

Sir John Colbatch and Augustan Medicine: Experimentalism, Character and Entrepreneurialism†

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Summary

The medical career of Sir John Colbatch illuminates some of the ways in which experimental philosophy, social change, and medical entrepreneurialism together helped bring about the end of the old medical regime in England. Colbatch's career in Augustan England depended very much on a growing public culture in which the well-to-do decided matters of intellectual importance for themselves, becoming increasingly free not only from the clerics but from the physicians. In this new world, debates about the fundamental principles of the new science took place increasingly in public, and in the English language, without the learned men of the university being able to enforce their authority. It gave people like Colbatch a new opportunity to make their way into the medical establishment.

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1. Introduction

Physick for Ages past has gropt her way
In Paths of Darkness, without any Ray
Of Certain Truth, and still going astray:
When Colbatch rose, who with reviving Light
Dispelled the Clouds, and chas'd away the Night.

....

Such are the Myst'ries of which thou dost unfold,
They'll write thy Name in Characters of Gold:
To Thee alone Mankind's indebted more,
Then t'all the Doctors that have gone before.

J. C. junior¹

¹ 'To the unknown Dr. Colbatch, Upon his several Most ingenious Tracts in Physick, Especially that of Alkalies and Acids', introducing Colbatch, *A Relation Of a very Sudden and Extraordinary Cure of a Person Bitten by a Viper, By the Means of Acids* (1698). The full citations to Colbatch's fifteen books are given in the Bibliography, in chronological order.

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As this attempt at heroic poetry suggests, one of the most remarkable London medical careers of the turn of the eighteenth century—a period of many remarkable medical careers—was that of John Colbatch. Probably born during the 1660s, beginning as an apprentice and then freeman apothecary in Worcester, he came to London in the early 1690s, where in 1696 he became a licentiate of the London College of Physicians; eventually, in 1716, he obtained a knighthood from George I. He died at what is described as ‘an advanced age’ on 15 January, 1728/9.² During his lifetime, Colbatch published over a dozen books, most of which had several editions. He also became the central figure in one of the most vigorous pamphlet wars of the end of the seventeenth century. His many medical enterprises are therefore a telling story of how the social and political world affected English medicine in the period. But the pamphlet war that he caused also gives insight into the intellectual world in which such men could rise to medical importance: a world in which the ‘experimental philosophy’ had become the touchstone of truth yet meant different things to different people. The collapse of the old medical regime that allowed people like Colbatch to flourish had many causes, but not least among them was the confusion brought about by controversies in the new science.

Despite the promise of the poem that Colbatch would be ever remembered as one of mankind’s great benefactors, one would be hard pressed, indeed, to find out anything about him in the historical literature. There is a very short paragraph on him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.³ That entry is dependent in turn upon William Munk’s short mention of Colbatch in his *Roll of the Royal College of Physicians*. Typically, Munk is clear about summing up Colbatch’s life: ‘He was a voluminous writer, but not of the highest class’.⁴ Ninety years later, G. N. Clark made one mention of Colbatch, but confused matters quite a bit: Clark calls Colbatch a ‘junior fellow’ (an unknown College rank) and repeatedly refers to him as ‘Dr Colbatch’, when in fact Colbatch never rose above the rank of licentiate and never obtained any university degrees.⁵ To confuse matters further, the *Short Title Catalogue* and catalogue of the British Library attribute the historical books of another John Colbatch, the Professor

² William Munk, *The Roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, second edition (London, 1878), I, 517. Munk’s information came from the Annals of the Royal College of Physicians.

³ Colbatch, Sir John (d. 1729), physician, a native of Worcester, where he practised for some years as an apothecary, was admitted a licentiate of the College of Physicians on 22 Dec. 1696, was knighted by George I on 5 June 1716, and died on 15 January 1728/9. His books are ridiculed in Garth’s “Dispensary”, canto v. He published: ... [nine books]. His earlier tracts called forth “Examination of John Colbatch, his books”, by Richard Boulton, 1699’, *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1887), XI, 252 (hereafter *DNB*). This entry, quite unusually, is unsigned.

⁴ William Munk (footnote 2), 517–8, quotes from Samuel Garth’s *Dispensary* (1699), canto v (see below, p. 501), to prove his point. Munk also lists nine of Colbatch’s books, the same ones later mentioned by the *DNB*.

⁵ Our Colbatch is not mentioned by John and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigiensis* (Cambridge, 1924–1927), or Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxoniensis, 1500–1714* (Oxford, 1891–1892). Clark mentions Colbatch in the context of the disputes within the College in the 1690s, simply noting his complaint against John Radcliffe and the fact that when accused of speaking ill of the College Colbatch blamed his words on John Badger (on whom, see below, p. 487). Since Colbatch was not admitted as a Fellow, Clark’s conclusion that ‘Dr. Colbatch was the only fellow admitted between 1694 and 1701’, is wrong (the only Fellow admitted in the period was D. Nicolas, and several physicians were made Candidates during these years): G. N. Clark, *A History of the Royal College of Physicians* (Oxford, 1964), II, 471.

of Moral Theology at Cambridge from 1707 to 1744, to our medical writer.⁶ Finally, while there is reason for Colbatch to have been treated by those who have written about the history of quackery; not even C. J. S. Thompson's mine of anecdotal information makes mention of him.⁷

No, Colbatch seems to be one of those people so typical of the time who was a bit too respectable to be treated as a quack, and a bit too outrageous to be listed among the respectable. Colbatch's rise to prominence illustrates perfectly the contemporary excitement about experiment, contestability of theory, debate over character, weakening of the medical establishment, and growth of public sentiment as a judge of propriety and efficacy that makes the period so important. It is precisely because Colbatch, like John Radcliffe and a great many others of the period, made his career in ways that show the differences between the turn of the eighteenth century and our own era that his story is so interesting and instructive, and it deserves a closer look.

2. Empiricism and experiment: a new remedy and its surgical tests

John Colbatch's later testimony makes it plain that he began as an apothecary's apprentice in Worcester, gradually rising to the rank of master in the Mercer's Company (to which the apothecaries belonged), and developing a good practice there before trying his fortune in the capital. He moved from Worcester to London some time in the early 1690s, probably in the wake of his friend Dr William Cole. Cole had earned an Oxford MD in 1666, before entering upon a successful medical practice at Worcester.⁸ Cole became part of Thomas Sydenham's network after writing to him in 1681, afterwards calling Sydenham 'my Learned and Worthy Friend'.⁹ Colbatch knew Cole very well from at least the mid 1690s,¹⁰ and on several occasions praised his

⁶ Donald Wing, compiler, *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America, and of English Books Printed in other Countries, 1641–1700*, second edition (New York, 1972–1988). John Colbatch BA, MA, BD, and DD (1706) served for some years as chaplain at Lisbon between his BD and DD degrees (John and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, I, Pt. 1); he, and not our medical practitioner, *pace* the *STC*, is therefore certainly the author of *An Account of the Court of Portugal* (London, 1700), with French translation as *Relation de la Cour de Portugal sous D. Pedre II. A Present Regnant. Traduite de l'Anglois* (Amsterdam, 1702). Although the practitioner Colbatch is credited by the British Library with Jodocus Crull, *Memoires of Denmark* (London, 1700), Dutch edition as *Mémoires de Dannemark, contenant la vie et le regne de defunt Christienne V, roy de Dannemark et la Norvege, etc. Trad. de l'anglois* (Utrecht, 1701), it, too, was undoubtedly by the divine.

⁷ C. J. S. Thompson, *The Quacks of Old London* (London, 1928). Thompson probably makes no mention of Colbatch because he was not one of those who advertised his practice by handbills, the two collections of these in the British Library being the major sources of Thompson's work. Roy Porter has recently mentioned Colbatch in passing in a line in his *Health for Sale: Quackery in England 1660–1850* (Manchester, 1989), p. 44. Colbatch is treated all too briefly in my *The Decline of the Old Medical Regime in Stuart England* (Ithaca, 1986), pp. 214 and 237; he gets more space in H. J. Cook, 'Practical Medicine and the British Armed Forces After the "Glorious Revolution"', *Medical History*, 34 (1990), 16–20. The only other treatment of Colbatch I have been able to discover is a short discussion of his 'hymn' to mistletoe of 1719, in Leo Kanner, 'Mistletoe, Magic and Medicine', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 7 (1939), 875–936 (pp. 928–9).

⁸ Anthony Wood, *Fasti Oxonienses, or Annals of the University of Oxford* (London, 1820), II, 160, 230, 291. According to J. F. Payne's article in the *DNB*, IV, 73, people of distinction from the vicinity of Worcester consulted Cole.

⁹ William Cole, *A Physico-Medical Essay Concerning the late frequency of Apoplexies. Together with a general Method of their Prevention, and Cure. In a Letter to a Physitian* (Oxford, 1689), p. 113. Cole's letter of 1681 had called forth Sydenham's *Dissertatio Epistolaris ad spectatissimum doctissimumque virum Gulielmum Cole. M.D. De observationibus nuperis circa curationem Variolarum confluentium: nec non De affectione Hysterica* (London, 1682).

¹⁰ J. Colbatch, *Novum Lumen Chirurgicum: Or, A New Light of Chirurgery* (1695) concludes with praise for William Cole, p. 81. Cole will figure further in the account below.

medical methods.¹¹ In all likelihood, Colbatch and Cole had already come to know one another in Worcester, where Colbatch may have been one of the apothecaries serving Cole and his patients. By early 1693, Cole had moved to London,¹² with Colbatch moving at the same time.

For by the autumn of 1693, word of a powerful new medicine invented by Colbatch was running through the London medical community. Colbatch's 'Vulnerary Powder' (named after Sir Kenelm Digby's most famous remedy),¹³ and his associated 'Tincture of the Sulphur of Venus',¹⁴ were rooted in a general medical system being forwarded by followers of Sydenham, including Cole;¹⁵ but the specific medicine had been developed from Colbatch's own investigations. During these first years, Colbatch did not spell out the principles according to which he had developed his remedies, simply claiming that he had found them empirically through self-study in medical books, by performing chemical experiments in his laboratory, and by trying things out on 'dogs and other animals'. Like other medical empirics of the time, he discussed the reasons why his remedies worked only in very general terms, preferring to stress their practical results. The two remedies discovered by such labours were produced in the form of powders, and were most useful in surgical cases, he wrote. His 'Vulnerary Powder' had the power to stop bleeding almost immediately, even in very bad wounds, without the application of a tourniquet; and together with the 'Tincture of the Sulphur of Venus' helped the nutriment of the body restore the flesh. The 'Vulnerary Powder' was meant to be dissolved in water (or if that was unavailable, in urine), and applied both to the surface of wounds and squeezed or injected into them; the lips of the wound were then to be stitched together immediately rather than kept open by tenting for the extrusion of laudable pus and healing from the bottom up. The patient was also to be given internally some of Colbatch's 'Tincture of the Sulphur of Venus' dissolved in wine.¹⁶ Together, these remedies would bring about painless cures even in the body cavity in a matter of days, Colbatch claimed.¹⁷

Needless to say, Colbatch's claims were of great interest to the London surgeons. But since the contemporary marketplace was then flooded with medical empirics who made great claims for their secret remedies,¹⁸ some of the surgeons resorted to the

¹¹ For example, J. Colbatch, *A Treatise of the Gout: Wherein both its Cause and Cure are demonstrably made appear* (1697) is dedicated 'To the Worthy Dr. William Cole'; J. Colbatch, *The Doctrine of Acids in the Cure of Diseases Farther Asserted* (1698) recommends a course of treatment following that of 'the Great Dr. Cole', p. 102; J. Colbatch, *A Dissertation Concerning Mistletoe* (1719) and J. Colbatch, *A Dissertation Concerning Mistletoe... The Second Edition* (1720) report a medical case in the words of Cole, pp. 13–4.

¹² Cole became a Candidate of the London College of Physicians on 26 June 1693, and a Fellow one year later (25 June 1694), *Annals of the Royal College of Physicians*, vol. 6, fols. 69, 144–5 (hereafter, *Annals*). My thanks to the Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians for permission to cite their records.

¹³ Digby's famous 'weapon salve', which stopped the bleeding of wounds by application to the weapons which caused them, was in fact a 'powder of sympathy', or in Latin a 'vulnerary' powder. For a description of making the powder, see Sir Kenelm Digby, *A Late Discourse Made in a Solemne Assembly of nobles and Learned Men at Montpellier in France... Touching the Cure of wounds by the Powder of Sympathy; With Instructions how to make the said Powder; whereby many other Secrets of Nature are unfolded*, translated by R. White, second edition (London, 1658), pp. 137–42. Also see Allen G. Debus, 'Fludd, Gilbert and the Weapon-Salve', *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 19 (1964), 389–417; and William F. Bynum, 'The Weapon Salve in Seventeenth-Century English Drama', *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 21 (1966), 8–23.

¹⁴ It is not entirely clear whether the 'Venus' in this remedy implied that it could be used in venereal complaints, or (more likely) whether it referred to the links between the planet Venus and copper, and copper and green colour: the most important ingredient in Digby's powder is a vitriol powerful enough to turn the metal of knife-blades green.

¹⁵ On this point, see Section 4 below.

¹⁶ Colbatch, *Novum Lumen Chirurgicum*, pp. 81–2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–39.

¹⁸ For a recent summary of contemporary medical empiricism, see Roy Porter (footnote 7).

methods of contemporary science and tried out experiments with the medicines. Late in 1693, with Colbatch's help, they arranged for a public trial of his medicines on a dog. As the surgeon and member of the Royal Society, William Cowper, soon wrote: 'The Report of Wonderful Cures wrought by Mr Colbatch's Styptick Pouder, so entertained the Expectations of divers Persons, that amongst others I thought my self obliged to obtain some convincing Proofs of its Operations'.¹⁹ A large dog was procured, his abdomen cut open so that some of his small intestines protruded, and a further cut was made in the intestines along their length; the intestines were then replaced in the dog's body, the wound stitched up, and some of Colbatch's powder applied.²⁰ 'The Dog continued without any ill Symptoms, and became perfectly well in a few days after'. Then the rear leg of the same dog was amputated 'three Inches above the *Patella*' (close to the body), which caused a great flow of blood; 'but after two or three attempts [using Colbatch's powder] the Flux of Blood was stopt, and such a Bandage made use of as was necessary only to keep on the Dressings: the Dog continued without any considerable Flux of Blood, and the next day he was found on his three Legs'.²¹

After the successful experiment with the dog, the surgeons moved to the next step: an experiment on people. The trial with the dog had suggested that Colbatch's claims for his remedy were accurate and, as Cowper put it, 'raised our Expectations of the like Success on Humane Bodies'. One of the Master-Surgeons of St Bartholomew's Hospital therefore arranged for Colbatch to try his medicines on two people there.²² In Colbatch's presence, Cowper and several other surgeons tried the vulnerary powder on two patients at St Bartholomew's Hospital who required amputation: one a man whose arm was amputated above the elbow, the other a boy of about twelve or fourteen years old whose leg was taken off below the knee.

But in both cases, Cowper reported, several 'succesless Applications of this Styptick were made', the blood finally being stopped by the usual tight bandages. In both cases, too, after initially ending the flow of blood, there was a recurrence of heavy bleeding a few hours later, which also had to be stopped by 'strict bandage'. Finally, in both cases the patients 'suffered extravagant Pains'. When the bandages were removed three days later, 'had any Person, a stranger to what had been done, seen the Stumps, he would have supposed nothing less than an actual Cautery had been applyed, or could have occasioned such large Escars, and so horrid an Appearance'.²³ To Cowper, this trial of

¹⁹ William Cowper, 'An Account of some Experiments lately made on Dogs, and of the Effects of Mr. John Colbatch's Styptick on Humane Bodies', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 18, no. 208 (February 1693/4), 42. According to Colbatch, he performed these initial experiments for the surgeons, with Cowper among the observers: J. Colbatch, *Novum Lumen Chirurgicum Vindicatum: Or, the New Light of Chirurgery Vindicated* (1695), p. 69.

²⁰ There seems to have been quite a bit of current interest in surgical experiments on dogs: for example, those of the Leiden anatomy professor Charles Drelincourt, in his *Experimenta Anatomica, ex vivorum sectionibus petita*, edited by Ernest Gottfr. Heyseum (Leiden, 1681), which was reviewed with considerable interest in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 15, no. 169 (March 23, 1685), 945–6. Also see G. A. Lindeboom, 'Dog and Frog—Physiological Experiments', in *Leiden University in the Seventeenth Century: An Exchange of Learning*, edited by Th. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer and G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes (Leiden, 1975), pp. 279–93 (pp. 289–90 on Drelincourt).

²¹ William Cowper (footnote 19) p. 42.

²² J. Colbatch, *Novum Lumen Chirurgicum Vindicatum*, p. 69; the language of Cowper's report suggests that the trial had been arranged by Cowper, but the surgeons officially appointed to St Bart's were then George Horsell, Charles Bernard and Robert Stevens: Nellie J. M. Kerling, 'Chronological List of Physicians and Surgeons', *The Royal Hospital of St. Bartholomew, 1123–1973*, edited by Medvei and Thornton (London, 1974), p. 389. Given Bernard's later involvement with testing Colbatch's remedies, he is probably the person who arranged for the experiment in the hospital, although perhaps it was at Cowper's instigation.

²³ William Cowper (footnote 19) pp. 42–4.

what he called Colbatch's 'styptick' proved that it was nothing other than 'a violent Caustick'. His report of the experiments in the *Philosophical Transactions* drew a larger lesson for his virtuosi readers as well: while animal experiments were commonly being performed on dogs and calves to try out new remedies, 'we ought to make our Experiments on those animals whose Magnitude and Age bear a Proportion to [the human body]: For, nothing is more obvious in Wounding the Arteries of Living Animals, than that the Protrusion of their Blood bears a Proportion to their Bulk'. This explanation was consistent with the prevailing mechanical ideas of the virtuosi with regard to physiology, associating what we would call 'blood pressure' with size. All had therefore been wrong in thinking that experiments on smaller animals could prove the efficacy of a remedy meant for humans.²⁴

But Colbatch told quite a different story, with quite a different lesson. He rejected the claims that his powder was a caustical styptic and that it did not work well on people; and he rejected the views of Cowper because he thought that Cowper and the surgeons had interests preventing them from giving his remedy a disinterested trial. Coming to London with confidence in his remedy, Colbatch had been happy to oblige the London surgeon-virtuosi in the hospital experiments as a way of gaining allies. But from the beginning of the trial, doubts about their motives began to surface in Colbatch's mind. According to him, the surgeons had requested that he come alone so that a crowd could be avoided, and he acceded to the request, bringing along only a servant boy to help. The Tuesday of the trial, however, he found about twenty surgeons waiting for him, who not only outnumbered him, but insisted on regulating the experiment themselves. Colbatch confessed that 'my Pouder was two or three times applied before the Fluxes of Blood were stopt', but he thought that 'the irregular application of it by one of themselves was the occasion of it'. His anxieties were temporarily relieved when after the patients had been treated and put to bed, the whole group went to a tavern, 'where every one seem'd to express great Satisfaction in what had bin done'.²⁵

Even so, Colbatch quickly found that he had been snookered. The next morning, while he was at Tom's coffee house, Colbatch was informed by a physician that the performance had gone amiss

for that one of the People had bled afresh; and if Mr. [Charles] *Bernard* had not bin at hand to have taken off mine, and applied his own Medicins, he had bled to Death. The Truth of which I had no reason to believe, having sent one the Night before, and another that Morning, to make strict enquiry how they did, who brought me word they were both very well...²⁶

Colbatch immediately went to the hospital, meeting on the way Mr Blackstone, apothecary to the hospital, who told the same story that the physician had. But when he arrived, Colbatch found something quite different from what had been reported:

when we came to the Bed where the Man lay whom they said had bled again; before I was capable of speaking to him, he rose up in his Bed, and prayed most heartily for me, telling me he believed no man, that ever had an Arm cut off, was so well as he.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁵ J. Colbatch, *Novum Lumen Chirurgicum Vindicatum*, p. 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

The man showed Colbatch that the dressings he had on his wound were the same ones Colbatch had put on the day before; he reported having had some pains in the inflammation above the stump for four or five hours the previous night, but had slept well. The boy amputee reported the same.²⁷

The accounts of Colbatch and Cowper cannot be reconciled: one or both of them were twisting the truth. Therefore, the personal character of the antagonists quickly became the central issue in the argument. The issue of character not only determined the lessons to be drawn from the events, but the 'facts' themselves.²⁸

Given both the way in which the trial of his remedy had been performed, and the rumours about its outcome circulating in London, Colbatch protested vigorously. Charles Bernard, therefore, arranged for yet another experiment at St Bartholomew's. Given what he considered to have been his previous treatment, Colbatch refused to attend, but sent Mr Baker, surgeon in Suffolk Street, on his behalf.²⁹ We know of this experiment only from a letter of Bernard's to Colbatch, and have to infer several things. But it is clear that in answer to some of Colbatch's objections about the first experiment, Bernard invited only a small group of people,³⁰ and ones other than had been at Cowper's trial, to be witnesses. Yet again, the trial failed.

Nevertheless, the character of the performers and witnesses of the experiment became the central question in the debate about its meaning. Colbatch wrote a strong complaint about the test to Bernard, centring his remarks on the motives of the surgeons in performing the experiment as they did. His associate, Baker, was not allowed to apply the remedy himself, the remedy was taken off too soon so that it did not have its full effect, too little of it was applied, and in general the surgeons were seeking ways to denigrate a useful remedy, Colbatch wrote. Because Bernard himself had such an excellent personal reputation, Colbatch had to disassociate any nasty remarks he made about the surgeons in general from Bernard, for whom he publicly maintained a high regard.³¹

Bernard's reply to Colbatch took clear advantage of this inequality of reputation, mingling questions about Colbatch's own character with his own witnessing of the events. Bernard, who noted that 'it lookes very much like a jest that a medicine designed for universal use . . . should be capably of being artifically or successfully applyd but by one man', again speaks of the 'horrid' and long-lasting pain suffered by the patient and the huge and gruesome scars afterwards left on the stump, states baldly that had they not put on 'a fresh rowler . . . with streighter bandage the man had bled to death', and tells Colbatch that his ideas about the mechanical reasons for the failure of the experiment were 'fitter for a carpenter than a philosopher to assign', and generally

²⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁸ The issue of personal character and medical practice has a very long history: Galen's books contain many examples of the topos. The question of character with regard to early modern experimental practice has been recently developed by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, 1986); Schaffer, 'Godly Men and Mechanical Philosophers: Souls and Spirits in Restoration Natural Philosophy', *Science in Context*, 1 (1987), 55–85; S. Shapin, 'The House of Experiment in Seventeenth-Century England', *Isis*, 79 (1988), 373–404; and S. Shapin, 'Who was Robert Hooke?', in *Robert Hooke: New Studies*, edited by M. Hunter and S. Schaffer (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1989), pp. 253–85.

²⁹ J. Colbatch, *Novum Lumen Chirurgicum Vindicatum*, p. 72.

³⁰ This is verified by the fact that J. Colbatch refers to the six or so surgeons who were going to be witnesses, *ibid.*, p. 72.

³¹ Ibid., p. 64: 'I am far from charging him [Bernard] with any thing unfair, for I can hear of no one person who has at any time heard him declare, That the Man at the Hospital bled again after my Powder was applied, and had stop't the Flux of Blood'.