



# How did Victorian gerontology shape modern attitudes to women's ageing?

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## My research

Examines representations of women's ageing in Victorian gerontology, literature and culture.

I argue that although women (as a group) have always lived longer than men, women's appearance as they age, has largely been interpreted as accelerated and more punitive.

# George Edward Day(1815–1872)

George Edward Day was born in Tenby. He was the son of George Day of Manorabon House, Swansea and his wife Mary Hale.

ward Day | RCP Muse: x | venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search: x | [PDF] A brief history of geriatrics: x | Swansea Manorabon House geo: x | Cary's New Itinerary, or, an Accu: x | Cary's New Itinerary, or, an Accu: x | +

play.google.com/books/reader?id=iB5bAAAAAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.RA1-PA717

New Itinerary; or, an Accurate delineation of the great roads ... throughout England and Wales; with many of the principal roads in Scotland from ... actual admeasurement. — John CARY (Geographer)

*Llandilo Vawr*, in the Environs of, are Berthlwyd, Thomas Edwards, Esq.; Havodnethyn, J. W. G. Hughes, Esq.; Green Hill, Mrs. Pugh; Pentre, Mrs. Philipps; Cae Glas, Jas. Thomas, Esq.; Cefn Cottage, Thomas Thomas, Esq.; Carreg Cemmaen, Thomas W. Lanford, Esq.; Llwyn Neleg, Rev. Dr. Protheroe.

*Llandilo Vawr*, near, on l. Dynevor Castle, Lord Dynevor.

On r. of *Llandilo Vawr*, Tregib, Wm. Hughes, Esq.; beyond which is **Manorabon**, G. Day, Esq.

1 m. beyond *Llandilo Vawr*, on l. is Gurry, Wm. Jones, Esq.

*Llansawel*, within 1 m. on l. Edwinstford, Sir James Hamlyn Williams, Bart.; on r. Taliaris, Lord R. Conway Seymour; beyond which is Abermarlais Park, Sir Thomas Foley.

R. 335.—TAUNTON\* to Axminster and Lyme Regis.

To Orchard Portman	—	1 6
Staplefitzpain	2 6	4 4
Street Ash	3 2	7 6
Combe St. Nicholas	1 4	9 2

*and Yeovil*, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ .

Sea	1	12 7
CHARD	3	15 7
LYME REGIS, as above	10 2	26 1

The latter Road from Taunton to Chard is the usual Carriage Road, avoiding the hilly Country between Taunton and Chard by the former.

INNS. Taunton, Chard, Axminster, Lyme Regis.

*Chard*, 2 m. on l. is Avishays, J. B. Marwood, Esq.; and 2 m. on r. is Cricket Malherbe House, S. Pitt, Esq.

3 m. on l. of *Chard* are Ford Abbey, John Fraunceis Gwynne, Esq.; Leigh House, H. H. Henley, Esq.; and SADBOROUGH, John Bragge, Esq.

*Tatworth*, on r. is Parrocks Lodge, J. B. Coles, Esq.

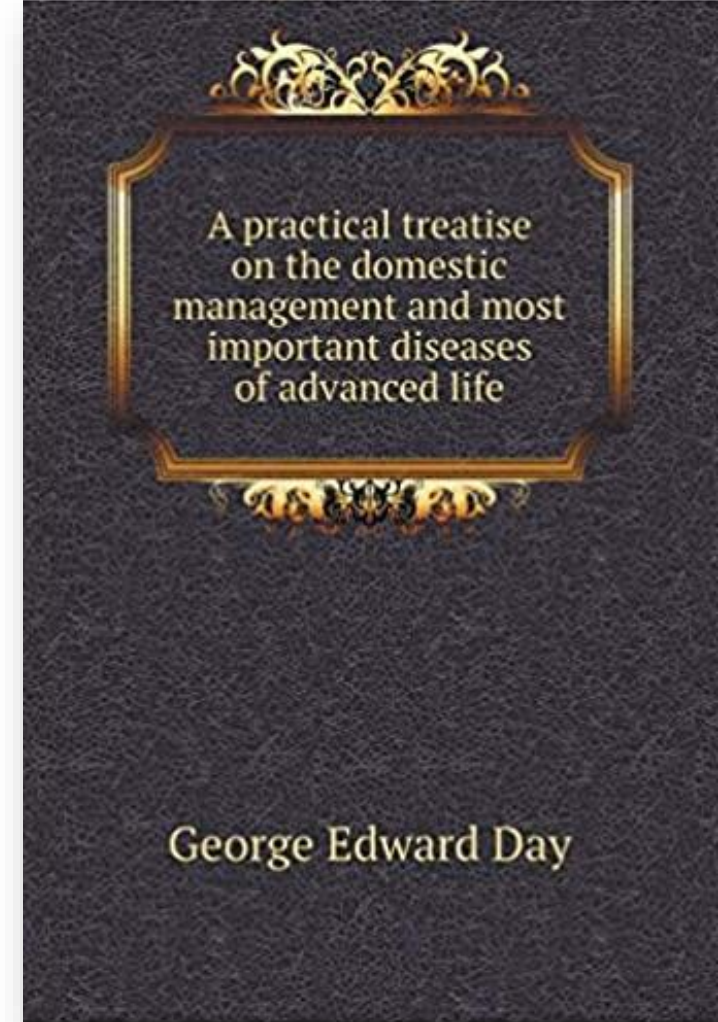
*Axminster*, on a Hill to r. Cloakham, Mrs. Alexander; 2 m. on r. Coryton House, W. Tucker, Esq.

About 3 m. on r. of *Axminster*, Shute House, Sir W. T. Pole, Bart.

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# George Edward Day

George Edward Day wrote a common sense book from the physician's perspective on aging in 1848. He complained that other physicians had little interest in caring for the ill of the aged (Morley 1133).



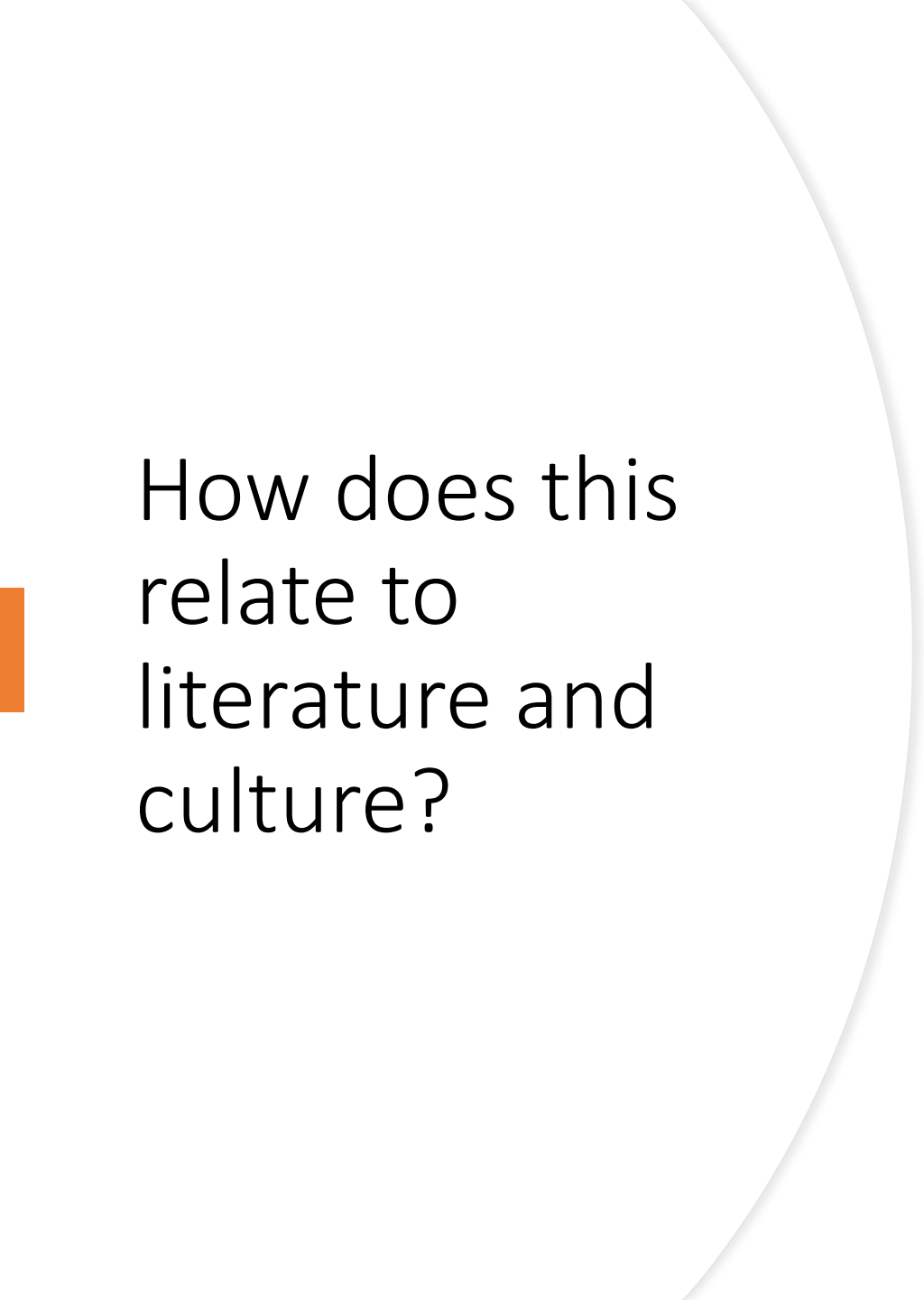
# Achievements

- Day recognised and provided a clinical description of Alzheimer's disease
- He worked out that the largest proportion of older people die in the winter and thus cautions them to be careful during these months.
- Day recognised that milk with added sugar that he recommends as being a dietary supplement, and the nutritional value of eggs in the diet of the elderly.

# His ideas harked backwards to those of Hippocrates and Aristotle

Day wrote that women showed signs of ageing from about **forty years of age**, whereas men did not start to look old until they were between **forty-eight or fifty**.

Declining age he argued extended “in women to about the **fifty-second year**, and in men to about the **sixtieth**. Advanced age, or incipient old age, extending in women from **fifty-three to about sixty-five**, and in men from **sixty to seventy**. Mature or ripe old age, dating from the preceding period, and extending to about **seventy-five** in the female, and **eighty** in the male (Day 26).

A decorative orange vertical bar is on the left side of the slide. A large white circle with a thin grey border is positioned on the right side, partially overlapping the text area.

How does this  
relate to  
literature and  
culture?

In the period, there was a degree of similarity between the form of the Victorian novel and the medical journal. This is because Victorian doctors wrote alongside authors, in journals and shared a classical or literary education (Kennedy 2010).

Both forms relied on the meaning of physical appearance. For medical diagnosis or in the case of the novel, to imply moral and social meaning.

It can be affirmed that at all times men have striven to interpret pathological facts in accordance with the views of the physiology in vogue.

—Jean-Martin Charcot, *Clinical Lectures on the Diseases of old Age* (1881).





## Charles Dickens's ageing women and their (de)composition

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- Miss Havisham's skin
- Mrs Skewton's body
- Flora Finching's weight

# Miss Havisham's skin (*Great Expectations*, 1861)

... corpse-like... the frillings and trimmings on her bridal dress, looking like earthy paper. I knew nothing then of the discoveries that are occasionally made of bodies buried in ancient times, which fall to powder in the moment of being distinctly seen; but, I have often thought since, that she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust (60).

# Mrs Skewton's body (*Dombey and Son*, 1850)

The painted object shrivelled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained ... huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown (365).

## Flora Finching's weight (*Little Dorrit*, 1857)

Flora, always tall, had grown to be very broad too, and short of breath; but that was not much. Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a peony ; but that was not much. Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all she said and thought, was diffuse and silly. That was much. Flora, who had been spoiled and artless long ago, was determined to be spoiled and artless now. That was a fatal blow. (143).



## Modern attitudes to women's ageing

There's an old adage: Men age like a fine wine, while women age like a glass of milk. Jokes come in endless supply when it comes to aging and the inevitability of earning senior citizenship (Olson).

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Questions?





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