

**THE HUNTERIAN ORATION, DELIVERED IN
THE PRESENCE OF HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
THE PRINCE OF WALES AT THE ROYAL
COLLEGE OF SURGEONS OF ENGLAND
ON THE 13TH OF FEBRUARY 1877**

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The Hunterian Oration, Delivered in the Presence of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales at the Royal College of Surgeons of England on the 13th of February 1877 by Sir James Paget

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THE
HUNTERIAN ORATION

FEB. 13, 1877

THE
HUNTERIAN ORATION.

MAY it please your ROYAL HIGHNESS :

MR. PRESIDENT, MY LORDS, AND GENTLEMEN,—

I do not doubt that I may offer to your Royal Highness the thanks of the whole College of Surgeons for your presence here to-day. By thus honouring the memory of John Hunter, you make us more than ever proud of being the guardians of his great museum and his reputation ; you make us more than ever anxious for the promotion of that true scientific surgery of which we reverence him as the founder. Moreover, we shall venture to regard your Royal Highness's presence as a sign of your approval of the efforts of the College for the public welfare, and of your desire to encourage the sciences on the cultivation of which its reputation and utility depend. For these, and many more unspoken reasons, the College, fully represented here to-day, offers to your Royal Highness its grateful and respectful thanks.

When time and the favour of my colleagues in the Council brought to me the occasion of delivering the

Hunterian oration, I thought it right to study afresh the character of John Hunter. And now I beg your leave to tell some of the facts and thoughts to which, in my study, I have been led—chiefly to tell, if I can, what were the motives of John Hunter in his scientific life; what were the chief characters and what the method of his work; to tell, also, some of his achievements, and of the lessons that may be read in the story of his life.

I hope that I may thus fulfil, however imperfectly, the design of the founders of the oration, by promoting the honour of John Hunter and, perhaps, even the progress of surgery, by showing, in his illustrious example, the good influence of the scientific mind.

The motive which first urged John Hunter towards the pursuit of science seems to have been only the necessity of earning his livelihood. For we find him, at first, as the youngest child of a Scotch laird, idle and negligent of education. In the first twenty years of his life he appears to have had no inclination to science or to the arts that minister to it, or, indeed, to any kind of intellectual pursuit. We find no tales of early enterprise, no childish love of nature, no sign of future mental power. When he was seventeen, he tried to help a brother-in-law, who was a bankrupt cabinet-maker in Glasgow; and, probably, if he had succeeded, cabinet-making might have been the business of his life. Happily, he failed; his brother-in-law was past helping. Then, after two years more of idleness, what was to be done?

His brother William Hunter, ten years older than himself, was prosperous in London, and was becoming

distinguished as a teacher of anatomy and surgery; so he offered to assist him, and if this should fail he would go into the army. Thus, in mere idleness or necessity, with no other reason than that there seemed nothing else to be done, John Hunter drifted into the opportunity of scientific study—drifted into the career in which he was to become great among the greatest men of science, and among all surgeons of all times the most renowned.¹

It seems strange that a mind so remarkable as John Hunter's, so robust and self-willed as it proved, should not have shown or felt its power till, as if by chance, it was brought to scientific work. He had not lived in darkness or among dull people: his father was a shrewd and sensible man; his mother well educated; his two brothers were persons of remarkable mental power.² With these, his mind had had opportunities of exercise and culture; but he had neglected them as to him useless. He had lived among the same wonders of the organic world, the same truths and utilities in nature as moved him, in his later years, to restless study; yet he seems to have given no heed to them. No desire of knowledge was stirred in him till he was under the influence of scientific minds.

It may be that his mind only now began to attain the maturity requisite for a desire of scientific knowledge. But I think it was rather that now, for the first time, he found, in the company of his brother, the subjects and the method of work for which alone his mind was naturally fitted.

In 1748, when John Hunter came to London, there

¹ See Note A.

² See Note B.

was great intellectual activity in all the medical sciences, and William Hunter was in the midst of it. He was an intimate associate with some of the best minds of the day; he was the best lecturer and best anatomical teacher of that time; fluent, well-read, devoted to science and art, an earnest observer, an enthusiastic collector, willing to spend all that he could earn on his museum and his means of teaching. William Hunter, indeed, may be counted as the first great teacher of anatomy in England, the founder of the first great school, and among the biologists of his time and country second to none but his brother.

To be taken from idleness on a Scotch farm to an activity of life, such as John Hunter found in his brother's school, was like being born into a new world; and this was the very world, if not the only world, in which the best part of his mind could live and grow. He had a natural fitness for the study of living things; for other things he seems to have had no more desire or capacity of knowledge than common men have. The germ of this fitness was, we may believe, born in him, as in both his brothers; and when, at length, it found appropriate conditions of its life, it developed and grew into true grandeur. But this natural fitness was wholly intellectual; there was, at first, no love or desire in it; and so his mind had no motive power till it was set to its right work, and in right working found happiness.

For the happiness of intellect is in its work; that of the highest intellect is vigorous self-guided work. The highest intellect finds that happiness, the desire of which is its energising motive, not in the mere reception,

nor wholly in the possession of knowledge, but in the process of acquiring it and of using it in thoughtful exercise.

Moreover, to some intellects, and among them many of those by which the greatest results in science have been attained, there is but one kind of knowledge which satisfies either in the getting or in the having. To John Hunter there seems to have been no great intellectual happiness except in the study of living nature; and to this he was now first brought. Hence onward there was no lack of motives. The mind that had been idle, heedless, and aimless had come to its right field of action; every form of intellectual exercise and pleasure was offered to it, and it grew to capacity for all. Gradually the desire of knowledge, both for its own sake and for the happiness of gaining it and using it, became like an insatiable passion, a motive to incessant work.

Now, I believe that in Hunter may be studied an example of the influence of the simplest and most natural motive of the scientific life; namely, the intense desire for the happiness of knowledge and of intellectual exercise in watching and working for the truth. It is not mere curiosity. Curiosity is, indeed, a necessary part of scientific desire; but it is not the common curiosity which can be satisfied by hearsay; which seeks only new things, careless whether they be true if only they be wonderful or personal, or whether, if true, they can be wrought into real or useful knowledge. Hunter is a type of the true men of science, in that he was always impelled by desire to attain knowledge by intellectual self-exertion. And, like an athlete, restless unless in the exercise of his strength, so he could not rest; he could not but search,

and watch, and question Nature ; he must compel her to answer, and then compare and interpret her answers and penetrate to their inmost meanings. And he could set no limit to his search. Within the range of the great world of life he must needs seek, by every method of enquiry, every kind and degree of knowledge.

With this passion for knowledge of biology another concurred. Hunter had a passion for collecting. It may have come through imitation of his brother ; it may have been a mere yielding to the fashion of the time, as dominant then as it is now ; but I believe it was natural—an instinctive love of gathering and keeping ; and it was vehement in him, and worked together with his desire of knowledge, each animating and provoking the other.

It cannot be maintained that Hunter's love of collecting was only consequent on his desire of knowledge. Science determined its first direction ; and the great desire of his life was to have a grand museum, with ample and costly illustrations in catalogues and drawings. He would have collected, if he could, everything that could show to himself and others all the great facts in biology that he could find. But even this could not satisfy his love of collecting ; for, besides his museum, he collected a crowd of things that must have been useless even to himself, and must have helped to make him poor ; pictures of much cost, engravings, armour, works of art in ivory, bronze, marble, stuffed birds, and implements of savage warfare. With all these his house in Earl's Court must have looked like a curiosity-shop.¹ But if this were a fault it may easily be pardoned ; no earnest collector ever binds

¹ See Note C.