

**THE HUNTERIAN ORATION
DELIVERED AT THE ROYAL
COLLEGE OF SURGEONS,
FEBRUARY 15TH, 1897**

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The Hunterian oration delivered at the royal college of surgeons, February 15th, 1897 by
Christopher Heath

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CHRISTOPHER HEATH

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From the Author.

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HUNTERIAN ORATION.

DELIVERED AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS,
FEBRUARY 15TH, 1897.

BY

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HUNTERIAN ORATION.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,—Before proceeding to deliver the fifty-eighth Hunterian Oration allow me to congratulate you, sir, on your restoration to health, and to express the gratification of myself and my colleagues at your being able to take the chair to-day. I have also to express my acknowledgments to my colleagues in the Council of this College, who have desired that I should undertake the duty of Orator on the present occasion; and next I have to thank you who have kindly attended here to-day to do honour to the memory of the immortal John Hunter. Allow me also to congratulate you on the fact that we meet in a rehabilitated theatre, which is, I hope, more comfortable to its occupants than the former one.

John Hunter was a great anatomist, a learned physiologist, and a profound pathologist, as his monumental museum and his numerous writings sufficiently show; but there has been among the Hunterian Orators of late years a tendency, I think, to ignore the fact that Hunter was also a great surgeon. It will be my effort to-day to magnify the claims of John Hunter to have been a great surgeon.

When seventeen years of age John Hunter stayed for a time with his brother-in-law Buchanan, and thus acquired manual dexterity in the carpenter's workshop, which is, after all, no bad preparation for the art of chirurgery. In his twentieth year John joined William Hunter, and soon showed his dexterity as a dissector, and became by rapid

strides a human anatomist. In the following summer he attended at Chelsea Hospital under Cheselden, the leading surgeon of the day, and only entered as a pupil at St. Bartholomew's, under Percival Pott, when Cheselden's health gave way. This was in 1751, and here Hunter must have seen a good deal of the best surgery of the day; but in 1754 we find him entering as a pupil at St. George's Hospital, where he two years later filled the responsible position of house-surgeon. In 1759 his hard work of various kinds had told upon Hunter's health, and he sought change of air by joining the army medical service, with which he served at the siege of Belleisle in 1761, and subsequently in Spain. Here he saw much surgery, and upon it he based his paper on gun-shot wounds, and showed how erroneous was the then received practice of invariably opening out bullet wounds. His paper on "Inflammation" also was to a great degree founded upon observations made at Belleisle, and in it he constantly refers to cases which came under his notice there.

Having thus added largely to his surgical experience, Hunter returned to London in 1763 at the conclusion of the war, and devoted himself to what little surgery came in his way, but worked hard at those researches in anatomy and physiology which have rendered his name immortal. In 1768 he was elected surgeon to St. George's Hospital, where he enjoyed for five-and-twenty years the opportunity of practising surgery before an admiring crowd of pupils, many of whom attained eminence in later life. Hunter was then in his fortieth year, which may be fairly considered a surgeon's prime; and it is not wonderful that he attracted as his pupils men like Jenner, Home, Carlisle, Abernethy, and Astley Cooper.

It is to be regretted that we have so little contemporary information respecting Hunter as a clinical teacher. That he did teach in the wards of St. George's there can be no doubt, for it is impossible to imagine Hunter failing to observe, to record, and to annotate verbally or in writing the cases which must necessarily have come before him in

that hospital. But the days of clinical clerks and surgical registrars were not yet come, and there is no official record of Hunter's work to be found at St. George's. How Hunter would have rejoiced in the complete system of recording not only cases, but post-mortem examinations and museum specimens, which now obtains in that institution, and in every other well-managed hospital, metropolitan or provincial! There were in those days no weekly and other medical journals teeming with records of clinical experience, nor were the then existing medical societies much affected by hospital surgeons. In 1783 the Society for the Improvement of Medical and Chirurgical Knowledge was founded by John Hunter and Dr. Fordyce, and to its 'Transactions' Hunter contributed papers on "Inflammation of the Internal Coats of Veins," read in 1784, and on "Introsusception" in 1789, but for the first twenty years of his hospital work the clinical record is wanting.

In 1774 Hunter began a course of systematic lectures on the Principles of Surgery, of which the library of this College possesses manuscript notes of various dates by different members of his class. The well-known edition by Palmer, published in 1833, was taken from the shorthand report by Mr. Nathaniel Rumsey of Chesham, of lectures delivered in 1786 and 1787, and no doubt fairly represents Hunter's teaching. / It was these lectures which Astley Cooper and Abernethy attended, and which they and others found difficulty in following, mainly because of Hunter's defects as a lecturer,—for he was not an attractive lecturer, his manner was heavy and his language inelegant and even coarse. Still these lectures did more to lay the foundation of modern surgery than any other work of the last century, and proved Hunter to be not merely a philosopher, but as I shall hope to show, a sound practical surgeon. Thus in his sixteenth lecture he discusses in much detail the affections, common then as now, grouped together under the term hydrocele. He distinguishes between three species: "first, when it takes place in the tunica