

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE LIFE
OF
JOHN HUNTER, F.R.S.

CHAPTER I.

1728 to 1751.

Mr. Hunter's birth and family ;—his early habits.—Dr. Wm. Hunter's rise to fame ;—his difficulties at the outset of life.—Mr. Hunter's arrival in London ;—his rapid acquisition of anatomical knowledge ;—becomes a pupil of Cheselden.—Cheselden's mode of operating for stone ;—his character and death.—Mr. Hunter's employments at this period ;—the advantages which he derives from his brother's society.

JOHAN HUNTER was born at Long Calderwood, a small estate belonging to his family, situated about eight miles from Glasgow, in the parish of Kilbride East, Lanarkshire. His father, who appears to have been a small farmer living on his own estate, was descended from the ancient family of Hunter of Hunterston, a part of which property they had received from Robert the Second. His mother, whose maiden name was Paul, was the daughter of a respectable citizen of Glasgow, who held the office of Treasurer of that place. John, the youngest of ten children, was born in the year 1728, but on what day is not exactly known : the parish register states the 13th of February to have been his birthday, but he himself used to date it on the day follow-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

THE LIFE OF JOHN HUNTER.

ing, and it is on the 14th, consequently, that his anniversary is celebrated at the College of Surgeons. We have no means of knowing whether either of his parents displayed any remarkable degree of talent, but it is certain that their offspring, both in the first and second generation, included an unusual number of persons eminent for their intellectual superiority*. Besides William, of whom mention will often be made in the course of these memoirs, another brother, James, the eldest of the family, possessed considerable abilities. He was intended for the Law, and completed his studies with a view to practising as a writer to the Signet in Edinburgh ; but on visiting London in his twenty-seventh year, he became so enamoured of the pursuits in which he found his brother William engaged, that he determined on devoting himself thenceforward to Physic. He immediately began the study of anatomy, and pursued it with such zeal and diligence, as speedily to attain considerable proficiency ; added to this he was possessed of peculiarly engaging manners, and displayed talents which, in Dr. Hunter's opinion, could not have failed to place him in the highest rank as a professional man in London. He was, however, attacked with a spitting of blood, which obliged him to relinquish his pursuits and return to his native place ; but the change proved of no avail, his complaint increased, and in no long time proved fatal.

* Mr. Wardrop, in his interesting life of Dr. Baillie, observes, that " the extent of talent united in his family and connexions was remarkable. He was not only the son of an able Professor, and nephew of the two Hunters, but his sister, Miss Joanna Baillie, has attained the most elevated rank in literature. Mrs. Baillie's sister was married to the late Sir Richard Croft, a man whose name is endeared in the recollection of many, as well for his manly and upright heart as for his professional celebrity : and Mr. Denman, who has distinguished himself so much at the bar, (now Lord Chief Justice,) was Dr. Baillie's brother-in-law." Of this tendency of genius to display itself in various members of the same family, many remarkable examples might be adduced from ancient as well as modern history.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE LIFE OF JOHN HUNTER.

3

One of the daughters, Dorothea, was married to Dr. James Baillie, Professor of Divinity in the University of Glasgow, and gave birth to the late Dr. Baillie, author of the 'Morbidity Anatomy', and for many years the first physician in London; and to Mrs. Joanna Baillie, the highly gifted authoress of the Dramas on the Passions.

Agnes, another daughter, married Mr. Buchanan, a cabinet-maker at Glasgow. The other children all died young. Hunter's father died in 1738, at the age of 78, and John was thus left, at ten years of age, to the care of a fond, and apparently over-indulgent mother: the consequence was, that being in a great measure master of his own actions, and having little taste for books, he preferred engaging in country sports, to studying those elementary branches of knowledge which are best acquired in youth, and the want of which, as in the case before us, is sure to be severely felt in after-life.

When Hunter was about seventeen, he went to stay for a time at the house of his brother-in-law, Mr. Buchanan, under the hope of being able to assist in freeing him from the pecuniary difficulties into which his convivial habits and inattention to business had led him. It is probable that whilst here, Hunter, who prided himself on his manual dexterity, assisted his brother-in-law in his workshop, and that hence originated the statement made by Foot, that he had served as a millwright or a carpenter. His efforts, however, proved unavailing to accomplish the object of his visit, and Mr. Buchanan soon after resigned his business, and earned a scanty livelihood as a teacher of music, and clerk to an Episcopalian chapel in Glasgow.

During this time Wm. Hunter was rapidly pursuing his way to fame and fortune. After receiving a classical education at Glasgow University, and studying medicine for three years as a pupil of Cullen, who was at that time prac-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tising at Hamilton, he resorted to Edinburgh, where he spent a winter attending the schools of anatomy and medicine, and finally settled in London in 1741.

He was immediately engaged by Dr. Douglas to assist him in making preparations for a work on the bones, and also to take charge of the education of his son. With these views, accordingly, he became an inmate of the family; but on the death of Douglas, in the following year, he turned his thoughts to lecturing on anatomy, and immediately set about making preparations on a large scale for the purpose.

In 1745 a fair opening for his exertions offered, on the resignation of Wm. Sharpe, who had for several years past given a course of lectures on surgery, which he had undertaken at the express request of a number of naval surgeons. To this class Wm. Hunter succeeded, and after a time altered the plan of the lectures so as to render his course much more of an anatomical than of a surgical nature*.

Previously to this time, Wm. Hunter's means had been very limited, for though the family property had fallen to him at his brother James's death, yet as his mother continued, with his permission, to reside on the estate, the surplus accruing to him could have been but small. In proof of this, Mr. Watson, formerly surgeon to the Westminster Hospital, and one of Wm. Hunter's earliest pupils,

* It was customary for the lecturers of that day to treat in one course on a number of subjects, sufficient to furnish matter for three or four distinct courses according to our present system; and the meagre amount of information afforded to their hearers may be judged of by the following facts, mentioned by Mr. Chevalier in his Hunterian Oration. Mr. Bromfield, who was surgeon to St. George's and a lecturer of considerable note, comprised anatomy and surgery in a course of thirty-six lectures. Dr. Nicholls, at whose school Wm. Hunter studied, professed to teach anatomy, physiology, and the general principles of pathology and midwifery in thirty-nine, and Mr. Nourse of St. Bartholomew's embraced "*totam rem anatomicam*" in twenty-three lectures.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

used to relate, that as they were walking home together after the introductory lecture, the latter, who carried a bag containing seventy guineas, which he had received for entrance fees, remarked, that this was a larger sum than he had ever before been possessed of. Linnæus gives a similar account of his own slender beginnings where he says, “*Exivi patriâ, triginti sex nummis aureis dives ;*” and it is related by Sir James Earle, that at Pott’s death, a small box was found among his papers, containing a few pieces of money, not amounting to five pounds, being the whole which he ever received from the wreck of his father’s fortune. Such anecdotes may serve to encourage those who, at the outset of their journey through life, chance to have their purses but slenderly furnished : numbers more might be found by a reference to the lives of eminent men in all professions, many of whom, though they have afterwards reaped a bountiful share of the favours of Fortune, were doubtless obliged, on their first starting in life, to have recourse to shifts quite as curious as those of Johnson’s Irish friend, who in describing how a man may live respectably in London on thirty pounds a year, allots ten for the expenses of clothes, and provides that all visits are to be paid on *clean shirt days*.

Wm. Hunter had many difficulties to overcome in establishing his anatomical school ; he was the first surgeon, unconnected with an hospital, who had lectured on anatomy*, and no one had attempted it on a scale at all equal

* It was not until 1745 that the alliance between barbers and surgeons was happily dissolved : before this time, any surgeon dissecting a body out of their Hall was liable to a fine of ten pounds. Amongst other privileges, they possessed the right of claiming annually the bodies of four executed felons, which probably led Dr. Caius to choose the Barber-Surgeons’ Hall, to deliver his anatomical lectures in, soon after their incorporation in 1540. From this time to the dissolution of the company, their readers of anatomy were, with very few exceptions, chosen from the College of Physicians, to whom, with the excep-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to what he proposed : his predecessors had been accustomed to employ but one subject for demonstrating all parts of the body, excepting the bones and arteries, which were described on preparations ; and the nerves, for exhibiting which a foetus was usually employed. Practical dissection was unknown to the great bulk of the profession. Added to all this, a far greater horror of anatomical pursuits existed in the public mind at that time than at the present.

William Hunter's address and perseverance at length triumphed over all these difficulties, and he succeeded in forming an establishment, which, in consequence of the superior advantages it afforded, and the unrivalled talent of its founder as a lecturer, for a long time maintained its rank as by far the first anatomical school in London.

John Hunter was now in his twentieth year, when the fame of his brother's success made him desirous of entering into the same profession. He accordingly wrote to his brother, requesting to be allowed to join him in London, and offering his services as an assistant in the dissecting-room. The reply was favourable, and contained a kind invitation to visit London. He lost no time in complying with this, but set out on horseback in September, in company with Mr. Hamilton, a friend of the family, and arrived at his brother's house about a fortnight before the commencement of the autumnal course of lectures. No long

tion of Cowper and Cheselden, is due the merit of supporting the fame of this country in anatomical pursuits, from the time of Caius to that of the Hunters. In the list of physicians who successively taught anatomy in England, we find the names of Caius, Harvey, Glisson, Mead, Willis, Lower, Wm. Hunter, and last, though not least, of Matthew Baillie. With Dr. Baillie ended the race of Physician-Anatomists, with the exception of Dr. Wilson, who lectures at the present day. This resignation of the professor's chair of anatomy on the part of the physicians, arose not however from any lack of able men to fill it, but from a conviction that the surgeons were now fully capable of instructing their own pupils, and with more practical effect.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

time elapsed before John's skill was put to the trial in preparing for the lecture a dissection of the muscles of the arm. It is probable that Wm. Hunter had not as yet formed a very high estimate of the talents of his hitherto idle brother, and little foresaw that he was ere long to eclipse his preceptor: he was, however, so well pleased with his pupil's first essay, that he soon after entrusted him with the preparation of a similar part, of which the blood-vessels were injected. In this the young student again succeeded so well as to obtain much praise for his dexterity from his brother, who foretold that he would soon become a good anatomist, and promised that he should never want employment. From this time, therefore, we may consider Hunter as engaged in the dissecting-room, under the instruction of his brother's assistant, Mr. Symonds, where he pursued his studies with such zeal and diligence that by the next season he was able to take the charge of directing the pupils in their dissections;—thus, by his rapid progress, showing what may be effected by great diligence, and adding another to the examples furnished by Cheselden, Haller, Albinus, Baillie, Abernethy, and a host of others, that the surest foundation for future professional eminence is an early and extensive knowledge of anatomy.

The summer after he arrived in town, Wm. Hunter obtained permission for his brother to attend at the Chelsea Hospital, under Cheselden, of whom, as Hunter's first master in surgery, and as the most celebrated surgeon of his day, no apology will be necessary for introducing a short account. This admirable surgeon was now more than sixty years of age, and had retired in great part from the toils of a profession in which he had been engaged during nearly forty years, and in which he had attained the highest rank. As a surgeon, Cheselden may be said to have enjoyed the same repute, both in England and on the Continent, which his

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07957-0 - The Works of John Hunter, F.R.S.: Volume 1

Edited by James F. Palmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

contemporary and friend Dr. Mead had acquired as a physician. He was educated at St. Thomas's Hospital, under Mr. Ferne, a very able man, and studied anatomy under the celebrated Cowper. At twenty-two he became a lecturer on surgery and anatomy, and in the following year was elected a member of the Royal Society, to whose Transactions he contributed several papers, the most remarkable of which contained the description of the operation by which he restored to sight a lad who had been blind nearly from birth. At Ferne's death he was elected first surgeon to St. Thomas's, and was appointed consulting surgeon to St. George's and the Westminster Hospitals. He was eminent in every department of surgery, but it was as a lithotomist that his name first became known all over Europe. The operation he at first adopted was that called the high method, when the bladder is entered above the pubes, which be performed with considerable success, saving six out of every seven who were cut. About this period, however, all Europe rang with the name of Raw, the famous Dutch lithotomist, who had adopted Frère Jacques's method, with improvements of his own, but kept his plan so profound a secret as to blind the eyes even of the famous Albinus, his assistant, as to the exact parts through which he cut. Cheselden, with Douglas, and other surgeons in London, who had met with less success by the high method, tried the mode described as Raw's by Albinus, in which the whole wound in the bladder was made beyond the prostate; but they experienced such ill fortune that they felt assured the operation was not correctly described, and Cheselden, abandoning this, planned the lateral operation as it is at present performed. He now met with such signal success, that Moraud, then one of the first surgeons in Paris, came over to this country purposely to learn the operation, and during his stay saw Cheselden cut twenty-seven patients

without losing one. Cheselden's manners were exceedingly kind and gentle, and notwithstanding the extensive practice he had enjoyed, he always, before an operation, felt sick at the thoughts of the pain he was about to inflict; though during its performance his coolness and presence of mind never forsook him*. In alluding to this feeling, Moraud relates an anecdote of a French surgeon, who, on visiting the hospital, expressed great surprise at witnessing such an evidence of weakness, as he considered it, on the part of so famous a surgeon: after the operation was over, the visitor was invited by Cheselden to accompany him to the fencing school, whither he was going to see a sparring match; but here the tables were completely turned, for no sooner did the contest begin, than the stranger turned pale at the sight, and was obliged speedily to betake himself to the open air.

It was under this great man that Hunter received his first lessons in surgery,—a worthy master for so eminent a pupil; and he continued to attend regularly at the Chelsea Hospital during the summer months of 1749 and 1750. Here he would have probably continued for some time longer, but in the following year Cheselden was obliged to resign his situation in consequence of an attack of paralysis, which entirely unfitted him for business. He repaired to Bath in the hope of amendment, but in 1752 he was seized with apoplexy, which put an end to his life, in the sixty-fourth year of his age. Besides his talents as a surgeon, Cheselden displayed considerable taste in the fine arts; he was fond of poetry, and an intimate friend of Pope; he had also made architecture his study, and it was from his plans that Putney Bridge, and the former Surgeons' Hall in the Old Bailey, were erected.

* Such feelings, in a less marked degree perhaps, are far more commonly experienced than is generally supposed, by the very best surgeons previously to undertaking operations of importance.

But to return to Hunter. We may consider him as now fully entered on his professional studies ; and as he was not one who ever loitered over an undertaking, it is probable that his time was pretty fully occupied between the hospital and the dissecting-room. He was, however, fond of company, and as he had not, like Haller, forsworn the use of wine on commencing his medical studies, though he found it necessary to do so in after life, he mixed much in the society of young men of his own standing, and joined in that sort of dissipation which men at his age, and freed from restraint, are but too apt to indulge in. Here, as in graver matters, his ambition urged him to take the lead of his companions, amongst whom he went by the familiar title of ‘ Jack Hunter’. Nor was he always very nice in the choice of his associates, but sometimes sought entertainment in the coarse broad humour to be found amid the lower ranks of society. He was employed by his brother to cater for the dissecting-room, in the course of which employment he became a great favourite with that certainly not too respectable class of persons the resurrection men ; and one of the amusements in which he took especial pleasure, was to mingle with the gods in the shilling gallery, for the purpose of assisting to damn the productions of unhappy authors, an office in which he is said to have displayed peculiar tact and vigour.

It must not, however, be supposed that it was to company like this, or to the society of wild young men, that Hunter was confined. His brother was a scholar, and possessed of gentlemanly manners, and though comparatively a stranger in London, he was already known as a man of much talent, and as likely to rise to eminence ; he was also fond of society, and his house was consequently frequented by many of the first men, not only in his own but in other professions. It has therefore seldom fallen to the lot of young men to enjoy equal opportunities of culti-