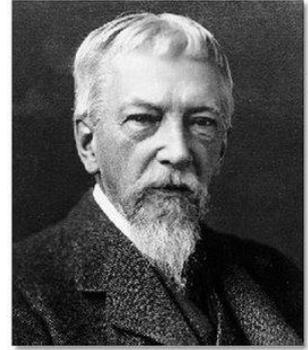


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Women Writers (ANG 553)

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“Go home and rest” is an expression that is still used today. However, it was very popular in the nineteenth century. Indeed, one of the treatments used was the rest cure, which was created by Silas Weir Mitchell. In this paper, this man will be described as well as his cure. Some of the criticisms levelled against Mitchell’s cure will also be presented.

Silas Weir Mitchell Biography

Silas Weir Mitchell was born on January 15, 1829 in Philadelphia. His father John Kearsley Mitchell (1798–1858) was a successful physician and professor at Jefferson Medical College. Mitchell studied at the University of Pennsylvania to become the seventh physician in three generations. During his studies, he also devoted his time to religion. As a matter of fact, he read texts from the Bible every day and attended church twice on Sundays. After graduation, he went to Paris with his sister Elizabeth, where he studied medicine. The knowledge he had acquired in these Universities helped him during the Civil War where he was in charge of nervous injuries and maladies.

With the experience and the expertise he gained, he became a specialist in neurology and wrote various works such as *Reflex Paralysis and Gunshot Wounds* (1864), *Other Injuries of Nerves* (1864) and *Injuries of Nerves and Their Consequences* (1872). Being so passionate about medicine, he became the initiator of the rest cure which was described as a medical word for nervous diseases, particularly hysteria. Then, in 1880 he explored another field of study; he wrote poetry and different novels. Indeed, he wrote *The Case of George Dedlow* (1866) a story based on Mitchell’s war experiences. Moreover, *Hugh Wynne* (1897) and *The Adventures of Francois* (1898) achieved great success (Enerson). During 1908-1909, he was the founder and the first president of the *American Neurological Association* and the first president of the *Philadelphia Neurological Society*. As he got older, his reputation as a writer equalled his reputation as a physician. On January 4, 1914, Mitchell died of influenza (Enerson).

Rest Cure Treatment



During his lifetime, Mitchell showed many talents as a physician, writer and poet. However, one of the most successful discoveries he made was the rest cure treatment, which was developed in the early 1870's. His method became so popular that it was "recognized throughout the United States and Europe and even drew the attention of Sigmund Freud and French neuropsychologist Jean Martin Charcot" (Lawson).

The rest cure treatment particularly targeted women and was used to treat a variety of nervous conditions. As Mitchell described it, in his book *Fat and Blood*, there were five elements that constitute this cure which were "rest, seclusion, diet, massage, and electricity" (Brady, 5). The first element required women to stay in bed for six weeks to two months. They were not allowed to sew, read, write, or even sit up. The only two things they could do were brush their teeth and do what nature called them to do. In other words, at this stage women could not use their hands at all and had to bed rest for long hours during the day. For seclusion, women were not permitted to see their family. However, the only person they could see was the nurse who was in charge of massaging, bathing, and clothing them. Except this person, no one else could see these women. Moreover, they were asked to eat fatty dairy products and iron to revitalize their body because it was said that these women were suffering from anaemia (Brady, 7). Butter was also an ingredient that was included in most of their diets. Their bodies, except the face, were massaged gently for half an hour and a rigorous massage followed for an hour (Brady, 8). Then, they had to rest for an hour. Mitchell argued that "very soon the patient begins to find the massage delightfully soothing and to complain when it was omitted" (*Fat and Blood*, 54-55). For them, it became a source of comfort and relaxation that gave them peacefulness. The last element, electricity, was usually used with massage (*Injuries of Nerves*, 246). It was used to stimulate the muscles and avoid atrophy. The combination of these two elements was regarded as efficient as an exercise but without over-exhausting the patient or losing too many calories. Unlike the massage, the electricity was used on the patient's neck and face and it lasted from forty minutes to an hour. Mitchell thought it was necessary to use this element. In his words, "for atrophy and muscular palsy, a treatment by electricity three or four times a week, by daily massage, with local hot baths to precede each sitting seems to me to fulfill all the needed indications" (*Injuries of Nerves*, 251).



Critics about the Rest Cure Treatment

During the nineteenth century, the rest cure treatment was used to reduce nervous disorders. It became very popular because contrary to other cures it was painless. However, much criticism was made against it. Some feminists challenged its moral foundation. Indeed, Poirier (1983) affirmed that men also suffered from nervous disorders. Even Mitchell himself had a “nervous temperament”. However, when he described his patients he always used the feminine gender (20). Poirier (1983) also added that these women were already suffering from a lack of social and intellectual stimuli. They were inactive all day and that punished them more than it helped them. Brady (1996) approved and explained that “Weir Mitchell’s rest cure was based on the assumption that women were physically and intellectually inferior to men, and the prescription often took the form of punishment rather than relief”. For her, this treatment seemed more destructive than helpful for these women. Furthermore, the physicians were seen as authorities and had to advise their patients, especially women, on any aspects of their lives. After this cure, women were revived and felt the need to take back their responsibilities as mothers and wives. In other words, they were confined to the private sphere again and under men’s power. Burr (1929) questioned the elements suggested for the treatment. Indeed, according to her, “Mitchell had the glimmering of an idea, which he could never prove, because chemistry was not far enough advanced, that milk does good in these patients not only because it is easily digested, but because it in some way alters the chemistry of the body (11-12). She also argued against the massage by saying that during Mitchell’s time, massages were done by charlatans or quacks (Burr, 12). Showalter tells us that Dr. Margaret Cleaves, who was herself a sufferer, “attributed female neurasthenia not simply to overwork but to women’s ambitions for intellectual, social, and financial success, ambitions that could not be accommodated within the structures of late-nineteenth-century society because women did not have the previous preparations that men had had for generations” (136). It was a way to confine women to their bed and to stop them becoming independent. Finally, for Ussher “the rise of the Victorian madwomen marked a turning point in both the history of women’s madness and in institutionalized misogyny” (64). She believed that because of the confinement and restrictions of this cure, it had an impact on women’s mental health. In short, this cure was probably very successful but there are some negative elements that should also be considered.

To conclude, some female writers described in some of their works the rest cure’s effects on their lives. Do you remember Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story, the *Yellow Wallpaper*? Gilman was a woman who tried this cure and described what she thought about it.

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An everyday diet could look like this one: drank a cup of coffee in the morning to regulate their bowels. Then, beef served in a form of raw soup was one meal that these women could eat.

Furthermore, two of Mitchell's works, *Wear and Tear / Hints for the Overworked* (1871) and *Fat and Blood: An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria* (1877) were best-selling publications of his theories and were translated into four different languages.

such as neurasthenia, hysteria, and other nervous disorders.

Gillian Brown added that this cure was a form of restriction against women who were supposed to be confined to the domestic sphere.

Even though today's women have almost the same rights as men, it has not always been like this. Indeed, we only have to look at the nineteenth century to realize that women were not considered. They had to follow the pattern established by the society.

Mitchell's rest cure was quite successful in treating anaemia, physical exhaustion, and what we may now call post-traumatic stress disorder, but when applied to middle- and upper-class women, the cure was problematic [...]. Thus,

http://books.google.ca/books?id=3WIukgv2eLMC&pg=PA175&lpg=PA175&dq=rest+cure+crit+ics&source=bl&ots=SsI7gD3T2d&sig=PqsMmx7watpgy1HT0DpI6GnanHo&hl=fr&ei=IIOxSej9KZquMfWm6e0E&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=2&ct=result#PPA182,M1 Gillian Brown



Silas Weir Mitchell ([January 15, 1829](#)–[January 4, 1914](#)) was an [American physician](#) and [writer](#). He was son of a physician, [John Kearsley Mitchell](#) (1798–1858), and was born in [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania](#). He studied at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) in that city, and received the degree of [M.D.](#) at [Jefferson Medical College](#) in 1850. During the [Civil War](#) he had charge of nervous injuries and maladies at [Turners Lane Hospital](#), Philadelphia, and at the close of the war became a specialist in [neurology](#). In this field Weir Mitchell's name became prominently associated with his introduction of the [rest cure](#), subsequently taken up by the medical world, for nervous diseases, particularly [hysteria](#); the treatment consisting primarily in isolation, confinement to bed, [dieting](#) and [massage](#). His medical texts include *Injuries of Nerves and Their Consequences* (1872) and *Fat and Blood* (1877). Mitchell's disease ([erythromelalgia](#)) is named after him.

In 1863 he wrote a clever short story, combining physiological and psychological problems, entitled "The Case of George Dedlow", in the [Atlantic Monthly](#). Thenceforward, Mitchell, as a writer, divided his attention between professional and literary pursuits. In the former field, he produced monographs on [rattlesnake](#) poison, on intellectual [hygiene](#), on injuries to the [nerves](#), on [neurasthenia](#), on nervous diseases of women, on the effects of [gunshot wounds](#) upon the nervous system, and on the relations between [nurse](#), physician, and patient; while in the latter, he wrote juvenile stories, several volumes of respectable [verse](#), and prose fiction of varying merit, which, however, gave him a leading place among the American authors of the close of the 19th century. His historical novels, *Hugh Wynne*, [Free Quaker](#) (1897), *The Adventures of Francois* (1898) and *The Red City* (1909), take high rank in this branch of fiction.

He was also [Charlotte Perkins Gilman](#)'s doctor and his use of a [rest cure](#) on her provided the idea for "[The Yellow Wallpaper](#)", a short story in which the narrator is driven insane by her rest cure.

Honors and recognition

Dr. Mitchell's eminence in science and letters was recognized by honorary degrees conferred upon him by several universities at home and abroad and by membership, honorary or active, in many American and foreign learned societies. In 1887 he was president of the [Association of American Physicians](#) and in 1908-09 president of the [American Neurological Association](#). [New International Encyclopedia](#)

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http://books.google.ca/books?id=v_OkSkFriAgC&pg=PA1461&lpg=PA1461&dq=Silas+Weir+Mitchell+%3D+rest+cure&source=bl&ots=0u-e412D2s&sig=ljJVxrJ6drz9A28wY_uzUhunAic&hl=fr&ei=rwybSbOnB83dtgeZ6s2pCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=7&ct=result#PPA1461,M1 very good one rest cure encyclopaedia

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