

The indefatigable Sir John Sinclair's *Code of health*

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The code of health and longevity
(4 volumes), Edinburgh, 1807

John Sinclair was born in 1754 at Thurso Castle in Caithness, Scotland. He inherited extensive estates at the age of 16 and immediately embarked on a programme of improvements to his land. It was only the first signs of the tireless energy Sinclair was to apply to all his endeavours in life. The young estate owner went on to become a lawyer, agricultural reformer, influential politician, writer and obsessive collector of data.

The business of collecting, organising, and analysing data Sinclair called 'statistics'. The term had been used in Germany, but there it had been applied to the study of states and constitutions. The first use of the word as it is understood today was in Sinclair's 21-volume *The statistical account of Scotland*. In 1790 Sinclair sent out questionnaires to more than 900 parish ministers in Scotland. This 'unique survey of the state of the whole country' contained 160 questions regarding the geography, population, agricultural and industrial production of each area. Reluctant respondents were sent up to 22 further correspondences of varying degrees of remonstrance. If all this failed, Sinclair despatched 'Statistical Missionaries' to gather the information he required. Completed in June 1799, Sinclair's monumental work was the first successful attempt to collect information about Scotland's natural resources and the social and economic activities of its people. But there was much more to come from the man who adopted the sobriquet 'the most indefatigable man in Britain'.

Sinclair was elected the first President of the Board of Agriculture, but his ambitious schemes lacked funding and embarrassed the government. There was also a failed attempt to



The code of health provides accounts of those who lived to a great age, including John and Sarah Rovin, depicted above, reputed to have lived to 172 and 164 respectively!

produce a 'statistical account of England'. In his later years, Sinclair devoted most of his time to producing what he called the 'Codean system of literature'. This was an attempt to summarise all knowledge under four headings; agriculture, health, political economy and religion. Only those on health and agriculture ever appeared.

Sinclair's lack of medical qualifications led many in the profession to criticise his attempt to give advice on matters of health. Despite this, *The code of health and longevity* is one of the most comprehensive works on gerontology ever written. It not only contains a great deal of sensible life-style advice, but also a bibliography of 1,800 works on ageing, excerpts from ancient authors, personal narratives, national statistics and accounts of the longest-lived people in Europe. Sinclair made detailed inquiries, 'convinced that much light would be thrown on the subjects of health and longevity, were accurate returns made from hospitals and other public institutions, of the diet, age, and other particulars, regarding the persons who resided in them'.

The returns for Greenwich Hospital list: names of persons upwards of 80 years of age; if their families were long lived; years if ever married; if in the habit of drinking freely; if in the habit of using tobacco freely; the state of their organs and mental faculties; and the state of their teeth. This report is followed by observations from Thomas Jameson of Cheltenham, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, who noted: 'The list of ninety-six men in that hospital still alive, in extreme old age, is uncommonly great; ... That one half belonged to aged families, many of whom had both parents very old. ... That they were almost all married, ... That they almost all used tobacco, and most of them acknowledge the habit of drinking freely.'

Some of the collected information, however, is probably not as reliable as the Greenwich report. The accounts of long-lived people, for example, include John Rovin and his wife Sarah, allegedly aged 172 and 164 respectively. A later reviewer admitted that 'amidst much heterogeneous, and probably useless, matter, however, were several valuable and interesting pieces of information; and it was totally forgotten that the indefatigable author of the work had confined himself to the humble but useful task of collecting materials of all kinds, which he left to others for the purpose of converting to specific purposes, according to their discretion.'

Sinclair's *Code of health and longevity* went through six editions and was translated into German, French and Italian. The College Library has a complete set of the 21-volume *Statistical account of Scotland*, and a first and fifth edition of *The Code of health*. The fifth edition of 1833 was donated to the Library by Sinclair and has his presentation inscription on the title page.

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