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978-1-108-07113-0 - The Life of Edward Jenner M.D.: With Illustrations of his Doctrines,
and Selections from his Correspondence: Volume 1

John Baron

Excerpt

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L I F E
OF
D R. J E N N E R.

CHAPTER I.

HISTORY OF HIS EARLY LIFE.

EDWARD JENNER was born in the vicarage at Berkeley, in Gloucestershire, on the 17th of May, 1749. He was the third son of the Reverend Stephen Jenner, A. M. of the University of Oxford, Rector of Rockhampton, and Vicar of Berkeley. His mother was the daughter of the Rev. Henry Head, of an ancient and respectable family in Berkshire. This clergyman once held the living of Berkeley, and had, at the same time, a prebendal stall in the Cathedral of Bristol.

Besides his church-preferments, the father of Jenner possessed considerable landed property, the family being of great antiquity in Gloucestershire and the neighbouring county of Worcester. It has pro-

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duced several eminent men, among whom may be mentioned Dr. Thomas Jenner, President of Magdalen College, Oxford, the immediate predecessor of the pious and learned Dr. George Horne. Jenner's father had been tutor to a former Earl of Berkeley; and the late earl, his brother the admiral, and, indeed, the whole of that noble house always evinced a very strong regard to him and to his family. This excellent and devout man was cut off not long after the birth of his son Edward, at the age of 52, in the year 1754. This heavy loss was as much as possible alleviated by the affectionate care and judicious guidance of his eldest brother, the Rev. Stephen Jenner,* who brought him up with paternal tenderness. He had another brother, the Rev. Henry Jenner, M. A., Oxon, Rector of Rockhampton, Gloucestershire, Vicar of Little Bedwin, Wiltshire; and domestic chaplain to the Earl of Aylesbury. From this gentleman are sprung the Rev. George C. Jenner, and Mr. Henry Jenner, who, as will hereafter be seen, assisted their uncle in his interesting pursuits and inquiries.

Dr. Jenner had three sisters, Mary; Sarah; and Ann, who was married to the Rev. Wm. Davies, Rector of Eastington, in the County of Gloucester.

* B. D. Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford; and Rector of Fittleton, Wiltshire. For many years he was Rector of Rockhampton, and perpetual Curate of Stone, both in Gloucestershire.

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He left three sons, the Rev. William Davies, D. D. Rector of Rockhampton; Robert Stephens Davies, Esq., of Stonehouse; and Edward Davies, Esq., of Ebley House, in the same county.

When about the age of eight years, Jenner was put to school at Wotton-under-Edge, under the Rev. Mr. Clissold. He was next placed under the tuition of the Rev. Dr. Washbourn, at Cirencester, where he made a respectable proficiency in the classics, and laid the foundation of some of those friendships which continued throughout life. His taste for natural history began to show itself at a very early period. Before he was nine years of age, he had made a collection of the nests of the dormouse; and when at Cirencester, he spent the hours devoted by the other boys to play or recreation, in searching for fossils, which abound in the oölitic formation in that neighbourhood. His scholastic education being finished, he was removed to Sodbury near Bristol, in order to be instructed in the elements of surgery and pharmacy by Mr. Ludlow, an eminent surgeon there. On the expiration of his term with this gentleman, he went to London to prosecute his professional studies under the direction and instruction of the celebrated John Hunter, in whose family he resided for two years, a favourite pupil.

The energy and originality of Mr. Hunter's character, had already commanded the respect of his professional brethren, and secured to him a large share

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of public confidence and attention. He unquestionably belonged to that family of genius, whose works, whatever may be their nature, have not merely a temporary and local interest, but an abiding and universal one; because they are founded upon principles which regulate the progress of truth in all branches of knowledge, and they would not have failed to have rendered him a distinguished man in any situation in life. He was not less vigilant in his observation, than he was scrupulous and accurate in his examination, of the objects of his studies. He became thereby a penetrating and original thinker, and being at the same time gifted with much enterprise and perseverance, he mastered difficulties which for ever would have obstructed the progress of inferior minds.

When Jenner went to London, he was in the twenty-first year of his age, Mr. Hunter in the forty-second. He was not at that time a public lecturer, but he had been about two years Surgeon to St. George's Hospital, and for a considerably longer period he had established his menagerie at Brompton, where he so successfully and perseveringly carried on his inquiries respecting the habits and structure of animals.

The boldness and independence of Mr. Hunter's character produced deep and permanent effects on the minds of all who witnessed them. Jenner, in particular, felt their power; he saw a master-spirit advancing steadily in that walk of knowledge to

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which he himself was led by all the predilections of his taste, and all the influence of his early habits. He saw a kind, free, and manly nature devoted to the acquisition of science, and putting away from him entirely the selfish and personal considerations, which are too apt to encumber the researches, and to circumscribe the objects, of less enlightened minds. The heart of Jenner was peculiarly alive to virtues of this kind, and he had moreover an intellect fully capable of appreciating and admiring the other qualities of his master: it was a singular felicity which brought such men together. The pupil not only respected the teacher, but he loved the man; there was in both, a directness and plainness of conduct, an unquenchable desire of knowledge, and a congenial love of truth. An unfeigned and unchangeable regard to this life-giving principle, adds a peculiar dignity to all human researches, and its influence subsists long after our common occupations, and all the objects of worldly ambition, have passed away.

These remarks will receive full and pleasing confirmation, in the personal history of the eminent individual whose life we are considering. After completing his professional studies in London, he retired from his preceptor's house; but he did not retire from his good-will and affection, nor from his anxious guidance and direction in his scientific pursuits. An uninterrupted epistolary correspondence was kept up between them, till within a short period of Mr. Hunter's death. A very considerable

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number of his letters have been preserved. The reader can scarcely fail to be interested in those which I mean to present to him, truly characteristic as they are of the writer's mind, as well as illustrative of the nature and progress of the inquiries of Jenner.

Dr. Jenner set a great value upon these letters. They were carefully preserved in a cover, which was inscribed in his own hand-writing "Letters from Mr. Hunter to E. Jenner;" an honour which he was not always in the habit of conferring on more dignified communications.

During the time of his residence with Mr. Hunter, in 1771, Captain Cook returned from his first voyage of discovery. The valuable specimens of Natural History which had been collected by Sir Joseph Banks, were in a great measure arranged and prepared * by Jenner, who was recommended by Mr. Hunter for that purpose. He evinced so much

* The knowledge which he thus acquired he always retained. In the dissection of tender and delicate organs, and in minute injections, he was almost unrivalled, and displayed the parts intended to be shown with the greatest accuracy and elegance. He had the kindness to bequeath to me a preparation which combines all these qualities. It represents the progress of the ovum in our common domestic fowl, from its first development to its full and complete growth, when it is about to be dropped from the oviduct. The dissection is beautiful, and the vascularity of the membrane which invests the ova, as well as the internal state of the oviduct, where the shell is formed, are all exhibited with masterly skill.

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dexterity and knowledge in executing this duty, that he was offered the appointment of Naturalist in the next expedition, which sailed in 1772. But neither this, nor other prospects of a more enticing nature, could draw him from his purpose of fixing his abode in the place of his birth. In this determination he was partly guided by the deep and grateful affection he felt for his eldest brother, who had been his guide and director when deprived of parental care; and partly by an attachment to the rural scenes and habits of his early youth. Possibly in this decision we may now be permitted to trace the agency of a higher power, which induced a young man frequently to reject most flattering prospects of wealth and distinction that he might be enabled to follow up the leading object of his mind in the seclusion of a country village. It was in this situation that the great purpose of his life was to be fulfilled. It was in such a combination of circumstances as was here presented, and in none other, that the discovery of vaccination could have been effected. In this respect it differed from most other investigations. The facts which have led to the knowledge of the principles of the different sciences, are scattered widely over the works of the creation, and may be found out by all who, with competent faculties, set themselves assiduously and patiently to read the volume that is spread out before them. It must be confessed that it is a rare gift among men, to be able to decipher, with profit to

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themselves and advantage to others, this great book, which every where teems with wondrous instruction. It nevertheless is open to all, and all may peruse it freely; but the page upon which the virtues of vaccination were inscribed, could never have been seen by many individuals. The existence of such an affection as cow-pox was known only in a few districts; it therefore could not become a subject of common observation, nor challenge the keen scrutiny of inquiring intellects to its elucidation. Its reported prophylactic powers, it is true, had not altogether escaped popular notice; but no one had arisen to ascertain the correctness of this rumour, or to investigate the source and accuracy of the tradition, till Jenner was led to the pursuit; and to an almost unlooked-for, and unparalleled extent, rendered it available to the subjugation of the greatest scourge of mankind. It is manifest, therefore, that in the very essence of the inquiry itself, and in the character of the genius of him by whom it was conducted, there was a suitableness and an accommodation, without which it neither could have been begun nor accomplished. This peculiarity will be rendered still more apparent when we come to trace the progress of his mind in maturing the discovery. He mentioned the subject to Mr. Hunter while he was his pupil; and often attempted to arouse the attention of his professional brethren in the country to it, but without success. The merit of persevering in his labours, and the honour of his triumph,

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rest therefore, in an exclusive manner, with himself.

In attempting to unfold character, it is not less instructive than it is interesting, to find in the private history of a distinguished individual, the successive links in the chain of events, by which it pleaseth Providence to conduct him to that eminence where shines the splendour of his genius and his intellect. This progress in the case of Jenner can luckily be delineated with much accuracy. While yet a youth, and just entering on his elementary studies, that impression was made upon his mind which laid the foundation of all his future researches respecting vaccination; and, with the constancy of a character fitted and fashioned for great achievements, it was never permitted to escape from his consideration till it terminated in that wonderful discovery, the effects of which all nations have enjoyed. It is probable, therefore, that the seed which was sown before his intercourse with Mr. Hunter commenced, would in some future time have germinated, even though he had never witnessed the animating and encouraging example afforded by his prolific and indefatigable genius.

While thus ascribing its natural influence to a fact which will be more fully elucidated in the course of this narrative, we must not underrate the effects of the culture of such a mind as Jenner's, when conducted by a spirit so inquisitive, so searching, and so skilful, as that of Mr. Hunter.

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It was a truly interesting thing to hear Dr. Jenner, in the evening of his days, descanting, with all the fervour of youthful friendship and attachment, on the commanding and engaging peculiarities of Mr. Hunter's mind. He generally called him the "dear man," and when he described the honesty and warmth of his heart, and his never-ceasing energy in the pursuit of knowledge, it was impossible not to be animated by the recital, and to perceive that something more than esteem for high intellectual attainments, was required to form that bond of union which, to the last hour of his life, joined the affectionate recollections of the pupil with the memory of the master.

Immediately after his return from London, Jenner commenced the active duties of his profession. Those who know the painful and laborious exertions of a country surgeon, will see with interest and satisfaction that the love of knowledge can overcome all obstacles; that the daily demands of a toilsome and anxious calling, may be duly and vigilantly fulfilled, and buoyancy enough of character left, to enable a young man in a secluded situation, with little aid from books or society, to rise above every discouragement, to keep his mind constantly alive to every new source of information, to commence and carry on original investigations in many branches of physiology and natural history, and ultimately, by patience and humility of mind, to bring forward for the use and unspeakable advantage of his fellow crea-