
This monograph is a unique insight, not only into people of exceptional longevity, but also into the laborious work of validating the ages of such subjects. Whilst the volume shows that most reported instances of exceptional longevity are incorrect, it does cite many individuals whose longevity has been validated. Much of the age exaggeration occurred through to the late 19th Century. Until then, in Sweden and Denmark and still today in most countries, age statistics are based on self-reported age censuses or unverified ages reported on death certificates. Validation has relied on accurate birth registrations and since these have been available for a Century or more, unfortunately, many of the cases where validation has been assured are now dying at extremes of old age. Indeed, three of the more carefully scrutinized case histories were subjects who died during their investigations. The ages, however, were verified to be up to 122 years and 5 months at the time of death.

Exceptional longevity is not a new concept. In England John Lock, philosopher, noted in 1681 a woman said to be 108 years of age. His passage not only tells us of Alice George’s marriage at 30 and her 15 children (with a further 3 miscarriages) but also Lock describes her daily constitution and dietary intake as if seeking out the ‘secret’ of longevity.

Whilst some readers may read this monograph from cover to cover, I believe the true appeal is to dip in and out of the chapters comparing the validation across countries and witnessing photographs of those elderly people who so rightly receive infamy in this book. My own favourite description is of Katherine Plunket who was born in Ireland on 22 November 1820 and died on the 14 October 1932 at the age of 111. Not only was she one of the 8 cases identified by the well-known American actuary Walter Bowerman as having died at ages between 109 and 113 years, but she was shown to be one of the few cases that could be validated. There was speculation that Katherine’s true date of birth may have been later. However, the evidence was that since her mother married in 1819 and Katherine was born in 1820 (when her mother was 16 years of age) this has been dismissed. There was, however, further speculation that Katherine died and was replaced by another child. However, there was a Census in 1821 and she was present on this. An account by her cousin in 1930, as published in The Spectator, tells of Katherine at the age of 102 being forced to her bed by an attack of bronchitis. At the suggestion of her physician she remained in her room despite a good recovery. She thus left the management of the garden and estate entirely in the hands of her younger sister who then succumbed at the age of 84 to a heart attack and left Katherine alone. Her cousin tells her that she decided to ‘pull herself together’ and she therefore took over the role that her sister had previously undertaken. Whilst there was a suggestion that it was Katherine, not Gertrude, who died in 1924 and that Gertrude impersonated Katherine for the rest of her life in order to prevent inheritance passing to her nephew, it seems improbable that Gertrude, a lady in a pious Victorian household, and the daughter of a Bishop, should suddenly take to serious crime at the age of 83.

I thoroughly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in ageing. It is both educational and entertaining and would fit as comfortably on a coffee table as it would in an academic library.

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