Review Article

That curious book "The Breath of Life" by George Catlin

Lawrence W. Onsager (*Loma Linda University*)

Suggested Citation

Onsager, L. W. (1980). That curious book "The Breath of Life" by George Catlin. *International Journal of Orofacial Myology*, 6(4), 7-10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52010/ijom.1980.6.4.3>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of the International Association of Orofacial Myology (IAOM). Identification of specific products, programs, or equipment does not constitute or imply endorsement by the authors or the IAOM. The journal in which this article appears is hosted on [Digital Commons](#), an Elsevier platform.

That Curious Book "The Breath Of Life" By George Catlin

By Lawrence W. Onsager, M.L.

Associate Director
Loma Linda University Library
La Sierra Campus
Riverside, California

ABSTRACT

In 1861, George Catlin published a classic on mouth breathing titled *The Breath of Life* which is a contribution to the history of medicine, dentistry, and medical anthropology. Catlin, famous for his American Indian paintings and contributions to ethnography, believed that primitive Indians were healthier than civilized Europeans because they slept on their backs and breathed through their noses rather than their mouths. He emphasized his point with the use of many rather absurd illustrations. The book had a fair degree of success and was reprinted regularly until 1891. Garrison and Morton list the book as the first published work in America on mouth breathing.

In 1861, a curious book entitled *The Breath of Life* was published by an American eccentric, George Catlin. Called a "classic" by Fielding Garrison¹ and listed in Garrison and Morton² as the first published work in America on mouth breathing, this book brings a little known side of the author to our attention.

George Catlin, 1796-1872, famous for his American Indian paintings, had vision and boundless energy. He traveled extensively in the Western United States and Central and South America painting Indian portraits and scenes illustrating Indian life and customs. He painted more pictures of the trans-Mississippi West than any other artist before the days of photography.³ His most popular book is *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* written during eight years' travel amongst the wildest tribes in North America, 1832-1839; it was published in 1841.

Born in Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley near Wilkes-Barre, Catlin grew up hearing tales of the bloody Wyoming Massacre of 1778, in which his mother had been taken captive by the Indians as a seven year old child. He spent his youth

as a reluctant scholar and an avid hunter and fisherman. His father was a well-known lawyer, and at his request George became a lawyer. After three years of boredom, he quit law and migrated to Philadelphia to become a self-taught portrait painter. His real career began in 1830 when he made his first trip among the Western Indians with General William Clark, co-leader of the Lewis and Clark expedition and then the superintendent of Indian affairs at Saint Louis.

A self-styled expert on mouth breathing, Catlin titled his classic *The Breath of Life or Mal-respiration and Its Effects Upon the Enjoyments and Life of Man*. In the preface, Catlin pontificates, "No person on earth who reads this little work will condemn it: It is only a question how many millions may look through it and benefit themselves by adopting its precepts." Printed by photolithography from an illustrated manuscript that he had prepared in the jungles of Brazil, the first edition contains an appendix dated Rio Grande, Brazil, 1860. The title imprinted on the cardboard cover was:

THE BREATH OF LIFE

(All Life (on Earth) is Breath)

(All Else (on Earth) is Death)

MANUGRAPH

by

George Catlin

First published by John Wiley in New York and by Trubner and Company in London, the book was issued again and again—sometimes under the title *Breath of Life* and sometimes *Shut Your Mouth and Save Your Life*. Catlin's first biographer, Loyd Haberly, claimed that the book sold more than 40,000 copies.⁴ The last American edition was issued by Heath Publishing Company of Boston in 1890 and the last English edition by K. Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company of London in 1891.

Haberly claims that the eccentric C. L. Dodgson, mathematics tutor at

Oxford, bought a copy of the book because of his interest in personal health—he had a dread of drafts—and used it when he was writing the first version of *Alice in Wonderland*. Catlin's absurd illustrations of mouth breathers made excellent models for the peculiar inhabitants of Wonderland.⁵

The size of the book increased over the years with additional illustrations and an enlarged appendix. The original edition had 76 pages; this increased to 92 pages in 1869, 102 pages in 1878 and 110 pages in 1890. The illustrations increased from 26 to 29. The fourth London edition in 1870 was described as considerably enlarged. This was because the appendix included material Catlin had left out to limit the size of the original edition.

The subject matter of the book has had various interpretations. A check of the Library of Congress Catalog of Printed Cards reveals that catalogers have assigned the following subject headings to the book: Mouth Breathing, Curiosa, Manu-graph, Medicine & Surgery, Respiration, Hygiene (Personal), Indians (North American), Sleep, and Breath and Breathing (in religion, folklore, etc.).

The main point of the book is that healthy people sleep on their backs and breathe through their noses. Catlin believed that primitive Indians were healthier than civilized Europeans due to the advantages derived from quiet and natural sleep. In his travels he observed that Indian women would press the lips of their children shut while they were sleeping to teach them to breathe through their noses. In contrast, "civilized" mothers lovingly cover the faces of infants sleeping in overheated rooms causing them to gasp for air and learn to breathe through their mouths. According to Catlin, this naturally leads to disease and death. To prove his point, Catlin states,

From the Bills of Mortality which are annually produced in the civilized world, we learn that in London and other large towns in England, and cities of the Continent, on an average, one half of the human race die before they reach the age of five years and one half of the remainder die before they reach the age of twenty-five, thus leaving but one in four to share the chances of lasting from the age of twenty-five to old age.⁶

Catlin believed the bad habit of mouth breathing caused nightmares, snoring, nervous debility, crooked spine, deafness, infant death, yellow fever, cholera, crooked teeth, colds, and bleary, dreary faces to name a few of the more terrible things. Catlin observed that most aged persons in "civilized" society close their mouths firmly; he attributed their longevity to the "long practiced and healthy habit" of breathing through the nose.

Catlin visited 150 tribes, containing more than two million Indians by his estimate. Among these tribes, he claimed the incidence of aches, pains, mental and physical deformities, and premature deaths was significantly less than in the "civilized" world.

Because the Indians kept no written records, Catlin could not obtain exact numbers of annual deaths or proportionate estimates of deaths before and between certain ages. Instead he obtained his information from verbal estimates made by the chiefs and medicine men in the various tribes—a rather creative way of doing an epidemiological study. For example, he would question a chief about such things as the number of children under ten years of age which his village had lost during the last ten years.

Among the Mandan Indians, Catlin learned from the chiefs that the death of a child under ten years of age was unusual. To verify their verbal report, he checked the cemetery where the bodies were placed on scaffolds above the ground and found only eleven children.

Clermont, chief of the Osage Indians, replied to Catlin's questions. "Before my people began to use firewater, it was a very unusual thing for our women to lose their children."

Naw-Kaw, chief of the Winnebagoes, said, "Our children are not

now near so healthy as they were when I was a young man; it was a rare thing for a woman to lose her child; now it is a very difficult thing to raise them."

His study used techniques similar to those of the new field of medical anthropology which developed after World War II, a field defined as "the cross-cultural study of medical systems and the bioecological and sociocultural factors that influence the incidence of health and disease."⁷ Medical anthropologists have developed theories to explain why Catlin found less disease among the primitive tribes. Hunting-gathering populations are considered to have been too small to maintain diseases such as measles, rubella, smallpox, mumps, cholera, and chicken pox. Instead diseases such as typhoid, leprosy, or malaria with which the individual remains infected for long periods of time, were prevalent. Nomadic habits of hunter-gatherers also affect their health positively. Small populations constantly on the go are less likely to reinfect themselves from fecal or other matter than a large settled population. James V. Neel aptly notes that, "The advent of civilization dealt a blow to man's health from which he is only now recovering."⁸

Contemporary Views of the Book

Not all of Catlin's contemporaries wholeheartedly agreed with his conclusions. The *Health Reformer* noted "a man must be very far gone in the vanity of his own theory, who can attempt to explain so many things to the eye of reason and observation as George Catlin does, by the simple act of sleeping with the mouth open."⁹

In 1897, Leo Kofler wrote in his *Art of Breathing as the Basis of Tone-reproduction*, "I recommend two books to be read and re-read not only by singers and public speakers, but by parents and educators of children. One is by Dr. Clinton Wagner, of New York, and is called *Habitual Mouth Breathing*; the other bears the significant title *Shut Your Mouth*, and is by George Catlin."¹⁰

Present Views of the Book

A brief digest of the book was published in *Saturday Night*, of Los Angeles, in the 1920's. A friend

brought this article to the attention of the well-known orthodontist, Edward H. Angle, 1855-1930. Angle is known for the Edward H. Angle Society of Orthodontia which is named for him and for his book *Malocclusion of the Teeth*, which went through seven editions. In the book, he pictures two elderly North American Indians and comments that their mouths were "in perfect balance with the rest of their features, making certain that their dentures must have been normal."¹¹

Impressed with Catlin's book, which bore out his earlier conclusions about the tendency for normal occlusion of the North American Indian, Angle had it reprinted in 1925. In the foreword, he says "so thorough is the work of Mr. Catlin and so sound his reasoning, most of what this book contains has since become the accepted belief of the orthodontic profession. In his belief that some forms of malocclusion of the teeth and facial deformity are due to mouth-breathing we only too well know Mr. Catlin to be entirely correct, and doubtless, he is one of the first, if not the first, in this country to direct attention to this fact."¹²

In a 1972 article, "The biological destiny of the orofacial muscles," E. Gwynne-Evans takes some liberties in quoting Catlin on the potentialities of lip behavior:

The lips in the day, are generally concerned with eating - drinking - singing - laughing - grinning - pouting - talking - smoking - scolding - whistling - chewing - or spitting. Its endless modulations of sound may produce the richest, the sweetest of music, or the most frightening and unpleasant sounds in the world.

It converses—it curses and applauds; it comments and reproves—it slanders—it flatters—it prays and it profanes—it blasphemes and adores—blows hot and blows cold—speaks soft tones of love and affection and rough notes of vengeance and hatred—it bites and it woos—it kisses—eats cherries—roast beef and chicken and a thousand other things—drinks coffee, gin and mint juleps and sometimes brandy—takes pills, rhubarb and magnesia—tells tales and keeps secrets—is pretty or is ugly—of all shapes and sizes—with teeth white—teeth black and teeth yellow and with no teeth at all.¹³

According to Donald F. Proctor, little recognition was given the role

of the nose in the defense of human health prior to the end of the nineteenth century. Proctor claims that only since the 1960's have serious scientific studies been directed at understanding the function of the nose; he mentions that Catlin was one of the earlier champions of the cause.¹⁴

Why Catlin Wrote this Book

No doubt Catlin's inquiring mind and his powers of observation developed as a painter helped him to conceive the book. The range of his interests can be seen from such things as the brief pamphlet he published in 1860, *The Steam Raft, Suggested as a Means of Security to Human Life upon the Ocean*, which gives evidence of his ability as a mechanic and inventive genius, and from a book that reflects his interest in geology in 1870 entitled *The Lifted and Subsided Rocks of America*. A restless man, he constantly needed a challenge. His early career illustrates this. He had a successful law practice for three years, but he considered the study of law "dry and tedious" and the eight years he spent painting portraits and miniatures "fatiguing and confining."

Catlin needed an enterprise to which he could devote a lifetime of enthusiasm. He found his lifework when the sight of a visiting delegation of Western Indians gave him the idea of recording the North American Indians in their primitive state. As early as 1824, he contemplated collecting materials for an ethnological and natural history museum. His brother Julius was to be the expedition's geologist and assist in the natural history collecting. Unfortunately, Julius drowned before they could carry out their plans.

Catlin's own health was periodically poor and he was interested in improving it. By observing the Indians, he thought he had found the secret of their good health when he noticed that they slept with their mouths shut. He cured himself of mouth breathing and wrote the book to pass on "to all classes of people and all nations" this "important advice" on mal-respiration. He was particularly concerned about the suffering of young children and directed much advice to his "young readers."

Conclusion

Since the publishing of his first biography in 1948 by Loyd Haberly, there has been a revival of popular interest in Catlin's work. Although his paintings have been both praised and condemned, the consensus today is that his work should be considered as historic documents or scientific illustrations rather than as works of art.

Although Catlin had some worth-

less theories in *The Breath of Life* that such diseases as cholera, yellow fever, tuberculosis, croup, etc., are caused by mouth breathing, it is now established fact that those who breathe habitually through their mouths are more prone to certain infections and orthodontic problems. Normal nose breathing cleans and warms the air as well as inhibiting bacterial growth. Treatment of mouth breathing may involve three specialties: medicine, dentistry, and

T B E

BREATH of LIFE

or

mal-Respiration.

and its

effects upon the enjoyments & life of man.

By

Geo Catlin.

Author of "Notes of Travels amongst the North Amn. Indians."

Ec., Ec., Ec.

JOHN WILEY, NEW YORK,

1861.

Figure 1: Title page of the first edition.

speech pathology and this slim, little volume, *The Breath of Life*, may be judged by history as having a place in the annals of medicine, dentistry, and medical anthropology. Catlin, who has been well-recognized for his work as a painter and ethnographer, should also be recognized for his unique contribution to the development of the scientific understanding of mouth breathing.

We might well follow Catlin's admonition; "If I were to endeavor to bequeathe to posterity the most

important motto which human language can convey, it should be in three words—Shut Your Mouth!"

REFERENCES

- ¹Garrison, Fielding. *An Introduction to the History of Medicine*. 4th ed. Reprint. Philadelphia and London, W. B. Saunders Co., 1966. p. 614.
- ²Morton, Leslie T. *A Medical Bibliography (Garrison and Morton); an Annotated Check-list of Texts*

Illustrating the History of Medicine. 3rd ed. Philadelphia and Toronto, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970. p. 387.

- ³Ewers, J. C. George Catlin, painter of Indians and the West. Smithsonian Institution. Annual Report, 1955. p. 483.
- ⁴Haberly, Loyd. Pursuit of the Horizon; a Life of George Catlin, Painter and Recorder of the American Indian. New York, Mac-Millan, 1948. p. 208-9.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 209.
- ⁶Catlin, George. *The Breath of Life or Mal-respiration and Its Effects Upon the Enjoyments and Life of Man*. New York, John Wiley, 1872. pp. 5-6.
- ⁷Foster, George M. and Barbara G. Anderson. *Medical Anthropology*. New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1978. p. 1.
- ⁸Neel, James V. Lessons from a "primitive" people. *Science* 170:818, Nov. 20, 1970.
- ⁹Sleeping with the mouth open. *Health Reformer*. 1:44-45, Oct. 1866.
- ¹⁰Kofler, Leo. *Art of Breathing as the Basis of Tone-production*. 7th rev. ed., New York, Edgar S. Werner & Company, 1897. p. 49.
- ¹¹Angle, Edward H. *Treatment of Malocclusion of the Teeth*. 7th ed., Philadelphia, S. S. White, 1907. p. 66.
- ¹²Angle, Edward H. Foreword. In: Catlin, George. *Breath of Life or Mal-respiration and its Effects upon the Enjoyments & Life of Man*. Reprint. New York, John Wiley, 1925. p. 3.
- ¹³Gwynne-Evans, E. The Biological destiny of the oro-facial muscles. *Br. J. Disord. Commun.* 7:111-2, 1972.
- ¹⁴Proctor, D. F. The Nose, ambient air and airway mucosa. *Bull. Hist. Med.* 48:358, Fall 1974.

Figure 2. The contrast between the civilized European and the primitive Indian. Illustrations from George Catlin, *The Breath of Life*... New York, John Wiley, 1872. pp. 44, 62.