

Vaccination: Fascination and Poetry

To the Editor: It was interesting to read the article on Luko Stulli's poem about vaccination, written on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of its publication. However, there are several points which we would like to discuss in response to the author's statement that vaccination as a topic *in poetry*, except in Stulli's case, is rarely mentioned in the world literature (1). We believe that this statement might create a wrong impression on the phenomenon of vaccination and its influence in the cultural sphere of the late 18th and early 19th century. Pervasion of vaccination in literature and poetry should hardly be regarded as rare within the European context. In contrast to the authors' claim, we would like to argue that the sensitivity of Croatian poets to new discoveries corresponded to similar tendencies elsewhere in Europe, and that Luko Stulli's poem should not be regarded as a rarity.

Fascination with vaccination was strong and omnipresent. Despite the activities of anti-vaccination groups, the most prominent personalities of the period advocated its wide-ranging use (2). It suffices to mention Napoleon Bonaparte's Paris regulation according to which entire regiments and schools were vaccinated. Even the clergy co-operated and often devoted their Sunday sermons to the subject of vaccination. Political institutions mostly encouraged the vaccination campaigns, particularly in the countryside, and doctors were paid by district councils and frequently awarded public honors when involved in vaccination (3). In short, vaccination was in vogue, and not only within medicine but within other social spheres and strata. Literature, including poetry, was not an exception. Firstly, a considerable number of writers were attracted to scientific subjects in this period. Poets writing in Latin excelled in didactic poetry on topics of natural history, transforming the scientific and philosophical teachings of Descartes, Newton, and Bošković into thou-

sands of hexameters. It suffices to mention the literary landmarks such as Capel Lofft's *Eudisia* published in 1780, which anticipated the poetry of Erasmus Darwin (*The Botanic Garden*, *Zoomania*, *The Temple of Nature*, *The Origin of Society*) and strongly influenced poets such as Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats (4). Secondly, verses in general, and those about vaccination in particular, were used in vaccination propaganda campaigns. These campaigns often included other publishing activities such as press articles. Daily or monthly magazines concerned with the spread of vaccination propaganda, such as London Monthly Review established by Phillips in the year of Phipps's inoculation (1796), continually published both poetry and prose about vaccination (5).

Borovečki at al mentioned a few works inspired by vaccination and argued that those poetic accounts were shorter and not as well developed as Stulli's vaccination poem. It is indeed true that since Jenner's discovery, the poetry that praised and promoted vaccination varied from simple lines to deep and powerful pieces of art. One of the most popular vaccination poems, recognized by British critics as immeasurably better than any other of the kind, was Robert Bloomfield's poem entitled *Good Tidings or News from the Farm* (Fig. 1) (6). This poem had been published in the same year as Stulli's (1804) but, surprisingly, was not mentioned in Borovečki's paper.

Unlike Stulli's poem, written by a reputable physician and a member of the Ragusan fine society, Robert Bloomfield's poetic work was a creation of a gifted representative of the working class. It was a four hundred line-long poem written in native language and rhyming couplets. *Good Tidings* combined a number of different poetic modes, including the narrative verse tale, autobiographical lyric, pastoral lyric, and didactic propaganda poem. As it is well known, it earned Jen-

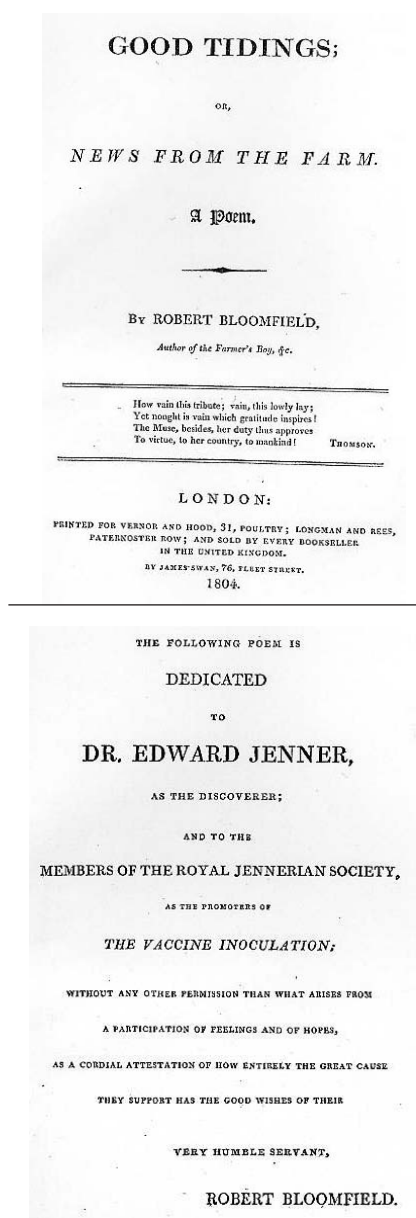


Figure 1. The front pages of Bloomfield's *Good Tidings or News from the Farm*, with a dedication to Jenner (see ref. 6).

m. Even the sharpest critics wrote enthusiastically about it, claiming that Bloomfield poem was graceful and deeply affecting, thus worthy of being inserted among the *Flowers of English Poetry* (4,5). The true magic of Bloomfield's *Good Tidings* and its appreciation among the readership was also in the fact that it was based upon the experience of smallpox in his own family.

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In the same year when Bloomfield's *Good tidings or News from the Farm*, and Stulli's *Vaccinatio; De Jenneriano Invento Optime Merito; Carmen Elegiacum* came out, John Williams poem entitled *Ode to the Discoverer of Vaccination*, was also published, describing Jenner's discovery as a biblical battle against evil. Later in his *Ode to Jenner* published in 1810, Christofer Anstey linked the destructive power of smallpox to the danger posed by French imperialism (4).

In summary, whereas the authors in the last section of the paper do mention several European authors who wrote poetic compositions on vaccination, they claim that Stulli's poem was a rarity, thus failing to refer to the best known piece in this particular genre, Robert Bloomfield's *Good Tidings*. The purpose of this letter was to correct these oversights in an otherwise interesting and comprehensive study.

Stella Fatović-Ferenčić
stella@hazu.hr

Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Institute for the History and Philosophy of Sciences
Division for the History of Medical Sciences
Zagreb, Croatia

Tatjana Buklijaš
Department of History and Philosophy of Science
Cambridge University, Free School Lane
Cambridge, UK

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