Condition

A copy of the same edition (though with seemingly better quality paper) sold for \$10,624 at Christie's Printed & Manuscript Americana sale in May of 2011, landing squarely in the

middle of the auction house's price estimate. Given the number of copies of this exact edition that exist in libraries – 69 according to WorldCat – that seems like a solid price, surely bolstered by some secondhand cult aura conferred upon the book by its having shared a press and printer with the first editions of *Common Sense* in the same year.

One thing I wonder about, but didn't get to delve into as much as I might have liked to, is how much the high wool content quality of the paper in my specific copy might actually add to its value. Of course, typically damage like the discoloration on these pages would detract from the appraisal value of an item, but in this case (and perhaps this is just because I did way too much reading about colonial papermaking!) these qualities actually seem to lend an air of authenticity and specificity to the copy. Even the foxing and brittleness of the uneven, deckle edges of the pages seem to suggest the possible use of this volume in combat, exposed to elements in an army camp or even on the battlefield. Ultimately, that may be the antique dealer in me talking – regardless of the industry standard around presentation of these kinds of things, I know that's how I'd contextualize this volume if I were describing it for a dealer or auction catalog.

The binding is another matter – while it's not in terrible condition, it is a bit fragile and there is some wearing on the leather at the corners and spine. This kind of damage doesn't really offer much in terms of authenticity or romanticism, but I do think that the Pennypacker bookplate and provenance does, situating the book in a tradition of Pennsylvania state history that spans three centuries. I'm really not sure what I'd estimate as a price for this, particularly given how much the Americana market may have changed since 2011, when the most recent publicly available sale of this edition occurred. That being said, accounting for the uniqueness of

the paper, the *Common Sense* factor, and the Pennypacker provenance, I'd assess the value as somewhere in the same ballpark of \$8,000-\$12,000 estimated by Christie's at that 2011 sale.

Experience

I enjoyed my experience in the reading room a lot. Interacting with the book was exciting and aspects of the process of being served materials were clearly explained by the reference and technical services staff. I didn't feel like I was being watched or surveilled while engaging with the materials, there was a feeling of trust in the reading room. It was also great to be there with so many other researchers. At one point, I actually ran into a researcher who works as a fellow at the museum library I've been working at for the past year. His research is on 30th century queer cultural and political history, and it was cool to know that everyone in the reading room could be working on such vastly different material. The reading room I work in serves a lot of rare material but all within a single subject area. I really appreciated how the diversity of collections reflected in the research being done in the reading room, and enjoyed the quiet, trustful atmosphere.

Another component that I liked about this research was the digital aspect. Because this material is deeply in the public domain, I was able to do so much research over the internet that I wouldn't have been able to do researching a more contemporary object. It feels almost like science fiction to be navigating texts printed over 200 years ago over the internet, like the people who spent their lives building the infrastructure of print media were working towards something that they didn't know anything about, something that they could really scarcely even imagine. I felt more grateful than ever for the human traces they left behind in their work, traces I got to

glimpse from a world more mediated and complex than they would ever experienced. Yet this world is one that they built, among countless others, despite or because of the fact that they couldn't and would never see it. These experiences with artifacts of the past, of people and ideas who have died and yet whose lives made the world we know, give me cause to seriously reflect about what unseen world I'm helping to build and what traces I might leave in this one for it. I'm thankful to have had the opportunity to engage in that reflection, and agree that, as Robert Bell quotes the Bishop Jewel in a list of literary quips on the reverse side of his bookselling catalog in 1780, "A good Book is a Noble Companion."

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