

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

LONDON

SATURDAY APRIL 5 1947

EASTER EGG

As a token of rebirth to celebrate the coming of spring and the growth of vegetation many nations in antiquity were accustomed to presenting eggs, sporting with them, painting them, or eating them. Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans all regarded the egg as a symbol of the universe,¹ and the Jews included it in their Feast of the Passover. Whether the custom was incorporated into the Christian festival of Easter from Jewish or Gentile sources is unknown—indeed it is immaterial, for the egg has no great religious significance to Christians but is merely one of the innumerable symbols taken over from pagan folklore. It is not surprising that primitive man, observing birds and snakes and crocodiles and turtles emerging from an apparently lifeless envelope, surmised that some distant ancestor of his own race had once done likewise. According to an old myth from Bengal the first parents of mankind sprang from an egg, and the Chins of Burma relate that a primeval woman laid 100 eggs from which our ancestors hatched to raise mankind's diverse nations. Primitive Greek myth-makers went further and attributed the creation of the universe to the splitting into two parts of a cosmogonic egg. Phobos and Eros issued from these and created the world and its creatures—a fanciful though perceptive account of an individual's creating his experience, his "world," from his fears and loves. According to the Hermetic tradition the egg round which a serpent twined symbolized the hermaphroditic first principle of the universe, matter-spirit; when apart the former represented Chaos, the latter Ether. The conception of the egg as a link between the animate and the inanimate was taken up by the Greek, and later by the Arabian, alchemists, who saw the egg as a symbol on the one hand of the universe, on the other of the philosopher's stone. Elixir of egg, like the cyclotron to-day, would be capable of transmuting metals. (We note in passing that a recent lecture on "ovobiology" was delivered in Belgium with the title "The Egg will Conquer the Atom!") Sometimes the alchemist referred to his vessel as the philosophical egg in which he heated together opposite elements to form the philosopher's stone. A symbolic analogy may be seen between that process and, if one follows the analytical psychologists in regarding it as a symbol of the mind, the man brooding on the elements of his experience in the creation of individuality. We speak also of a hen brooding on her eggs.

Having endowed his eggs with magic, primitive man was not slow to use them for various medical and other purposes. The ancient Egyptians included eggs in a number of medicaments. The following remedy against sores on

the anus is recorded in the Papyrus Ebers² (written c. 1500 B.C.): "Egg of the goose, 1; guts of the goose, 1. Clap on the anus." John of Arderne three millenniums later was recommending white of egg mixed with finely ground flour as a dressing after operating for fistula in ano. Eggs were also popular among the Egyptians as hair restorers and cosmetics, and one face-cream consisted of bullock's bile and ostrich egg beaten up with fresh milk. We need not be surprised that similar concoctions often served the same function in expensive establishments—as "egg shampoos" and "egg packs"—in Britain and elsewhere before the recent war, for primitive ways of thought persist with great tenacity. Black³ has recorded the popular practice of a patient's boiling an egg in his urine and then burying it in an ant-hill. As the egg disappears so does the malady. Again, owls' eggs mixed with a drunkard's liquor will cure him of his evil ways. Ambroise Paré in 1536 found that when boiling oil was not available for treating battle wounds the yolk of egg with oil of roses in turpentine was a better therapeutic trick. Perhaps less remote from our own ideas of the uses to which eggs should be put (though remote from our experience) is William Hunter's predilection for them; his dinner at the British Coffee House consisted of two eggs and a glass of claret.

THE EGG AS FOOD

We want eggs because we like them; we miss the contrast of flavour and texture of intact eggs and the physical properties exploited in cooking. Eggs-and-bacon is a national dish—or at least was; eaten solo, eggs are an equal delight; or they can be combined with other foods in scrambled eggs and omelettes. They satisfy the palate and belly of man, whether he is described as an individual or, in the phraseology of Dr. Summerskill, as a calorie-consuming social unit. Their aerating power is used in making sponge cakes; their binding power makes puddings and cakes what they should be; and they for a time stop cakes from becoming stale. The unthinking eater little knows what nutritive value he can extract from an egg. One egg contains about 6 g. of protein, equal to the 16% by which our average daily intake of animal protein has fallen since 1938. In a small survey made some four years ago it was observed that it was the families keeping hens who sustained the pre-war consumption of animal protein in their diet. Egg protein is first class. A hen must pack into the shell the protein needed to make a chick that will nearly fill the shell before it can get to other food. For reasons of space the protein must be first class for the chick, if not for other animals. It's a matter of lebensraum.

We read in *Nutritive Value of Wartime Foods* that 1 oz. of egg supplies 250 i.u. of vitamin A; this is about 500 i.u. per egg. This statement should have been qualified, for even during the war fowls got varying amounts of carotene in their food; it is from this that the hen gets its vitamin A, and one egg may contain six times as much vitamin A as another. Almost all the vitamin A of an egg is actual,

¹ *Observations on Popular Antiquities* by J. Brand. Charles Knight, London, 1841.

² *The Papyrus Ebers*, trans. C. P. Bryan. G. Bles, London, 1930.
³ *Folk Medicine*, Folk Lore Society, London, 1893.