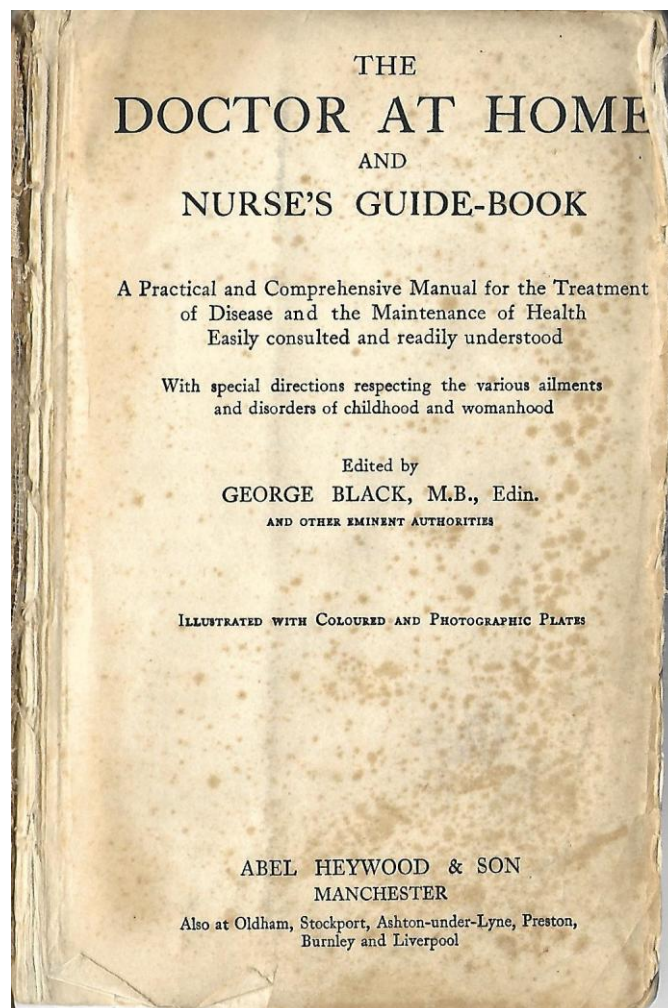


# THE TREATMENT OF FRECKLES IN 1910

My paternal grandfather, Arthur Cooper, was killed in April 1918, near Ypres on the Western Front, when my father was three years old. Arthur had been a postal worker in the Liverpool General Post Office before the Great War and, before that, a postman in Manchester. He married in 1909 and his daughters were born in 1910 and 1912. Around that time, he and my grandmother must have attended the Cheetham Hill Congregational Church because on 17 April 1910, he was awarded a First Class Prize by the President J.R.Stringer, in the form of a book, the details of which appear below:



The book is almost 600 pages long, and it is perhaps invidious to draw conclusions on the basis of one entry; but I couldn't help being struck by the page or two devoted to Freckles, which contains some alarming passages. The text seems to reveal an entirely different world to the one we inhabit now (or does it?)

The writer starts with a largely neutral description, concentrating on the prevalence of the condition among fair-haired people, and even more so amongst those with red hair; but the sting is in the tail. (I should say at this stage that my mother was a redhead, and that my own face has always been covered with an extraordinary number of freckles).

FRECKLES may appear before the third or fourth year of life and generally vanish in advanced age. Once having appeared, they last a long time, fading in winter to reappear in summer. Persons of fair complexion are most liable to them and those having red hair are rarely quite free from freckles; dark-complexioned people are not, however, always exempt. They are attended by no symptoms and are only annoying by reason of the disfigurement they cause.

So it's a disfigurement, then, is it? Nobody told me; but clearly, it must have bothered a great number of people in 1910. Indeed one wonders whether the doctor (at home or not) and the nurse (in need of guidance or not) had much time for anything else, judging by the amount of space devoted to the subject.

Dr Black explains that there are ways of removing freckles altogether and ways of treating the disfigurement. He does not really recommend the former (saying that it at least requires the attentions of 'a medical man' - and I don't suppose he was using the word in a gender-neutral way). Nevertheless, the text reveals that there must have been some who were willing to give it a go:

#### FRECKLES, REMOVAL OF

When there are discoloured marks on the skin, as in freckles, the colour deposit takes place in the deeper layer of the epidermis; hence they are very difficult of removal, because, in order to take away all the colouring matter at once, this portion of the skin would have to be removed down to the papillae, as in the case of a blister. Now this is painful and troublesome and, moreover, experience shows that it would be useless to blister off such deformities, because we not infrequently see blisters on different portions of the body actually followed by staining of the skin where no such

staining existed before. It has been found possible in many cases, however, by proper stimulants to induce an absorption of the pigment, or produce rapid change in the skin, when the new-formed cells will not have the colour.

Let us hope that the number of people who wanted to wanted surgery to be cured of their freckles was not great; and let us hope that no such removals are attempted nowadays, though I would not be certain of it, given the example set by the late Michael Jackson in several other (not altogether dissimilar) fields of plastic surgery.

But there are more horrors to come, for it appears from the good Dr Black's *magnum opus* that there were people who wanted to have the freckles burnt out, rather than sliced off.

#### FRECKLES TREATMENT OF

Among these may be mentioned several preparations of mercury, sub nitrate of bismuth and mild alkaline applications, as solutions of carbonate of soda, or of carbonate of potash. These, variously combined with emulsion of almonds and tincture of benzoin, form agreeable remedies, which should be perseveringly used. Better results are obtained by the prolonged use of mild remedies than by strong applications. Freckles may be rapidly removed by using applications of such strength that their continuous action for some hours gives rise to the formation of minute blisters. The pigment may be carefully removed with the epidermis forming the roof of the blister. The epidermis which re-forms over the surface thus treated will be found to be free from excess of pigment. This process is not to be advised, however, as the benefit is of short duration and, in unskilful hands, permanent injury to the skin might result.

Ouch! I note that Dr Black is not really in favour of these treatments either, especially when administered by paramedics or quacks, but at the same time it seems to me that the patient who was really eager to damage his skin would not have to twist the good doctor's arm all that hard. I say this especially because, having given his version of a health warning, Black gives us a recipe (in fact several), for things we could try out for ourselves.

#### FRECKLES, WITHERING COSMETIC LOTION FOR

This preparation for freckles was compounded as follows: ---Take a teacupful of sour milk; scrape into it a quantity of horseradish; let it stand for several hours, then strain well and apply with a camel-

hair brush two or three times a day. The following recipes are also said to remove either freckles, tan, or sunburn and are certainly harmless: ---Dip a bunch of green grapes in a basin of water; sprinkle it with powdered alum and salt mixed; wrap the grapes in paper and bake them under hot ashes; then express the juice and wash the face with the liquid, which will usually remove either freckles, tan, or sunburn. Or, put two spoonfuls of sweet cream into half a pint of new milk; squeeze into it the juice of a lemon, add half a glass of genuine French brandy, a little alum and loaf sugar; boil the whole, skim it well, and when cool it is fit for use.

Now, to be fair, the Doctor makes it clear that we will not come to any harm, if we are content to paint our freckle-disfigured faces with milk and horseradish, or grape-juice, or creamy brandy; but note that the sub-heading does contain the adjective 'withering'. And isn't the article as a whole telling the public that freckles are a terrible affliction, and that one should really try to do something about them, if we expect to be received in polite society?