

The Sleepyhead's Bedside Companion

Sean Coughlan

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Extract

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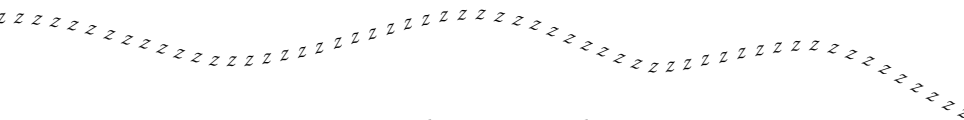
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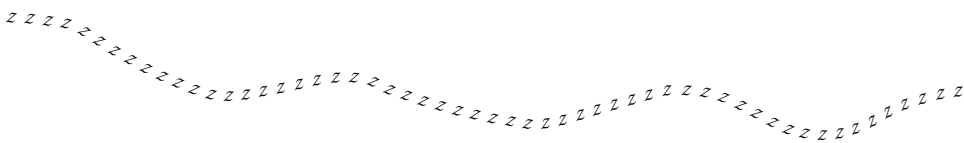
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INTRODUCTION

In Praise of Sleep

SLEEP HAS BECOME A MODERN OBSESSION. In our overcrowded, time-starved lives, it's sleep that we crave more than almost anything else. When we run out of time, it's sleep that suffers, turning tiredness and sleep deprivation into a daily self-inflicted punishment.

What makes this an even greater folly is that there is so much to be enjoyed about sleep. It's nature's finest and most mysterious free gift. It's an inexhaustible source of rest and recuperation, a respite from the hassle and hustle all around. Instead of rationing sleep, we should be revelling in it.

In a burnt-out 24-hour culture, sleep is a last patch of long, cool, green grass, a place to catch your breath and look up at the sky. Sleep is an essential part of the natural habitat of being human. It feels like the only place left where no one expects you to work or shop.

So why do we treat sleep so badly? Why don't we savour sleep, enjoy its pleasures, learn about its history, culture and meaning? If sleep was charged at restaurant prices then maybe we'd have sleep gourmets and sleep recipes, turning the nightly kip into an epicurean event. Instead we chop back sleep, cutting its corners, doing without.

It's not as if we don't know the consequences. The dangers of not getting enough good quality sleep have become ever more apparent. Barely a month passes without some new medical research showing the physical damage caused by sleeplessness. Lack of sleep makes us anxious, irritable and unable to concentrate. Only getting five hours'

sleep leaves someone as impaired in performing simple tasks as if they were over the drink-driving limit. Over a longer period, inadequate sleep sharply increases the risk of heart disease and is associated with an increased likelihood of obesity and diabetes. Sleep deprivation makes it more difficult to learn and remember.

So why when we know all this do we make a mess of sleep? How do we turn it into such a disaster area, with so many claiming to be sleep starved or suffering from insomnia or the growing problem of sleep apnea? Everyone sleeps, maybe not as much as we might like, but it's a universal human experience, as instinctive as breathing. But for something that should come so naturally, we seem to have turned it into a problem.

Sleep has been caught in a pincer movement. There are so many demands and distractions in our restless, broadband lives that we go to bed too late and get up too early and never get the afternoon sleep that our bodies want as compensation. If that isn't bad enough, then there is a misguided character assassination of sleep, presenting it as a waste of time, an enemy of hard work and ambition. The fact that sufficient sleep is a physical necessity and that we would drop dead sooner from lack of sleep than lack of food doesn't seem to register.

It's not as if we have much of an excuse to miss out on sleep. They might have privatised the rainwater and polluted the fresh air, but sleep is there in abundance and without cost. No charge for the re-charge. Sleep is the spa that never closes. It's completely egalitarian. Samuel Johnson called it the 'impartial benefactor', ready to come to the rescue of saint and sinner, prince or prisoner alike. Sleep has no priority boarding queue. But still we manage to get it

wrong, cutting short our sleep and having a miserable day of suffering from what doctors describe as ‘TATT’ – or ‘tired all the time’.

We’ve all been there when sleep means more than anything else. Sitting exhausted in some miserable departure lounge when a flight has been cancelled, the lack of sleep leaving you feeling rougher than the carpet tiles on the airport floor. Or there’s the exhaustion of trying to calm a howling baby on a winter’s night, with the red eyes of daylight appearing over the rooftops. Or that dead-head sensation of going to work with so little sleep that it almost hurts. All we want at such times is for sleep to come to our rescue, to help the weary and worn-out, to throw its cloak around us.

This book is about restoring the balance, celebrating the neglected glory of a good night’s sleep. Instead of worrying about sleep, or dismissing it as wasted hours, we should be treating it as an intriguing delicacy, a pleasure that we can enjoy again and again, a mystery train that takes us into dreams and adventures, giving us a tour around our own subconscious, a place with its own history and forgotten culture. We should admit that there are few finer pleasures than that moment when we give in to the desire to sleep.

Sleep connects us with something very profoundly rooted in nature, it’s where we let go, sharing the rhythm of sleeping and waking with all kinds of other living creatures, stepping away from the shrill demands of the day. It’s not worth getting into bed for anything less.

This is a bedtime story for the sleepyhead inside all of us.



Marie Antoinette rested her head in ostentatious splendour . . . before losing it on the guillotine.

And So To Bed

Undercover: a history of the bed

W^HERE IS THERE a finer invention than the bed? It's a machine for sleeping. It needs little maintenance and delivers magnificent results. It is the ultimate four-legged friend. But do we celebrate its history, is there a statue in every town to its pioneers?

Wherever there have been people there have been beds. In the Neolithic era, people slept under skins and furs in beds lined with grass or heather. On the rocky Orkneys, in the 5,000-year-old archaeological site at Skara Brae, there are ancient box-shaped beds made out of stone, which would have been softened with animal pelts and bracken.

A history of an object usually explains how much its design and performance have been transformed over the centuries. But the curious splendour of the bed is contained in how little it has changed. It could have been all kinds of shapes, but look inside an ancient Egyptian tomb and what does the bed look like? It's a wooden rectangular frame with four short legs. You could buy something similar in John Lewis. Of course the pharaohs had an appetite for decoration, so there are more elaborate beds with all kinds of animal designs attached, but the basic template has remained unchanged.

The Roman bedroom was known as the cubiculum, and this was often rather cubicle-like and functional. The type

of beds the Romans brought on their conquest of Britain were also plain and practical, not dissimilar to the beds brought by later Scandinavian invaders, known as the tribe of Ikea. The Roman bed was a rectangular frame, made out of wood or metal, with straps or ropes or metal bands fixed across the top to support some kind of soft bedding stuffed with feathers or straw.

The word 'bed', as direct and simple as the thing it describes, was introduced by the Anglo-Saxons. There are references to bed-curtains in Saxon writing, suggesting that these would have been hung around the bed to keep in the warmth. Pillows were stuffed with straw, and bed-covers could be made from goatskin or bearskin. The bed would have been an important possession for a powerful individual. A recent excavation of a seventh-century burial site in Yorkshire found a woman's body draped in jewellery and lying in a bed. This burial bed, made for the sleep of death, was constructed from wood and held together with iron.

Edward the Confessor's deathbed is stitched into the story told in the Bayeux Tapestry, which shows him resting on a bolster-type pillow, his wooden bed decorated with carvings in the shape of animal heads. These are similar to Viking-style beds found in Norway, with carvings reminiscent of the figureheads on the prow of a longboat.

The Normans, more into chainmail than comfort, continued in the tradition of plain bedding. But like tourists suddenly dazzled by something exotic, they were responsible for one of the great leaps forward in bed making. The Crusaders, used to their draughty bedrooms in unheated castles, came across very different sleeping arrangements in the Middle East. There people were

marvellously embroidered account of what happened to Richard III's bed after he had lost the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. The defeated king's bed was set upon by robbers and soldiers, who tore off everything valuable they could carry, rushing away with precious stones and luxurious materials. But the wooden frame was too big and heavy to remove and ended up in the possession of a Leicester innkeeper, who, pub-landlord style, used it as his own rather flashy bed.

The bed stayed in this pub for the following century, passing from tenant to tenant, until one of the landlords discovered why the bed was so heavy: it had a secret compartment stuffed with the king's gold coins. This windfall of money soon saw a rapid improvement in his social standing, with this 'man of low condition' being made the local chief magistrate. In a similarly predictable fashion, everyone fell out over the money when he died. His widow was murdered, the coins were stolen and seven people were hanged and one burned to death for the conspiracy. Such was the unhappy legacy of the 'last abiding-place of the last monarch of the Middle Ages'.

The account contains the following description of how the bed looked:

'Richly and curiously carved in oak, with fleur-de-lys profusely scattered over it, its panels inlaid with black, brown and white woods, the styles consisting of Saracenic figures in high relief, it proves from the singularity of its construction, the true purpose for which it was designed, every portion of it but the body being fabricated to take to pieces and put up at will; so that for travelling it speedily became transformed into a huge chest.'

The Victorian gents reading this story in their leather arm-chairs certainly had some imagination-stirring details to savour. Richard had woken in opulent surroundings, but by the end of the day his bed was being torn apart by peasants and his dead body was lying in a church 'as naked as ever he was born'. The fact that the legend might not be entirely reliable shouldn't spoil the story.

These richly decorated, heavily canopied beds were pockets of warmth in unheated houses. In paintings, where beds regularly appeared as props for idling goddesses or in poignant deathbed scenes, you can see them with heavy bedspreads, long curtains and brocaded canopies. The cold air was repelled and a cocoon of warmth created within. In warmer countries such as Italy, beds glimpsed in the backgrounds of paintings are shown without such curtains. In the 1320s, a Lorenzetti religious painting shows a bed, bedspread, sheets and pillow that could be in any modern house; a century later, a painting by Sano di Pietro shows something similar.

Meanwhile, sleeping quarters for the poor could mean curling up in a corner on straw or under a few blankets or wherever they could stay warm. The rural poor, trying to earn a living in the harvest, might be sleeping in barns or tucked into hayricks. Accounts written at the time tell of these poor itinerant workers lying like scarecrows in the straw.

But the middle classes were getting excited about beds. The Habitat gene was beginning to show itself. The Elizabethan urban middle class wanted bigger beds. The stout yeomen had had plain no-nonsense wooden beds for centuries, but now there was an appetite for something more elaborate. A comfortable merchants' house was likely

to contain several tester beds with embroidered drapes. Mattresses would have been stuffed with feathers or wool.

There was also a fashion for ridiculously large beds. The Great Bed of Ware, probably built for an inn at Ware, Hertfordshire, around 1590, was big enough for a dozen people. It became a tourist attraction and was mentioned in *Twelfth Night*. Not to be outshone by her subjects, Queen Elizabeth ordered a bed that was to be as lavish as it was enormous, ornamented with gold, silver and ostrich feathers. However, this grandiose construction proved to be of little consolation to Elizabeth in her last days. Contemporary accounts of her death recorded that she refused to lie down in her bed and instead chose to rest on the floor, supported by a few cushions.

No such anxieties affected the French monarch Louis XIV whose state bed at Versailles showed how the Sun King slept in golden splendour. The state bed was a centrepiece of royal ceremony, where the king might receive guests. There were five separate categories of bed, divided according to the degree to which they were for public show and for private use. It is claimed that Louis XIV had about four hundred beds altogether.

There were still plenty of people not enjoying such comfort. Servants might have got off the straw, but they were often confined to modest 'truckle beds' which could be pulled out for the night.

There were other practical considerations. An advert from a bedmaker in the Strand in London in the 1790s announced a 'new and improved style of Four-post and Tent beds' which promised to 'really prevent the harbour of Vermin'. The same rat-repelling advert offered 'improved sofa beds', which sound surprisingly modern.

By the middle of the nineteenth century there were other considerations. In more modest Victorian houses these big beds with their canopies and curtains took up a great deal of space. There were also worries about hygiene and the amount of dust gathered by these big, baggy, mahogany monsters. A healthier, fashionable alternative arrived in the form of mass-produced brass beds, without any side coverings and sold with sprung mattresses.

But that didn't mean that everyone had their own bed. Victorian social reformers campaigning against overcrowding found examples of lodging houses in Lancashire in the 1850s where sixteen people were sharing a single bedroom. In the 1860s, two-bedroom houses rented to working-class families in industrial cities often had ten or more occupants.

The Victorians used the word ‘chumming’ to describe the practice of the overcrowded sharing of a bed or living space, such as prisoners who might be ‘chummed’ in a jail cell. It was a word that started out as a university term for sharing a room and seemed to have gone downmarket. A more pungent older word for sharing a bed with several people was ‘pigging’.

Sharing bedrooms and beds was part of everyday life. This could be a malodorous experience, according to accounts of taverns in eighteenth-century America, where it was considered usual practice for guests to share a bed with strangers. There are complaints about having to share a bed with the 'greasy landlord' or with a man who made 'hideous

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*It is claimed that Louis XIV
had about four hundred beds
altogether.*

noises' below the bedclothes. A family of nine was able to share one bed, 'all pigged together lovingly'.

The fact that 'sleeping together' now means such a different thing is indicative of how much our sleeping habits have changed. The twentieth century saw the privatisation of sleep, with a more affluent society expecting that individuals and couples should have their own beds. The bed itself became less of a status symbol, as people looked to cars and gadgets and house improvements as more visible ways of flaunting their success.

There were some further technological changes in the modern bed – memory foam and nylon friction burns were just two innovations. But really the story of the bed is one of glorious continuity. Go to a museum in Rome and you can trip over an Etruscan bed frame, then go a couple of blocks into a furniture shop and there will be something not that different on sale.

The real marvel is that such a simple device has been the cradle of so much of life. The French writer Isaac de Benserade described it as the theatre of laughter and tears. Samuel Johnson provided his own translation: 'In bed we laugh, in bed we cry; And born in bed, in bed we die.'

Let's salute the neglected bedmakers and mattress stuffers. They've worked hard for centuries so that we can rest in peace.

See also Hot in bed: the electric blanket, p. 70

Gourmet sleep recipes

THE APPETITE FOR SLEEP is rich and varied. Here is an entirely unscientific collection of five classic sleeps.

Christmas afternoon

You've eaten a Christmas dinner so vast that your entire body is required for the digestive effort. Almost all your mental capacity is now devoted to breaking down Alpine slabs of Christmas pudding. Everyone has that glassy look that overcomes old people who have been drinking at weddings. With some careful navigation, the armchair is reached, and you lower yourself gently into its supportive arms. It takes too much effort to lift the remote control and through hooded eyes you watch the opening credits of *The Snowman*. He's walking in the air. Again. No adult has ever seen the middle section of *The Snowman*, because after a lively start – flying snowmen, interesting aerial views of Brighton – the lullaby chords create an irresistible urge to sleep. Give in to this urge. Your body is in a digestive paralysis and your stomach looks like a photo of a snake that's eaten a sheep. Your senses are being lulled. Every ounce of your body is calling out for sleep. Give in to this most delicious moment. This is going to be the best Christmas present you will get.

Parents' sleep paradise

If you ever go to a conference or work event that involves a night away, watch out for the parents of young children.

While everyone else is hiding their wedding rings and looking forward to a night on the drink, the away-day parent has got an entirely different ambition. They've been thinking about that hotel bed for months, imagining its firm contours, the pert corners of a plump pillow, the snap of fresh bedclothes smoothed into a welcoming neatness. There might even be a chocolate on the covers and some rubbish about saving the environment by not using too many bath towels. That big beautiful bed has got their name written on it. For months and months they've had their sleep disturbed by a child, this lack of sleep has become an obsession, there is nothing they crave more than a full night of uninterrupted sleep. So while everyone else is heading for the bar, they make an excuse about checking some e-mails and say they'll catch the partygoers later. No chance. At an indecently early hour, they shake off everyone else and head straight up for the bedroom, fantasising about the luxury of being asleep with nothing to wake them. This is the sweetest moment, the fulfilment of a pleasure that has been denied for so long, the long chilled glass of water in the middle of a desert. Do not disturb.

First morning of the holiday

If Schadenfreude were a lovely little holiday village just outside Salzburg, I think I might like to pay a visit there. Because waking up on the first morning of a holiday is a particularly selfish pleasure. A quick check of the watch and you can guess what all the other poor suckers at work are doing at that very moment. For you, my friend, the war is over. The holiday is here, there is no work, this pillow is waiting for a quality relationship with the side of your face.

face hot from the sun, on a summer holiday that never seemed to end. It might be nostalgia, it might be romanticising a golden era that never existed, but there is something special about the completeness of a child's sleep. They run around for hours and hours and then, as though flicking a switch, they fall into deepest sleep. When my young daughters fall asleep like this they are completely oblivious to the world around them. They can be carried up to bed without ever stirring. This is how it is to fall asleep without any concern for the next day, without any worries about money or work, asleep before your head hits the pillow.

See also The best-deserved sleep, p. 84

Where did you get those pyjamas?

PYJAMAS ARE A SARTORIAL LEGACY of the Indian Raj and centuries of European involvement in southern Asia. The colonial British brought back many words from India, such as 'bungalow', 'pundit' and 'caravan'. 'Pyjamas' were part of this cultural luggage, the word meaning a garment worn over the legs. In the later years of the nineteenth century, these new-fangled pyjamas became a fashionable alternative for men to wear at night, rather than long nightshirts. In the 1920s, high-society flappers began wearing them too, popularising pyjamas for women.

For a flavour of how pyjamas were first received, it's worth quoting that idiosyncratic Edwardian dictionary *Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, 1903, compiled by Henry Yule and better known as the Hobson-Jobson dictionary.