

# THE HEALTH OF THE NORTH IN A RENAISSANCE

## ENCYCLOPAEDIA\*

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In 1555 a private press in Rome issued a volume in Latin with some 400 woodcut illustrations, most of them specially commissioned by the author, these being in the form of vignettes at the head of a majority of the about 600 short chapters of the work. The author was patently a man of substance — yet he was a foreigner in Rome. Known as Olaus Magnus, the author was the exiled Archbishop of Uppsala, exiled in consequence of the adoption of Lutheran practices by the state and church in Sweden. Olaus shared the earlier part of his exile with his brother, his predecessor as archbishop. Although Rome was their spiritual and domestic home, the minds of the brothers were elsewhere — on 'the North', that is, on Scandinavia and especially on Sweden, a kingdom of wider political and cultural power than today.<sup>1</sup> Each brother wrote on the history of 'the North', and not least about the 'Goths', the mythical ancestors of the Northern peoples. The Renaissance mindset among scholars in Rome reflected and glorified the culture of the classical world, the Graeco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean. The brothers reacted by making claims for the Gothic north of Europe, implying that anything that the south had achieved, the north could (somehow) equal. Olaus's book was

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\* A talk on the above subject given to the Society on 3 February 2000 consisted largely of the presentation of illustrations, with minimal commentary, from Olaus Magnus, *A Description of the Northern Peoples 1555*, trans. P. Fisher and H. Higgins, ed. P. Foote [and J. Granlund], (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1996), 3 vols. (for purchase details, contact Fiona Easton, Office@Hakluyt.com, or c/o Map Library, British Library, London NW1 2DB). Since it is not possible to reproduce here more than a handful of the illustrations, the commentary has been extended, but references to the missing illustrations are given, the source being available in libraries and purchasable by interested readers

1 As well as present-day Sweden, Olaus considers the North to include present-day Norway, Finland, the Baltic states, and those German-speaking and Polish-speaking districts fringing the Baltic. Also Denmark, but for political reasons Olaus is hostile and bad-words the Danes.

therefore devoted to showing that the northerners were not, as Rome thought, uncivilised barbarians, even though the circumstances of the terrain and climate had shaped aspects of their behaviour, such as their forms of warfare, their territorial and domestic economy, and even their health and medicine. The vignettes — albeit often crude, often bizarre (like part of the text), and sometimes just wrong in detail — tell the same story. Thus, for instance, ice and snow frequently occur in both text and illustrations. In the text, Olaus, with his earlier personal experience of the North, passes on what he had observed while there, either seen with his own eyes or at least heard about.

For a Renaissance scholar, however, observation derived from personal experience was not enough, and Olaus stuffs his books with purportedly relevant quotes from classical writers, such as Pliny, dealing with other parts of the known world than the North. Most of this show-off information — or misinformation — is irrelevant, some of it plain silly, and no more need be said about it here.<sup>2</sup> As for Olaus's own observations, they deal with almost everything northern — the North's history, sociology, economics, geography, meteorology, etc. The book is not strictly an encyclopaedia, but the editors of the recently issued English translation justly call it 'encyclopaedic'.<sup>3</sup> There is no overall treatment of health and medicine. But scattered through the multitudinous chapters and vignettes are a fair number of references to health in the North. These references I now discuss, concentrating on those with accompanying vignettes.<sup>4</sup>

### *Some risks to life in the North*

Olaus illustrates a few of the risks to life and limb in the North. The illustration to a chapter on 'The dangerous fishing in the Norwegian Ocean' (p. 1082) shows giant cod and halibut being line-fished from small ships, and two men on a neatly polygonal ice-sheet, one of them fishing through a hole in

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2 Except that suspicion arises that Olaus sometimes shapes his personal observations to fit his classical authorities, a typical Renaissance unscholarly ploy inadequately considered in the introduction to the translation.

3 For the record, the English hardly get a mention. Only one vignette relates to England, actually to the English North, an anatomically hopeless drawing of a whale ('a giant fish') which grounded near Tynemouth in 1532 (p.1095). Because the bishops of Durham had foreshore rights, a whale skeleton from an earlier century was until recently displayed in Durham Cathedral and is now in storage at Beamish Open Air Museum (information I owe to Adrian Allan).

4 For some references not illustrated, see the Introduction, pp. lv-lvi.

the ice.<sup>5</sup> The editors point out that, as recently as the 1930s, some sixty to one hundred Norwegian deep-sea fishermen were lost annually. Elsewhere seal hunting is illustrated (p. 1036), single hunters in tiny boats spearing the animals on ice floes — the scene probably in the Gulf of Bothnia. Among the many uses of the seal carcasses, the blubber is claimed by Olaus to get rid of ringworm and skin eruptions.<sup>6</sup> For workers on land, too, there were dangers. Olaus does not highlight the dangers to life in a terrain of snow and ice, but draws attention to another climatic risk. A dramatic vignette heads a chapter entitled 'On lightning in the ore-bearing mountains' (p. 300), and presumably it was thought that lightning was attracted to iron ore. A cure for the choking caused by 'the sulphurous smell of thunderbolts' is helpfully offered. Most Swedes worked not in mines but in agriculture. Olaus chose to illustrate a chapter entitled 'On the fight waged by shepherds against snakes' (p. 1135), where the snakes include some emerging from waterways. Olaus warns against snakes spitting — 'as happened to me, fifty years ago, when as a schoolboy, I was going to collect juniper berries in the middle of August'. And he supplies a recipe for theriac, a snakebite antidote.<sup>7</sup> Rather less convincing is the illustrated chapter 'On the way bees attack people who are drunk' (pp. 1174-5), where in the vignette the bees seems to be heading for the open mouths of the slumped drunkards. Other persons attacked by bees, says Olaus, rush away and kill themselves by falling heavily or into a river. However, bee stings can be cured by greasing the face with fresh butter or by applying the sap from mallow when in flower.<sup>8</sup>

The risks of normal peacetime existence were topped by the violence of wartime — much of the book deals with warfare, endemic in Scandinavia in Olaus's day. Sliced-up corpses on a battlefield are shown in one illustration (p. 242), although the text invokes a mythical Gothic hero whose deeds included walking from Upper Sweden to Denmark in one day. Military tactics, often in the form of manoeuvres on the ice, included swimming across rivers, and one illustration relates to 'the swimming of armoured infantrymen, especially fat ones' (p. 506). The soldiers are actually hauling themselves through

5 In fact, ocean fishermen did not fish with lines and the eyes of the fish are wrongly placed. It is curious that the artist often got details of northern phenomena wrong, considering that he was presumably being supervised by Olaus.

6 p. 1036. Actually Olaus is quoting an ancient writer. But perhaps on such a Northern subject as seals, he is implicitly confirming an authority from observation.

7 Another chapter is 'On guarding tiny children from serpents during the harvest', the appropriate vignette showing a baby basket hanging from a branch of a tree, high above the lunging but frustrated snakes: pp. 626-7.

8 pp. 1174-5.

the water on a rope, Dad's Army fashion (*experto credite*), but one soldier, perhaps a fat one, who has let go is either swimming or drowning. Not only infantry were at risk. A chapter 'On the craftiness of some horses' is illustrated with a vignette of armoured cavalymen just about to break their necks by being thrown off violently bucking horses, one quite vertical (p. 1135).

At all times there were also domestic risks. A nice drawing of an interior, a dog sleeping in its bed, has two individuals with enormously long sticks protruding from their mouths, the ends aflame (p. 112). The woman, who has her hands occupied, busy spinning, carries a supply of the sticks in a band round her hair. These are pine splinters, used as torches, northern daylight being limited in wintertime. But, warns Olaus, used indoors these torches can be dangerous for women, the stench causing miscarriages.<sup>9</sup> Those long winter nights may well contribute to the reputation of modern Swedes for being excessively depressed and suicidal. Be that as it may, the 'voluntary drowning of King Hundiger in [a vat of] mead or hydromel' is shown (p. 648), and Olaus tells us that another suicidal monarch hanged himself, in each case allegedly to demonstrate to his followers a tortuous moral purpose. Olaus cautiously adds the view of a German historian that 'the deaths of this pair of kings was utterly ridiculous'.<sup>10</sup>

### *Some tips on healthy living*

The North ate a great deal of fish, some of it dried or smoked, and Olaus commends this diet for producing 'the distinctiveness toughness of their bodies'. A vignette shows a fish shop, the lady seller offering the lady buyer a thick eel, while the sea-food on display includes a seal. The surround of the picture has fish being smoked and barrels of probably salted fish in a cellar (p. 1058). As a good archbishop, Olaus commends temperance in eating and drinking, in a chapter referring admittedly only to the example of 'the giants and champions' of the past. And the vignette (p. 234) shows a medieval hero who dished out simple traditional food at his table, 'smoky rancid fare which tasted all the better for being plain', spurning foreign delicacies and spices.<sup>11</sup> Olaus adds fifteen verses of a poem praising the hero's abstemiousness. Exercise is good for health, as we are now daily told, and Olaus, writing on 'boxing gloves and gymnastic contests' (p. 270), presents two lightly clad individuals

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9 pp. 112-3.

10 p. 649.

11 'Spices' probably referred to the exotic ones arriving in southern Europe in Olaus' day, as a result of the new contacts with Africa and Asia, but which were expensive in the North and profited southern merchants. Moreover, these newfangled tastes derived from heretical Germany.

waving fists at each other — but it looks as if he borrowed this illustration from a classical source. More thoroughly Northern is a jolly drawing of youths assaulting with snowballs an enormous and elaborately architected snow castle (p. 54), although the fate of two youths trying to enter the castle by a hole at ground level seems sadly assured. Also Northern is an interior scene of what seems to be a sort of sauna (p. 456). While a baker cooks bread in an oven, in a space at the rear where hot water runs into a pot, two naked individuals, one with his feet in a bowl, are soaping themselves, and another pot seems to be filling with cold water. Oddly, the text ignores the bathroom scene.

Diseases will be discussed in a later section of this paper, but an exemplar of what might be considered a primitive preventative-medicine practice may be slipped in here. Plague did occur in the North, and an illustration depicts a Pied-Piper individual who, by some form of magical technique, persuades a line of rodents, both rats and mice, to leave houses and drown themselves in an ice-hole (p. 862). I have to confess that Olaus seems unaware of the plague connection. The Archbishop, who was capable of discussing almost any possible subject, and generally does so, includes a thought in the field of obstetrics and sexual practice. In a chapter entitled, weirdly, 'A fine comparison between the natures of fish and men', he cites approvingly a dictum of St Ambrose which has special application in the climate of the North, to the effect that 'all living creatures have fixed seasons for bearing their young, with the sole exception of human beings, whose time for giving birth is vague and indefinite. All other orders seek a mild period of the year, but women alone have their progeny under harsh conditions. A haphazard, headstrong desire for procreation leads to an equally haphazard time for childbirth'.<sup>12</sup> A useful tip for sober would-be parents. Finally, and aptly in the realm of geriatrics, a chapter on reverence for the aged shows in a drawing that, if you take your grandfather for a sleigh ride, when going down a steep hill you should not rattle him but lessen the speed of the descent by putting a bear skin under the conveyance (p. 217). Unfortunately the southern artist got it wrong, by putting the head of the bear at the rear instead of at the front, thus predicating a catastrophe.

### *The medical profession in the North*

Olaus does have a chapter 'On doctors and medicine', with the vignette reproduced below. Although the text adds up to saying that there are few medical men in the North, some of the chapter is worth citing.

Praise is given to trustworthy lawyers and skilled advocates on behalf of individual clients. But those are held in much greater renown who by the excellence of their skill know how to drive out what people saw to be bringing on death, and to someone in danger from a sickness restore the health which, in his agonising pain, he had been forced to despair of. ... Therefore among those useful arts which the powers on high have granted to support this abode of human frailty and its needs, we see none which is able to furnish anything like the advantages that medical help can contribute.

So far, so good, not least for bolstering medical self-confidence. However –

The health of man is very intricate, consisting as it does of a mixture of opposing humours ... [hence] it is not by chance nor by the vague desires of men that help is administered to the sick, but by very definite rules wisely considered by those who recognise the reasons for illness ... [Yet] a person skilled in healing often cures a sick man against his will, since in serious suffering the patient often has no true inclinations, but rather longs for something which the appraiser of the condition thinks may make matters worse. There is one condition, however, which the unfortunate invalid seems to fear without exception. When he has been once cheated by a bad, inexperienced doctor, or, more truthfully, a mountebank, he thinks them all deceivers, even the wisest physicians. Hence one finds in northern kingdoms a great scarcity of doctors to bring firm care to the ailing, not because they are uncertain in their art, but because their patients are so wayward and unmanageable.<sup>13</sup>

The patient is always wrong ... Another chapter, 'On the diversity of sick persons, illnesses, and medicines', lacks an illustration but indicates what the medical man faced in the North.

The quality of the elements are rigorous in those lands, and men's temperaments, too, are rigorous, especially those of noblemen and magnates, who readily outrage and affront Nature, so that the conscientious care of the doctor is disappointed of its due praise and the patient of his health. For this reason, very few individuals devote themselves to this perilous art, for while they desire to tend weakness in another's body, they fear that, because of the drawbacks and neglected regime I have mentioned, their own lives may possibly be endangered. ... Now the diseases particular<sup>14</sup> to Northerners are these: coughs, stones, toothache and pains in the eyes,<sup>15</sup> griping of the bowels, fever, catarrh, the itch, the French disease, and children's ailments; the plague, too, though it appears quite seldom, destroys folk all the more ruthlessly, especially those who are dulled by hangovers. There is also another disease, the camp sickness, which distresses those who are enclosed under siege. ...<sup>16</sup>

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13 p. 825.

14 The translation has 'peculiar', which cannot be right.

15 Elsewhere Olaus refers to what is, presumably, snow blindness.

16 The next chapter is about 'the inconveniences of gout', an ailment which not mentioned in the list of disorders.

But the few doctors can sometimes gain merit, at least by bedside psychology.

Now those physicians attain higher praise who employ simpler medicines, but cure the infirm more frequently. They also win the people's favour when they know how to adduce medical reasons to convince them that from the union of old men and girls, male children are born rather than female. Those, too, are popular who persuade the sick with comforting words to choose pleasant places with greenery, twittering birds, and even croaking frogs for the restoration of their health.

After thus dismissing the physicians of the North rather briskly, Olaus adds that 'surgeons are very plentiful in those lands, for the simple reason that the people there hardly let a day or an hour go by without fighting'.<sup>17</sup>

The illustration reproduced here (below) shows a venerable, long-robed physician in his surgery. He holds a urine vessel and apparently at his command a barber-surgeon writes a prescription. The plants in pots are probably herbs. The editors tell us that a guild of barber-surgeons was established in Stockholm in 1484. Members were appointed to 'the first bandage', that is, individuals in turn had both the obligation and the monopoly of giving first aid to victims of attack and people injured in brawls — and also no doubt the privilege of collecting in reward a fee.

### *Procedures and remedies*

A chapter entitled 'On baths, cupping and letting blood' sounds promising but the text discusses only the first subject. The vignette shows a bathroom which, again, looks somewhat like a sauna (p. 760). Naked or semi-naked individuals (? females) are in a space with a tier of benches, and what looks like an inadequately brief curtain separates them from another individual (? male) who appears to be dipping a substantial twig in a tank of water. One of the bathers has her/his feet in a bowl. There is, however, no sign of a heating apparatus. In the accompanying text Olaus asserts that, as in Italy, in the North there are many baths, private and public. Considering the possibility of the sexes meeting each other naked, and consequent misbehaviour, he claims that 'if such saucy customers were seen up to their tricks in the northern baths, they would shortly be dragged out and should it be wintertime, pitched into the deepest snowdrifts'.<sup>18</sup> In the next chapter, on 'the ritual of

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17 pp. 824-7.

18 pp. 761. The editors discuss whether communal bath houses were divided between the sexes. The Stockholm one did, 'but it was not rural custom to separate the sexes, though they might have to take it in turn to use the bath house' (p. 769)

virgins processing to the baths', Olaus remembers to return to the missing subjects. 'Both sexes use cupping and blood-letting to dispel scabies, which is caused by the cold, and to rid themselves of irritation beneath the skin; nevertheless bleeding is commoner, though better and safer when carried out in barbers' shops'. Rambling on, he notes that 'stout women, also, make use of many remedies to rid themselves of fat, such as nibbling aniseed and cummin, and drinking a solution of wormwood.'<sup>19</sup>

Another chapter refers to a recently resurrected medical auxiliary. The illustration to the chapter 'On leeches and different kinds of worm' would be puzzling if Olaus had not troubled to explain it. 'In the picture above you may observe a man with his feet soaking in water and leeches fastened to them. In similar fashion a horse has a small beast of the same sort clinging close to its hooves.' The leeches are in fact drawn as enormous wormlike creatures. Olaus continues: 'I have shown it like this because it is a common remedy in northern countries for draining off excess or corrupted blood from men and draught animals.'<sup>20</sup>

We now come to DIY remedies. Consider the chapter 'On the variety of beers and their medicinal powers'.

The older the barley beer, the purer and healthier it is. And if it is drunk during the siege of a castle, it marvellously relieves and cures the intercutaneous disease that swells into a tumour, and it also removes bladder stones. When I was trapped inside the beleaguered Swedish royal city of Stockholm in 1520, I drank this very old beer and for several mornings in a row saw in the chamber pot little stones which had been passed without pain or injury. I passed ones that looked like grains of millet, chick peas, and peppercorns, all making up something similar in size to a nut, and never afterwards caught sight of a bladder stone nor felt the malady at all. Again, if you mix butter into it and bring it to the boil before you drink, it gets rid of a cough. Next, if there has been an injury to the ribs, you should boil it with eggs, ginger, and sugar, as if you were preparing a dish, and when you give it to the patient, it will be marvellously beneficial. Also, for the growth of any nails which have been bitten off or cut off with a blade, flesh and all, this drink is helpful, as the Finlanders in the north have learnt by experience. And so also the people of Wroclaw have found with their Swidnica beer, which is wonderfully effective in healing damaged bowels, as I myself can vouch for.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere another DIY remedy is noted.

In the North there is a certain medicine which is considered an infallible remedy against pestilence (though outbreaks are rare) by men who are concerned to protect

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19 pp. 761-2.

20 p. 1165.

21 p. 644.



their health, and they employ it not merely in times of plague but at the advent of any illness.

Olaus then provides a lengthy recipe, which those interested in this panacea must read up for themselves.

This medicine possesses other amazing powers; it wards off many diseases by a simple purge, and may be drunk at any time you please with no ill effects. I know people who, without consulting a single doctor, have preserved their health uninterrupted solely by means of this syrup for sixty to ninety years, to the very end of their old age. Among them was Jakob, Archbishop of Uppsala, of sacred memory, who passed away in 1522, having attained his hundredth year.<sup>22</sup>

Other recommended remedies were more esoteric. One chapter discusses 'whale's semen, known as ambergris, and its medicinal use'.

In the same way that human beings procreate, so one whale mates with another and through the speed of its union ejects a large quantity of semen, which once released, cannot all be admitted into the female's vulva. It spreads far and wide across the sea, stuck together in lumps of various shapes, greyish-blue in colour with a tinge of white. It is gathered carefully by sailors (I myself have seen it strewn over the Ocean while on a voyage) so that they can sell it to physicians, who purify it and, in this form, call it ambergris. They employ it, as Jorath testifies, as a special very expensive ointment to counteract gout and palsy.<sup>23</sup>

Even less accessible to the ordinary mortal were the animal remedies. A vignette illustrates 'the killing of a bear and the drinking of its blood' — the just-killed bear is on its back and the drinker is crouched between its rear legs, sucking, Dracula-like, at its ripped belly. In fairness, Olaus relates this procedure only to a past hero, who did it to give 'an increase in bodily physique'.<sup>24</sup> Another chapter appearing in the section of the book which deals with wild animals and hunting, considers 'the medicinal properties of the elk's right foot, and how to capture elks', with an illustration (p. 882). Prospective elk hunters are referred to the book. Other animal remedies would upset the RSPB.

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22 p. 1137.

23 p. 107. The vignette has a lump of ambergris the size of a small house being hauled in by a couple of sailors in a little boat from a not much larger ship. It would be of interest to know where and when Olaus voyaged to see ambergris, if the 'I' is indeed Olaus — the editors do not comment on the voyage but state that the paragraph is largely lifted from an earlier writing.

24 p. 257. Perhaps 'bodily physique' means libido.

Partridge soup invigorates the stomach. Also, the brains of a partridge taken in three glasses of wine acts effectively against jaundice. A partridge's gall bladder, cooked with an equal weight of honey, is a useful prescription for bruised eyes, and when crushed and applied to the eyes, it is good for restoring vision.<sup>25</sup> Another chapter considers 'the young of pigeons and their medicinal qualities'. Their droppings, for instance, mixed with honey, dispel warts. This chapter is, however, most remarkable for its vignette (p. 967). The physician sits, in a high chair, at a table in his study, busy dissecting pigeons, additional bodies being brought to him by a young female. His table has an hourglass and a jug on it, and to his right hand, a book-stand holds an open book. A shelf contains small objects, no doubt bottles of pills and potions. Another chapter on useful birds, dealing with 'swallows and medicines that have been devised from them', also has a splendid vignette (p. 981). The same physician is seen again, at his table, but with an apparent customer, so the editors refer to his study as his consulting room. If there are swallows in the picture they must be the indeterminate objects on a shelf. Olaus offers some personal observations on swallow behaviour, but concludes his reference to swallow remedies on a sad personal note.

The burnt bodies of young swallows are a good treatment if you have been bitten by a mad dog. Their ashes will cure throat diseases, and heal cuts on the tongue and lips. Again, to eat a swallow cooked in mead is a very good method of clearing the chest ... If you incinerate maturer swallows and then mix the ashes with honey and smear them on the eyes, it will dispel giddiness.<sup>26</sup> This is also beneficial to people suffering from tonsillitis, since it checks swelling in the throat and uvula, a fact unknown to the doctors who attended my dearly loved brother, Johannes Magnus, Archbishop of Uppsala, when he died from this disease at Rome in 1544.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the despised North had something to teach self-confident Rome, even in medicine.

## Conclusion

Olaus's book is fascinatingly perverse in its selection and treatment of topics. Hundreds of chapters, many with extraordinary illustrations, have been passed over in this paper. Half a dozen non-medical titles, picked with a pin, may entrap the reader into seeking out and diving into this work.

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25 p. 995

26 Some curious objects on the left of the vignette, if not pots with flowers, may be pots with flames, representing the incineration.

27 pp. 981-2.

On the nocturnal dance of the elves, that is, spectres / On the warlike activities of women / How to recognise disguised furs / How men lay, or ought to lay, foundations on the ice / On jousting between squinting and one-eyed men / On the way bears steal honey / On the amazing birth of ducks in Scotland / On the duties of bees

But as regards health and medicine in the North, Olaus tells us little that could not have been, at least in generality, guessed. In Italy, in Olaus's day, there might be centres where daring men were experimenting with human dissection and drawing at least approximate conclusions about effective doctoring, and even publishing their results, but all over Europe — and not only in the North — folk medicine reigned. And no doubt it was to some extent affective. Some of the remedies might be worth a trial today, at least by complementary-medicine practitioners. But no doubt all the remedies — save those that were immediately harmful or painful — were welcomed by sufferers, at least on initial application, as evidence of a determined and kindly human attempt to soothe, sustain and reinvigorate what Olaus Magnus called 'this abode of human frailty and its needs'.

(I am indebted to the officers of the Hakluyt Society for allowing the reproduction of the illustrations that follow.)



## CHAPTER ONE

On dangerous fishing in the Norwegian Ocean



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On the way bees attack people who are drunk



## CHAPTER FIFTY

On doctors and medicines



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

On the young of pigeons and their medicinal qualities



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

On the Greek art of making bread



CHAPTER SEVEN

On leeches and different kinds of worm