

EDWARD BLISS FOOTE:  
PIONEER AMERICAN ADVOCATE  
OF BIRTH CONTROL

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A century ago American society was fundamentally Victorian in character with the tragic consequence that open discussion of sexual matters was taboo. Such propriety, scarcely limited to the layman, pervaded the most prominent medical circles well into the turn of the century. As late as 1890, for example, William Goodell (1829-94), the celebrated Professor of Clinical Gynecology at the University of Pennsylvania, actually apologized in his textbook on gynecology for discussing so delicate a subject as *coitus interruptus*. "It is . . . so hard a task to discuss such subjects in acceptable language, that I confess to some squeamishness, and would much rather refer you to suitable textbooks, *were there any* [italics mine]." But none were available, "although our land is flooded with a prurient literature treating of . . . conjugal relations."<sup>1</sup>

A decade later Denslow Lewis (1856-1913), a Chicago gynecologist, read a paper entitled "The Gynecological Consideration of the Sexual Act" before the American Medical Association in Columbus, Ohio. Although it was common procedure to publish all papers read at these annual meetings, George H. Simmons, editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, refused to print "this class of literature,"<sup>2</sup> Undaunted, Lewis published the paper privately<sup>3</sup> and distributed copies to his fellow practitioners at the following meeting in Atlantic City in 1900. Lewis' bold action met with little success, because Howard A. Kelly, Professor of Gynecology at the Johns Hopkins University and a recognized leader of his discipline in America,<sup>4</sup> artlessly supported Simmons and derided Lewis' work, stating that this deliberation was "attended with more or less filth and

<sup>1</sup> W. Goodell, *Lessons in Gynecology* (Philadelphia, 1890), pp. 562-563.

<sup>2</sup> M. H. Hollender, "The medical profession and sex in 1900," *Amer. J. Obstet. & Gynec.*, 1970, 108: 139-148.

<sup>3</sup> Denslow Lewis, *The Gynecological Consideration of the Sexual Act*. Appendix by Marc H. Hollender with an account of Denslow Lewis (Weston, Mass.: M & S Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> F. H. Garrison, *An Introduction to the History of Medicine* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1929), p. 604.

we besmirch ourselves by discussing it in public. . . . I do not believe mutual pleasure in the sexual act has any particular bearing on the happiness of life.”<sup>5</sup>

Within this parochial setting a remarkable New York physician named Edward Foote labored a lifetime, against intolerant and unreasoning opposition, to enlighten society on matters of birth control.

Edward Bliss Foote, the second of three children of Herschel Foote (1793-1870) and Pamela Bliss (née Townsend) Foote (1805-99), was born at Collamers,<sup>6</sup> a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, on 20 February 1829. His forebear, Nathaniel Foote (1593-1644), had emigrated from England two centuries earlier to become one of the original settlers of Wethersfield, Connecticut.<sup>7</sup>

Edward Foote's formal education was limited to a brief attendance at Shaw Academy, later renamed the East Cleveland High School. Deeply influenced by a biography of Benjamin Franklin, he left school at the age of fifteen to become apprenticed to a printer at the Cleveland *Herald*.<sup>8</sup> Three years later, after acquiring a sound knowledge of the printing business and a proficiency at journalism, he left Cleveland for a position as compositor with the New Haven *Journal*. Following a short tenure in New Haven, he joined the New Britain *Journal* which, under his direction as editor, became the largest selling weekly in the state. Next we find Foote as an associate editor of the Brooklyn *Morning Journal*, the first morning newspaper published on Long Island. Sometime during his engagement with this tabloid he developed his interest in medicine. He studied with a local physician and, after completing his readings, he abandoned journalism to enter into the practice of medicine under the tutelage of his preceptor.<sup>9</sup>

Although Foote's early education had been meager, his medical education was first-rate. In 1860 he was graduated from Penn Medical University in Philadelphia, having submitted for his degree a thesis entitled *Electricity in Relation to the Human Organism*.<sup>10</sup>

Penn Medical University was founded 14 January 1854 by Dr.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis (note 3 above).

<sup>6</sup> A. W. Foote, *Foote Family Genealogy and History*, 2 vols. (Rutland, Vt.: Marble City Press, Tuttle Co., 1907-32), Vol. 1, pp. 257, 388.

<sup>7</sup> *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York, 1893), vol. 3, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Biographical History of Westchester County* (Chicago, 1899), vol. 1, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> H. J. Abrahams, *Extinct Medical Schools of Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), pp. 176-231.



FIGURE 1.

Portrait of Edward Bliss Foote which formed the frontispiece to his *Medical Common Sense* (1864).

Joseph S. Longshore.<sup>11</sup> Although it lacked elaborate accommodations its curriculum was innovative, antedating by many years the liberation of American medical schools from the routine repetitive courses. The school was notable from another aspect. Women were admitted on an equal basis with men, and by 1864 seventy-four women had received their medical degrees. Following the Civil War the faculty of Penn Medical University was dispersed. In addition, the prime mover of the school, Dr. Longshore, had fallen gravely ill. As a consequence, the school became part of the Philadelphia University of Medicine & Surgery, which closed its doors in 1880 as a result of a bogus diploma scandal.

Foote opened his practice at Saratoga Springs, New York. Shortly thereafter he removed himself to New York City where he remained for the rest of his professional life.

On 6 September 1853 Foote married Catherine Goodenough Bond (d. 1900), a school teacher from Watertown, Massachusetts. Catherine bore him three sons: Edward Bond (b. 15 August 1854), Hubert T. (b. 18 January 1859) and Alfred Herschel (b. 16 May 1871).<sup>12</sup> Alfred died at the age of twelve from appendicitis; but Edward and Hubert followed their father into the medical profession. Edward Bond Foote was exposed to an excellent education, attending the Charlier Institute in New York and graduating in 1876 from The Columbia College of Physicians & Surgeons, receiving the Séguin prize for his report on the nervous system. Hubert T. Foote was graduated from The Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York, and practiced medicine in New Rochelle.

Largely through the efforts of Anthony Comstock (1844-1915), secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Congress passed a law in March 1873 closing the mails to every type of "obscene and indecent matter." In June 1876 Foote was indicted under this new federal statute, now termed the Comstock law, for distributing contraceptive information through the mails in his pamphlet *Words in Pearl*.<sup>13</sup> In July the case was heard before Judge Benedict at the opening session of the criminal branch of the United States Circuit Court. Foote was found guilty on 11 July 1876 and fined \$3,500. A possible ten-year prison sentence was suspended, because the judge "understood many patients might suffer if a sentence of imprisonment

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Foote (note 6 above).

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, 28 June 1876, p. 3.

was rendered.”<sup>14</sup> Foote’s medical practice was little affected by the trial publicity, although he was publicly denounced by some of his more orthodox colleagues.

Upon retirement Foote resided at Larchmont Manor, his home in Larchmont, New York, where he devoted his remaining years to writing.

Although Foote wrote extensively, publishing a multi-volume work, *Science in Story*, for young people in 1874 and editing a periodical called Dr. Foote’s *Health Monthly*, it is this author’s intention that we concern ourselves only with his three major works: *Medical Common Sense*, *Plain Home Talk* and *Home Cyclopaedia*. In these three popular books one can trace the development of Foote’s efforts to educate society to the need for contraception.

Foote’s entrance into this controversial arena occurred in 1858 with the publication of the first edition of his *Medical Common Sense*. This small volume for the layman, “written in language strictly mundane,” contains a brief section labelled “The Prevention of Conception.”<sup>15</sup> Here Foote lists the hazards associated with the common methods employed in his day to prevent “a too rapid increase of offspring” (e.g., douching with caustics, abortion and *coitus interruptus*), but he fails to offer any reliable substitutes. Equally important, he remains silent concerning his philosophy on this subject.

Subsequently, a revised edition appeared in 1864 which was enlarged by more than a hundred pages. It is in this issue that Foote sloughs off his previous timidity and presents a complete approach to contraception, giving his philosophy, an exposition of the commonly employed contraceptive methods and details on the reliable devices he recommends.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, his reasoning is neo-Malthusian and not medical when he states that “excessive child-bearing may be truthfully said to be the bane of general society. It is not only destructive of the vital powers of the female herself, but entails innumerable ills upon subsequent posterity, in bringing children into the world, like Shakespeare’s Richard ‘scarce half made up’ . . . .”<sup>17</sup>

Foote continues with a fairly comprehensive examination (Part II,

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, 12 July 1876, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> E. B. Foote, *Medical Common Sense* (Boston, 1858), pp. 247-250.

<sup>16</sup> V. J. Cirillo, “Edward Foote’s *Medical Common Sense*: An early American comment on birth control,” *J. Hist. Med. & Allied Sci.*, 1970, 25: 341-345.

<sup>17</sup> E. B. Foote, *Medical Common Sense* (New York, 1864), pp. 335-339, 378-380.

MEDICAL  
COMMON SENSE;  
APPLIED TO THE  
CAUSES, PREVENTION AND CURE  
OF  
CHRONIC DISEASES  
AND  
UNHAPPINESS IN MARRIAGE.

BY EDWARD BLISS FOOTE, M.D.

REVISED AND ENLARGED EDITION

NEW YORK:  
PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR,  
1130 BROADWAY,  
1864.

FIGURE 2.

Title page of Edward Foote's *Medical Common Sense* (1864).

Ch. 8) of the traditional, folklore-based contraceptives employed in his day out of ignorance "because there is an actual demand for some reliable prevention." Strangely, he avoids mention of infanticide as a means of controlling population. Surely, Foote was aware that the incidence of this horrid practice, so prevalent among the peoples of all nations for centuries,<sup>18</sup> would be reduced by the availability of effective contraceptives. He does deal, however, with abortion. Abortion had become a statutory crime in the United States in 1830, but abortions were still clandestinely performed in great numbers.<sup>19</sup> "I am confident that much of the horrible practice of procuring abortion, now so prevalent among married people, is caused by a want of simple and reliable means of prevention . . ."<sup>20</sup>

After presenting his reasons for controlling population and discarding the methods available as either harmful or inadequate, Foote delves into some detail regarding those contraceptives he viewed as dependable: the condom, the glans condom and the cervical diaphragm. He handles these devices with a quite modern tone. Unfortunately, he lays claim for the invention of the cervical diaphragm which was not substantiated.<sup>21</sup>

*Medical Common Sense* was well received in America and abroad, and was destined to go through many editions and revisions. More than 250,000 copies had been sold by the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup>

Foote continued his crusade for the acceptance of contraception with the publication of his second book, *Plain Home Talk*.<sup>23</sup> Foote omitted the contraceptives he described so ably in *Medical Common Sense* several years earlier, because he had "already in pamphlet form a work treating fully upon this subject . . ." (*Words in Pearl?*). Instead, the section on contraception, Part IV, Chapter 7, deals exclusively with John Humphrey Noyes (1811-86), founder of the Oneida Community and propounder of the theory of "male continence." In essence, male continence consisted of normal intromission and movements without ejaculation (*coitus reservatus*). Noyes claimed that when detumescence

<sup>18</sup> S. X. Radbill, "A history of child abuse and infanticide," in R. E. Helfer and C. H. Kempe (eds.), *The Battered Child* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 3-17, and W. L. Langer, "Checks on population growth: 1750-1850," *Sci. Amer.*, 1972, 226:92-99.

<sup>19</sup> C. Tietze and S. Lewit, "Abortion," *Sci. Amer.*, 1969, 220: 21-27.

<sup>20</sup> Foote (note 17 above).

<sup>21</sup> Cirillo (note 16 above).

<sup>22</sup> N. E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (New York: Gamut Press, 1963), p. 278.

<sup>23</sup> E. B. Foote, *Plain Home Talk* (New York, 1871), pp. 876-880.

took place intravaginally, in the absence of a male orgasm, there were no harmful effects.

Foote writes:

I have been acquainted with the discovery of the Rev. Mr. Noyes for several years . . . and advised a trial of it in a very great number of cases. . . . The reports in all cases heard from were adverse to the physical effects of practicing the "male continence" rule.

Although Noyes professed repeatedly that male continence worked well in his polygamous colony, Foote commented that such would not be the case in "the monogamic family, and for this reason it is the duty of the physician to advise everybody who wants counsel on this subject, and prescribe means which will effectively prevent conception. . . ."

Foote's last major piece of writing appeared four years prior to his death. In Part IV, Chapter 7 of his *Home Cyclopedia*<sup>24</sup> Foote laments the rigorous new laws enacted by Congress (e.g., the Comstock law) restricting the dissemination of contraceptive information. He pleads with his readers to act within the legal system for the repeal of these shortsighted statutes.

Foote continues in length on the social values to be derived from the use of contraceptics (a term coined by Edward Bond Foote)<sup>25</sup> in a section entitled "Contraceptics; Their Value in Promoting Human Evolution."

Foote relates that the population of his country had risen from three million in 1790 to eighty million in 1900. "The United States . . . at the present rate of increase will need some undiscovered continent . . . upon which to dump our surplus!" He goes on to state:

With contraceptics in the hands of the mothers of the race, the family physician could intelligently and effectually advise a woman when she might safely parent a child without entailing upon it a life of physical suffering . . . he could . . . provide means whereby the provident wife could select the most auspicious periods to add her quota to the worlds population. *What the human family needs, and must have, to promote moral, physical and mental evolution, is some means of producing fewer and better children* [italics mine].

On Friday morning, 5 October 1906, Edward Bliss Foote, aged 77,

<sup>24</sup> E. B. Foote, *Home Cyclopedia* (New York, 1902), pp. 1143-1148.

<sup>25</sup> E. B. Foote, *The Radical Remedy in Social Sciences; or Borning Better Babies through Regulating Reproduction by Controlling Conception* (New York, 1886), p. 52.



died at his home on Prospect Avenue in Larchmont, New York, following a protracted period of invalidism.<sup>26</sup>

Edward Bond placed a copy of the *Home Cyclopaedia* into his father's hands before the burial at the Cypress Hills Cemetery in Long Island, having written the following on the first fly-leaf:

As his work was his life companion, his solace, his Bible, the mirror of his soul, so must a copy of it go with him to mitigate the lonesomeness of the grave.<sup>27</sup>

Edward Foote's long and productive life was a testimony to the ideals he had established as a young man: "I shall not hesitate to lay before my readers . . . such information as I am in possession of, for the prevention of conception."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, 6 October 1906, p. 9, and *J.A.M.A.*, 1906, 47: 1319.

<sup>27</sup> T. B. Wakeman, *In Memory of Edward Bliss Foote* (New York, 1907).

<sup>28</sup> Foote (note 17 above).