

# The state of medical knowledge in Poland and local methods of maintaining health and longevity according to the Irish physician of Jan III Sobieski

## Abstract

Bernard Connor held the position of Jan III Sobieski's personal physician for a year. One of the outcomes of his time in Poland is the two-volume *The History of Poland*, which was published in London in 1698. Not only does the work provide interesting historical facts relating to the country, but it also reveals details concerning the professional job carried out by the author. He was, for instance, particularly interested in curious medical cases and the interplay between behaviour and health. One of the most well-known and engaging section of his work concerns the notes on the "koltun" and the reflections on the cause of Poles' strong and good health.

## Keywords

Connor, XVII c., medicine, health, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth



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The religious freedom reigning in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th century lured many foreigners persecuted in their home countries for their beliefs. Many were also attracted by the possibilities of improving their financial situation. Among them, a large group were Scots and the Irish looking for a lucky change of fate mainly in trade and military career. However, Bernard Connor's (1666-1698)<sup>1</sup> life path took a completely different turn. In search of an education he went to France because as a Catholic he could not count on the one provided on the British Isles. In France he studied medicine at the universities of Montpellier, Paris and Rheims<sup>2</sup>. He probably would not have thought about leaving for the Commonwealth, if he had not been persuaded by the son of Jan Wielopolski, whom he met in Paris. At the end of 1693, Connor accompanied the young Pole on his journey to Italy<sup>3</sup> and on his way back to Warsaw through Vienna, Moravia and Silesia. The medical knowledge of the Irishman was quickly appreciated in the Commonwealth and in the first half of 1694 he was entrusted with the position of Jan III's physician. Connor, however, dreamed of returning to his homeland. Also the king's old age and illness did not bode well for a long career at court. He did not have to wait long for favourable circumstances and was entrusted with the care of the health of Princess Teresa Cunegunda, who was going to Brussels. After the doctors of her husband, the Elector of Bavaria, took over the care of the princess, the Irishman sailed to England, where he arrived in February 1695. There he followed the path of a prestigious career as a lecturer at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and a member of the Royal Society (Knott 1907; Blumberg 1958; Szpilczyński 1974; Coakley 1992:15-25; Pugh 2002: 942-943; Kelly, Clark 2010: 53-72), but at the cost of changing his name and religion (Stone 2004; Darlitz, Stone 1981:14-35; Keitel 2013).

Although Connor did not spend too much time in Poland, he went down in history as a propagator of knowledge about this country on the British Isles as an author of a two-volume work *The History of Poland* published in London in 1698. This publication coincided with an increased interest in Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth caused by the recent death of Jan III Sobieski and the choice of his successor, which undoubtedly increased its circulation. In the introduction to the work, the author reveals the reasons why he undertook his research and did not stay in Poland for long:

When I came first into this nation, my chief design was to converse with physicians, and other naturalists, to improve my knowledge in the practice of physics, and natural history. But finding little here to satisfy my curiosity in these matters, that I might not lose my labour in

<sup>1</sup> In Polish historiography, the original version of the doctor's name (O'Connor) is most often adopted, but since all his publications are signed with the name Connor and this form is used in English scientific literature, in this work it was decided to keep it.

<sup>2</sup> Only in the archives of the University of Reims are documents confirming Connor's studies. There, on September 18, 1693, he received the title of Doctor of Medicine.

<sup>3</sup> They visited Rome, Venice and Padua. The evidence of this expedition is in Connor's description of Mount Vesuvius and the caves near Naples.

travelling in so remote a country, I resolved to look into their chronicles, to inform my self of the origin of the monarchy; of the succession, and remarkable actions of all its kings; of its geography, and its products; and to enquire into the ancient and present state of that vast kingdom. Which I have done with as much care and accuracy as I could well compass in so short a time (Connor 1698, I: viii).

So there is no doubt that the main reason for Connor's intensified historical and social study of the Commonwealth was the lack of worthy, learned interlocutors and the absence of the expected mental stimulation.

In the following lines, Connor introduces the reader to the message, content and structure of the work. The writer intended to present both the historical and contemporary image of Poland, with the first volume of the compendium being devoted to the past of the kingdom, and the second to contemporary issues. The author described the chosen topics in a collection of letters to ensure clarity of the text and the ease of reception. Moreover, such a compositional idea allowed Connor, who was not used to writing historical works, to focus on the topic announced in the title of the letter (*ibidem*, II: i). Ten letters addressed to famous and influential English personages, made up a comprehensive and multilateral description of the Commonwealth, including its geographical description, history and its customs, political, social and religious relations. The publication is supplemented by a map that allows for easier identification of the described places and events (*ibidem*, I: ix). All information was based on personal experiences and observations that Connor managed to gather during his twelve-month stay in the Commonwealth, news from various works, historical documents and conversations with "the most intelligent natives" (*ibidem*, I: viii). The attached list of sources includes 47 items (*ibidem*, I: xiv-xv), but the actual list of documents used may be much longer<sup>4</sup>. The fact that Connor collected materials and information about Poland also after his return to England is evidenced by a letter from the Bishop of Płock, Andrzej Chryzostom Załuski, which confirms that the documents ordered by the Irish doctor were sent (*ibidem*, I: 201-204).

The shape and content of the work were greatly influenced by Connor's publisher and friend John Savage<sup>5</sup>. Not only did he provide advice and assistance to the Irish doctor, but also after his death, he took over the work on the second volume of the compendium, composing it from the doctor's notes and pieces of information gathered from their interviews. Therefore, it is difficult to state unequivocally whether the final shape and tone of the work fully reflect the original intentions of its author. According to Connor, this publication was to present

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<sup>4</sup> This is indicated by the passages no doubt taken from the account of Robert South, not included in the list. This highly valued Anglican clergyman came to Poland as a member of the diplomatic mission for the baptism of Jan III Sobieski's daughter, Teresa Kunegunda, in 1677.

<sup>5</sup> Savage is also the author of *The Ancient and Present State of Poland. Giving a Short but Exact, Account of the Situation of that Country*, published in London in 1697 (a year earlier than Connor's work). It is a short compilation of the most important information about the Republic of Poland contained in Polish historical compendiums.

a possibly full and multidimensional picture of the Commonwealth, being a kind of promotion of this country (Connor 1698, I: v, 298-299). There is no doubt, however, that the overriding, though hidden, goal of the writer was to strengthen his own position and to ensure the favour of the authorities and prestige in the scientific community. As for the intention to promote Poland, reading the work must have had rather the opposite effect on the reader (White 2014: 213).

It is worth noting, however, that, despite the title, not all parts of the discussed work directly concern the Commonwealth and the functioning of the state. In addition to the short passages that complement the main topic, such as letters devoted to the history of the Teutonic Order and to Livonia, the study includes elements completely unrelated to the title issue. These are medical treatises and letters on lectures in physics, anatomy, and medicine delivered by Connor at Oxford, London and Cambridge (Connor 1698, I: 289/2-322/2<sup>6</sup>). Besides, they are not the only traces of the medical profession and the natural interests of the author of *The History of Poland*. Descriptions of the symptoms of various diseases, interesting medical cases and reflection on the laws of nature are not uncommon. Digressiveness and numerous inconsistencies in the implementation of the chosen topic are very characteristic features of Connor's accounts, as well as of most travel writers, who could not resist the temptation to tell and share the extraordinary impressions and thoughts. There is no doubt that when selecting the presented material, the writers were largely guided by the tastes and interests of their future readers, hence the tendency to seek extraordinary and sensationalism and to prefer them over the often less spectacular historical events (Sherman 2002: 17-20; Adrian 2010: 30-36). In the case of Connor, however, it can be also said with certainty that while he provided all the historical data, as it were, concealing the uncertainty with the compilation of the sources available to him, in the passages dedicated to topics related to his professional interests and education one can see real passion.

As mentioned, Connor had a very bad opinion of the level of science and education in Poland. According to him, the reasons for the low level of education and the small number of educated people in the Commonwealth should be sought in many social conditions related to the domination of the nobility and the limitations of the rights of the lower class of society. Connor, adapting many critical remarks from Robert South's (South 1717: 22-23, 32-37) account to the needs of his work, enriched them with some of his insights. According to the Irish doctor, the Polish nobility was too lazy and proud to engage in anything that required intellectual effort. In his opinion, enormous but unused scientific potential lay in the lower class of society. Addressing Thomas Millington, the recipient of one of his letters<sup>7</sup> Connor confidently proved the validity of this theory:

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<sup>6</sup> Both volumes have repeated problems with pagination, as a result of which the same page numbers appear two or even three times; the digit after the slash means that the page with the given number appears for the second time.

<sup>7</sup> Comments on the Polish education system are scattered in various parts of the work, however, according to the author's announcement, these issues are in particular devoted to "Letter IX" (v. II), from which comes to a quote addressed to the famous English doctor, Thomas Millington.

By all this, Sir, you may perceive what discouragement learning meets within Poland; for the common people there, who make about nine parts in ten of the whole nation, are either tho' poverty or slavery rendered incapable of addicting themselves to it, and it is certain, that in all ages, persons of the meanest birth have ever made the greatest progress in sciences, and this, by reason that their bodies are apter for fatigue, and they have no other ways to subsist than by their merit (Connor 1698, II: 81/2-82/2)

Due to his profession, Connor watched the Polish doctors with particular curiosity. He was convinced that not only because of the above-mentioned factors, there are few of them, which means that Jews and foreigners deal with the treatment of the sick in Poland, but they also present an embarrassingly low level of medical skills and knowledge (ibidem, I: 198-201; II: 81/2-82/2, 89/2-96/2). Connor's observations show that Polish doctors do not know anything about the latest discoveries in the field of anatomy and chemistry, and although they have heard of them, they do not read the works of English doctors who contributed to the development of medicine to such a significant extent. Even though they had access to the same medications used in England, provided by German apothecaries, they did not know how to apply them. The passage devoted to the illness of Sobieski's sister, Katarzyna Radziwiłłowa, was certainly an argument convincing readers of the accuracy of such a statement. According to Connor's account, the king called all city doctors, that is about ten of them, to discuss her alarming state of health. The Irishman also examined the patient and diagnosed her with an incurable case of liver abscess. The other doctors, however, downplayed his opinion and recommended maintaining the current treatment (Jesuits' powder), convinced that there was nothing serious with the patient. This strengthened Connor's belief that they did not know anatomy and that they were unable to find the true cause of the princess's illness (ibidem, I: 199). What undoubtedly irritated him was the deprecation of his diagnosis by saying that he was a stranger and did not know the condition of the princess and her illness. He stated clearly with superiority that the patient's condition worsened from day to day and she died after a month. Additionally, an autopsy ordered by the queen confirmed his original diagnosis. With professional accuracy he also described the shape and location of the stones he found in her intestines during this procedure.

The fact that the above event strengthened Connor's position as a talented and trusted doctor at the royal court is confirmed by the letter sent from Poland after his return to his homeland. Savage, the aforementioned publisher of the work, familiarized readers with both the original French version of this letter and its English translation (ibidem, I: 201-204). Ludwik Bartłomiej Załuski, the bishop of Plock, described in it all the symptoms of the disease and ailment plaguing the king:

His Majesty's feet, legs, and thighs, as likewise the lower part of his belly, have been considerably swelled for a good while. These swelling have daily increased since they began this summer, notwithstanding the most effectual remedies, both inward and outward, which have

been made use of to prevent their progress, and to discuss them. When these tumours are pressed with one finger, they do not pit, for they are almost as hard as iron, and as heavy as lead. When his Majesty walks, he imagines he has a great weight tied to his legs. The hardness of these tumours cannot be softened. Nevertheless, when the swollen parts are rubbed a little with a hot cloth, they seem immediately to be abated and eased, but soon after they return to their former condition. The colour of the swelling is not pale, but reddish, something inclining to purple (ibidem, l: 203-204).

Referring to the knowledge and experience of the Irish doctor as well as his capacity to consult other numerous English doctors, Zatuski asked for advice and assistance. Underneath the letter, Connor noted with regret that the week after he received this correspondence, the king was already dead. The described symptoms become the subject of his detailed considerations. Connor was amazed that such a serious deterioration in the king's health occurred so shortly after his departure. However, he was not surprised by the imminent death of the patient, because such a dangerous and rare course of the disease could not have ended otherwise. Comments on what processes had to take place in the body to bring about this state reveal the true interests of the writer:

Cases of this nature, my Lord, are very seldom seen. I have spoke lately with some old practitioners in Physics that had never met with any; for my part, I had never observed any disease like it; and I was at first surprised that the king's legs, that used to pit an inch deep when I was at his court, should become so very hard and so heavy afterwards. But considering that in our mass of blood there is, even naturally, a great deal of earthy parts or dregs, and that their lees may, by way of sediment, fall into the legs, and that their weight and quantity can hinder them from ascending to the heart with the circulating fluids. I rather admired why cases of this nature do not more frequently happen, particularly in old and plethoric people, as the king was. These hard swellings of his legs hinder the blood to circulate downwards, and so drove up all the humours to the head, which oppressing and overflowing the brain, caused apoplexy, of which he died the 17th of June, fifteen days after the date of my Letter, in the year 1696, in the sixty-sixth year of his age, and the 22d of his reign (ibidem, l: 204).

Another case of medical nature observed in Poland that Connor noted in his compendium was the famous "kottun" (*Plica Polonica*). This phenomenon not seen in any of the neighbouring countries intrigued him so much that he included it in a lecture given at the Royal Society on March 6, 1695, devoted to natural curiosities he encountered in Poland (apart from the "kottun", he also discussed seeds and minerals brought from his travels). He described with accuracy the different types and lengths of the matted hair. However, the biggest mystery for him was not the appearance of the "kottun" itself, but the symptoms described by people who wanted to get rid of it by cutting their hair:

When the hair is cut it is commonly said that these symptoms become more violent, and moreover produce cloudiness over the eyes, and sometimes total blindness; also that it causes headaches, pains in the limbs, vomitings, the members all of the sudden to become distorted and stiff, the nails of the fingers to have little white spots on them, and pimples and pustules to come all over the body (ibidem, II: 92/2).

Although this state of affairs was confirmed by eyewitnesses met by Connor, including the bishop of Poznań, who cut his own matted hair three times and then complained about his ailments, the doctor did not believe that this treatment could have such consequences. Nor did he share the belief that the disease was contagious or hereditary. The origin of the disease, which was commonly seen in the Tatar invasion of 1279 (Krakowski, 1956), seemed to him equally unlikely. According to this belief, the Tatars during their raids cut off many heads and threw them into the rivers. Whoever drank such contaminated water became ill. According to the doctor, this was another proof of the greatly superstitious nature of Poles (Connor, II: 94/2). This is also confirmed by their faith in the power of casting evil spells and in the misfortune brought about by the killing of a stork. Even the queen herself would not be free from believing in superstitions, demanding the exhumation of a Frenchman who died in Warsaw and chopping off his head to stop further deaths among this nation inhabiting the capital of Poland. It is also worth noting that some cases that, from today's point of view, could be considered examples of superstition, were treated by Connor as an interesting puzzle to be investigated by scholars. One of them may be the case of serpents and insects in Wiślica on the Neisse, which "being contradicted by the see of Rome" had no power to hurt anyone, and those taken away from this region immediately die (ibidem, I: 153) or the case of a Warsaw lawyer suffering from tongue cancer. According to Connor it was common opinion that his illness and death were well-deserved punishments for the lies he uttered (ibidem, II: 81/2). Placing that kind of information in the publication which was supposed to be a compendium of knowledge is somewhat surprising, especially considering that Connor became famous as the author of a then-controversial publication *Evangelium medici, seu, Medicina mystica: de suspensis naturae legibus, sive, De miraculis* (1697) in which he explained miracles using medical knowledge. Another case that is hard to believe from a common-sense point of view concerns a boy who was born with a golden tooth, which later during a fever turned into a bone (ibidem, I: 150). Undoubtedly, Connor must have found this story credible and worth investigating since he chose to duplicate it from Hartknoch<sup>8</sup> (1678). There is no doubt that the mysteriousness and unusualness of such cases roused the interest of Connor, who treated them as some kind of noteworthy natural phenomena. Therefore, within his publication, we can find not only descriptions of the above cases, but also extensive reports on children raised by bears (Connor, II: 342-348) or the information given without any context that the king's sister had menses at the age of sixty-four (ibidem, II: 91/2).

<sup>8</sup> Hartknoch's work was also an important source of knowledge about Poland for the aforementioned South.

As for other diseases and ailments troubling Poles, Connor considered them quite typical. Among the most common, apart from the "kottun", he included the rose<sup>9</sup> and venereal diseases. Interestingly, he noted that the treatment of the latter with infusions and herbal baths that cause severe sweating, which he had the opportunity to observe in Poland, shows very high effectiveness, although this type of approach to this disease was completely different from the one he was familiar with (*ibidem*, II: 90/2). On the other hand, leg ulcers and wounds were considered incurable.

It is interesting to know that, according to Connor's observations, scurvy was extremely rare in Poland, and the same applied to malignant fevers and pleural diseases. Even if such a case occurred, it was much less severe and did not cause such serious consequences as in other countries. Comments on the reasons for this should be looked for in the earlier chapters of the book. Connor looked closely at the lifestyle of Poles, their diet and behaviour that could affect their health and well-being. However, he did not limit his research to tracking the customs of the nobility but observed peasants with equal attention. For example, he noted that peasants ate three or four meals a day:

One of pease, with a little bacon sliced among it. Another of course wheat, barley, or millet, whereof they make their *cachat*; and two others of several sorts of strengthening roots; whereof they have great plenty, and very good (*ibidem*, II: 186)

Connor paid a lot of attention to Polish cuisine. The way he described all the dishes shows his fascination with their variety and flavours. He noted in detail the abundance of various types of meat, saltwater and freshwater fish, wild birds and dishes that were previously unknown to him, such as beaver tail, bear's paws or elk and bison meat. He pointed out that meat popular on the British Isles, such as rabbit and mutton, was not liked here. Polish meals also had different proportions; there was a lot more meat in comparison to bread, and the meat was from freshly hunted game in the morning of the same day. Readers could also learn about the unusual way of preparing cabbage by souring it. On top of that Poles' tables were rich in mushrooms, various poppy seed dishes, soups, sauces, sweetmeat and desserts. They also paid a lot of attention to brewing beer, producing mead and importing expensive wines from abroad. Another imported product were costly spices, which were used in large quantities. Living among Poles led Connor to the conclusion that they were engaged in eating and drinking from morning to night (*ibidem*, II: 209-216). As for comments about Poles' love of alcohol and drunkenness among them, Connor did not differ from other foreigners sharing their impressions of their stay in Poland (Moryson 1903: 282, 396; South 1717: 69, 83-84, 89, 97-98, 103). It can be considered an almost mandatory part of any such report (White 2014: 159). Nevertheless, along with all the negative effects of this phenomenon, the doctor, agreeing with South, recognizes that the consumption of such drinks could be one of the reasons for the good health, longevity, vigour and fortitude unheard of among other European nations living in the same climate.

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<sup>9</sup> Rubella or erythema.



It is worth mentioning that the list of factors influencing the exceptional condition of Poles also includes a diet rich in freshly baked meat, hardening gained through living in Spartan conditions, hunting, horse riding and various types of physical activity, unbridled talk and unlimited freedom and privileges. It is worth bringing up details of these seven main factors described by Connor in Letter V:

To give your Lordship a character of the Poles, I may affirm that they exceed all the nations of Europe in the vivacity of spirit, strength of body, and living long, which cannot be occasioned by their climate, because the Swedes, Moscovites, and Germans live all under the same parallel, and yet enjoy not the like vigour and health, and therefore must proceed.

First, from their diet, which as to meat is generally fresh roasted flesh (for they scarce ever eat any boiled or salt) and fowl, which encreases the volatile and fixed salts, and thence comes their vigour and vivacity. Secondly, from their drink, which is spirituous and strong, being chiefly Hungarian wine burnt, or aniseed water, both which they guzzle down in great quantities almost all day long. The poorer sort has a liquor distilled from wheat, oats, or barley, which the gentry rectified with aniseeds or aromatics.

Thirdly, from their living hardily, for they hate effeminacy, and a poor country cottage pleases them as well as a palace, and they frequently weave tapestry and arras, as they travel along upon the roads. Nay, many of them will sleep in time of frost and snow without any bed or other convenience, and the little children, two months after they are born, have been seen carried about stark naked.

Fourthly, from hunting, which is very much in use among them, and particularly of a wild beast which they call *zundra*, having no cloven feet. They eat these animals, which they find only in Lithuania. The Poles are extremely addicted to, and expert in horsemanship, which might probably occasion the arms of Lithuania.

Fifthly, from other exercises, for the Poles are very much enclined to dancing, leaping, vaulting, jumping etc. as likewise exceedingly given to talking and conversation, wherein they agree with the French. Sixthly, their beds, fasting, and temperance in eating, very much contribute towards their living long; for hard beds knit their bones, and temperance refines their spirits. The slaves among them have no beds, and the masters seldom use any but quilts, and the like. And seventhly, their health, vigour, and vivacity may reasonably be augmented by their great freedom and privileges, for where slavery hebetates and blunts the mind, and consequently enervates the body, liberty exhilarates the one, and by that means strengthens the other (Connor, II: 189-191).

It is worth noting that Connor and the aforementioned South were not the only ones who tried to discover the Poles' recipe for strength, longevity and health. An equally remarkable opinion is also found in the work of Fynes

Moryson, who, after his two-week stay in the Commonwealth in 1593, attributed the strength and sharpness of Polish minds mainly to horse riding and loose clothing (Moryson 1903: 391).

To the above list, one should also add some of Connor's comments regarding the high popularity of private and public baths. The physician assessed their impact on health extremely positively:

From their frequent use of baths, probably comes the reason that the Polish children are seldom scabby, either in head or face. It may be here also observed, that the children in Poland are seldom distorted, crooked, or ill-shaped, as it often happens in other countries because here they do not swath their children, but only wrap them loosely in linen clouts (Connor, II: 199-200).

Earlier in the same letter, Connor also described toughening young children by putting them naked in the cold in winter and washing them in cold water, which later resulted in their extraordinary hardiness (ibidem, II: 187). Adults washed their faces and necks in cold water every morning, and fathers were responsible for ensuring that children washed themselves as soon as they could sit up, even in the sharpest weather (ibidem, II: 192). As can be seen from those remarks, frequent washing and staying in the cold as a way to strengthen the body and avoid diseases was highly appreciated by the doctor. Connor, like other overseas visitors, unaccustomed to extreme weather conditions, followed with unflagging interest all manifestations of the population's adaptation to winter life. Reports on the stay in Poland often contain information about the winter fishing, travelling, transporting loads, obtaining animal feed and reliable measures for frostbite. Connor advised people planning a trip to the Commonwealth on how to protect themselves from frost by imitating the methods of clothing and behaviour used by the indigenous people. One such tip is to rub snow on frostbitten parts of the body (ibidem, II: 223).

Although the news provided by Connor is largely a compilation of materials available in other sources, the very willingness to obtain them proves the inquisitiveness and diligence of the author of the compendium. Connor's goal was to convey the most complete and true picture of the Commonwealth and its inhabitants, and the only way to do so was to expand and confront one's own experiences with information available in historical works and memories of other travellers. Despite the proclaimed intentions and the call for rejection of harmful prejudices against Poles, the meaning of the entire work, in which the Commonwealth is still contrasted with the more civilized countries, seems to confirm the author's declaration rather weakly. Many opinions, like those concerning the drunkenness and impulsive nature of Poles, often confirm functioning stereotypes more than oppose them. It is worth noting that Connor, most likely completely unconsciously, very often looked at Poland with equal superiority as the English at the Irish, and used deprecating expressions not alien to the intolerance and the rhetoric used against their nation (Canny 2001; Kenny 2004). Therefore, all the more important are the fragments of his work that indicate his personal commitment resulting from his profession.

Undoubtedly, they include all the remarks on the health and lifestyle of Poles leading the researcher to many interesting conclusions, such as the remark that the tight swaddling of infants practiced in his homeland may cause posture defects later in life. This proves that, when it came to medical issues, he was guided by conclusions based on empirical experience, not bias, and that he was able to put aside a sense of superiority.

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