

**THE HUNTERIAN ORATION,  
DELIVERED AT THE ROYAL  
COLLEGE OF SURGEONS OF  
ENGLAND; ON THE 14TH  
FEBRUARY, 1881**

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The Hunterian oration, delivered at the Royal college of surgeons of England; on the 14th february, 1881 by Luther Holden

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**LUTHER HOLDEN**

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HUNTERIAN ORATION

FEB. 14, 1881



THE  
HUNTERIAN ORATION

DELIVERED AT THE  
ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS OF ENGLAND

ON THE 14TH FEBRUARY 1881

BY  
LUTHER HOLDEN

EX-PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS OF ENGLAND; MEMBER OF THE  
COUNCIL AND OF THE COURT OF EXAMINERS; CONSULTING SURGEON TO  
SAINT BARTHOLOMEW'S AND THE FOUNDLING HOSPITALS

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THE  
HUNTERIAN ORATION.

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MR. PRESIDENT, MY LORDS, AND GENTLEMEN,—

“Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us.”

I can find no better than these venerable words wherewith to invite you to welcome the theme which brings us together here to-day ; for, within these walls, nay, in any place on the earth where men of our profession are met, what man is famous if John Hunter be not famous ? or, who but himself can be called the father of us English surgeons ?

His fame is fixed too high for us ever to grow careless or weary of our theme ; we do but honour to ourselves in thus bearing witness before the world that we honour him ; and that we are all, however unworthy the best of us may seem to rank with him, his loyal disciples in self-devotion and the pursuit of truth.

Some natures, it is true, are disheartened by the contemplation of the great achievements of genius

which map out the history of our race : and, here and there, an indolent man may be found, who has buried his one talent because it was not ten. Though this temper of mind is, happily, rare in our profession, which daily brings us face to face with the painful aspects and emergencies of real life, still it is best that we should always keep before us these brilliant examples of successful genius. Without them, how self-satisfied might we not become in the possession of our small attainments ! how remiss in their exercise ! To the striving and earnest man they are full of encouragement ; not only do they urge him on the path of common duty, but they raise him, as it were, on an eminence from which he may overlook the past, and, by seeing the results of the aspirations of his predecessors, assure himself of the reasonableness of his own.

No wonder, then, if the nobler side of our nature is moved to love and gratitude at the very mention of a name like that of John Hunter. No wonder, if every incident of his life is still rich with interest for us. No wonder, that the plodding historian finds his labour grow lighter and his narrative become more picturesque when Hunter crosses the stage. No wonder that, as English sailors are proud of Nelson, English soldiers of Wellington, English poets of Shakespeare, English physicians of Harvey, so English surgeons are proud of Hunter. No wonder that it is held an honour to stand where I stand to-day, to praise "the famous man, the father that begat us."

We cannot trace genius to its source, nor account

for its appearing. It is chiefly because of this mystery that we linger so long around the accidents which attend it, and that the study of them has such an undefinable attraction, and so surely awakens our highest sympathies. In such a spirit the life of Hunter must often have been studied, and I shall therefore claim from you some recognition of my especial attachment to my theme if, as the result of it, I can contribute a new item of information towards that part of his history which is the most obscure.

We are told, Sir, by John Hunter's biographers, most of whom seem to have copied from each other an unpardonable inaccuracy, that John Hunter, the father, died when his son John was but ten years old,<sup>1</sup> and that before and after that time, up to the date of his coming to London, he led a completely idle life, only broken into by a short and unsuccessful apprenticeship to a cabinet-maker in Glasgow, who had married his sister and to whom he was sent for the purpose of helping him out of some embarrassment in his trade.

His father was, we know, within two years of four score when he died; and the partiality, which he must naturally have felt in his declining years for the high-spirited son of his old age, is represented as the cause of his having dealt too leniently with him, to the neglect of his real interests. The outlines of the picture are easily sketched: up to ten years the darling of a decrepit father, after ten the pet of a widowed mother,

<sup>1</sup> For notes see end of book.