

Memoir of William Clift, F.R.S., &c.; &c.;

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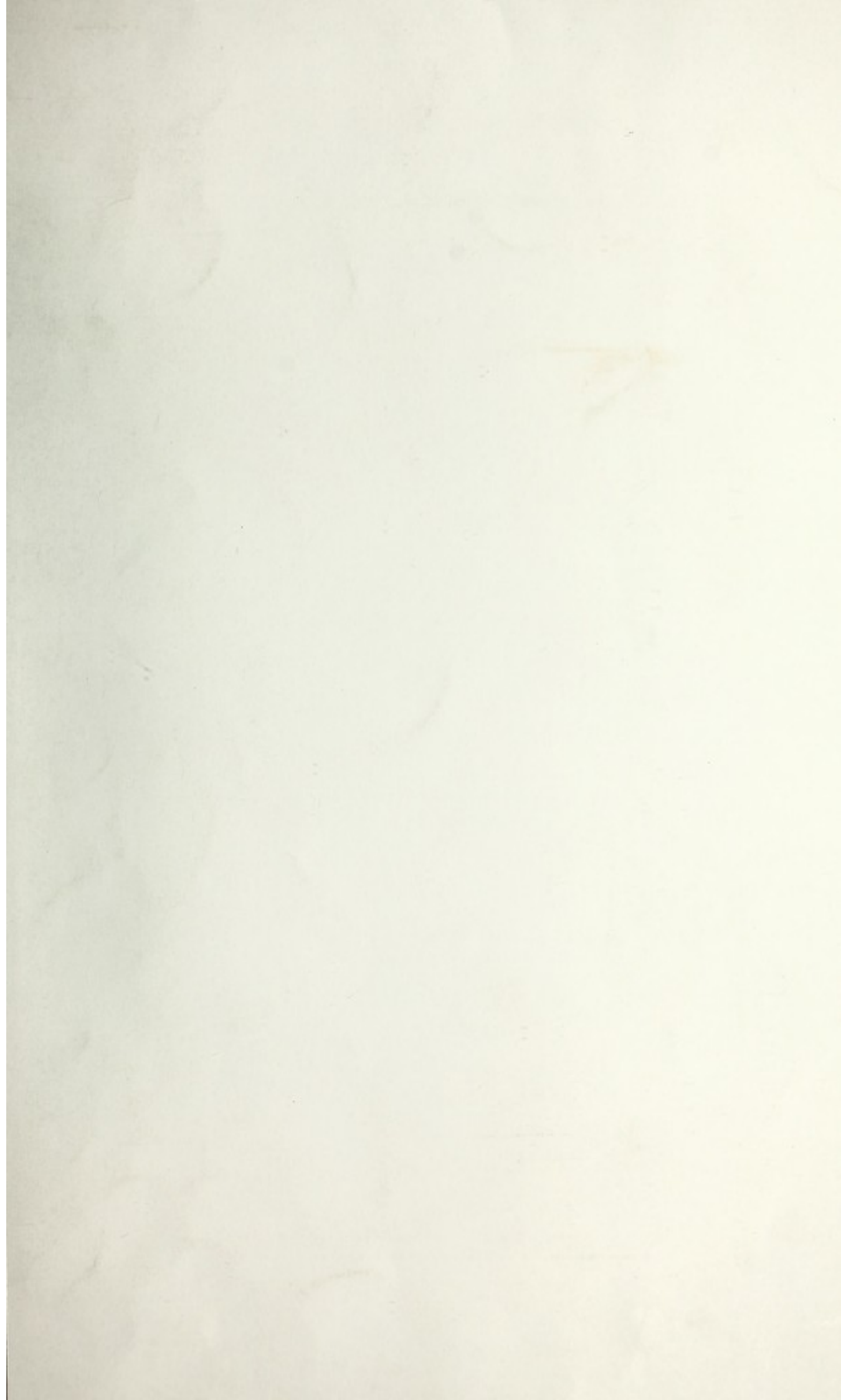
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MEMOIR

OF

WILLIAM CLIFT, F.R.S.,

&c. &c.

by
R. Owen

WILLIAM CLIFT was born at Burcombe, near Bodmin, on the 14th of February 1775, and was the youngest of seven children of the same parents. His father, Robert Clift, died a few years after, leaving his widow and family in narrow circumstances. William was put to school at Bodmin, and soon distinguished himself by the facility with which he acquired and the tenacity with which he retained whatever he was taught. Having a strong natural talent for drawing, some productions of his early pencil attracted attention, and brought the youth under the notice of Colonel Gilbert of the Priory, near Bodmin; and the good disposition and promising abilities of the young artist made him a favourite with both the Colonel and Mrs. Gilbert. This amiable lady had been the schoolfellow of Miss Home, and maintained a friendly correspondence with her after her marriage with John Hunter. Thus Mrs. Gilbert became acquainted with the loss which Hunter had sustained by the departure of his able anatomical

assistant and draughtsman William Bell, for Ceylon, in 1790: she accordingly communicated to Mrs. Hunter the qualifications of her young *protégé*, and strongly recommended him as likely to prove a satisfactory successor to Mr. Bell. Her advocacy was successful, and William Clift was sent to London, approved of, and in the year 1792 was apprenticed for six years to John Hunter, who received him into his house, without a fee,—the services of the youth, as amanuensis, anatomist, and artist, being the sole equivalent expected for this inestimable advantage at the outset of his career. Unfortunately John Hunter died, October 16th, 1793. During the brief period in which these relations subsisted between him and Mr. Clift, they appear to have been most satisfactory to both. There was no lack of employment. The young apprentice was roused at six in the morning, and earlier in the summer season, to assist and attend upon the great anatomist in the dissections which he carried on before breakfast. The coarser anatomical labours of maceration and injection, the copying out of detached MSS. records, and making sketches and drawings of the parts displayed, occupied the day; and in the evening he was called to the desk of his indefatigable master to write from dictation, usually until midnight.

This was a severe course of labour for a youth of seventeen: yet such was the goodness of heart, the simple earnestness of purpose and kindness of demeanour of the master, that no other sentiments were engendered in the congenial mind of the apprentice save those of the warmest affection and deepest reverence for the memory of him whom he ever regarded as his best teacher, benefactor, and friend.

"From the very beginning," writes Mr. Clift, "I fancied, without being able to account for it, that nobody about Mr. Hunter seemed capable of appreciating him. He seemed to me to have lived before his time and to have died before he was sufficiently understood;.....the more I have seen, the more I have known, the more I have learned, and the more I have thought, the stronger the conviction grows, that I shall never look upon his like again." These sentiments and affections were soon to be put to a severe trial. Hunter died in difficulty and debt: the sole provision for his family was his museum. The executors, Dr. Baillie and Mr. Home, were young men struggling

against the difficulties that oppose the early progress of the physician and surgeon.

"I was left alone," writes Mr. Clift, in the memorandum already quoted from, "until the year 1800 in charge of the Collection, with two gallons of spirit occasionally to keep it from decay, and with seven shillings a week,—all, I was told and believed, that could be spared,—at a time when the quartern loaf was, for a short period, two shillings. Thus I had no obstruction to my studies, but unluckily no one to direct them. It is true, I had a large part of Mr. Hunter's manuscripts put into my custody, and, having these stores at my discretion, I naturally consulted them, having no other books to read nor money to buy any; and anxious to learn something of the Collection left solely to my charge, I read them over and over, and in this way made myself somewhat acquainted with the end and object of the Collection generally, and with the history of many of the individual preparations; and every step thus acquired made me desirous to acquire more." In the meanwhile, Dr. Baillie gave Mr. Clift free admission to his anatomical lectures, and Mr. Home (afterwards Sir Everard) occasionally employed him to assist in his operations on private patients, or in the dissection of rare animals.

Mr. Hunter's premises consisted of the residence in Leicester-square, a house in Castle-street, and the museum which he had built in the intermediate space. The house in the square was let to lodgers; the house in the rear was inhabited by Mr. Clift and the old housekeeper of the family; and with no other aid than this, Mr. Clift undertook the custody of the museum until Government should determine to accept or decline the terms on which it was offered by the testamentary directions of Hunter.

The first proposition in 1794 had been ill-received by the minister. "What! give £20,000 for bottles—we want the money to buy gun-powder!" was the reply of Pitt, when the subject was first broached to him by Banks. But Sir Joseph was not easily discouraged, and his endeavours, with those of other friends of science and cherishers of the memory of Hunter, were at length successful. After seven years' siege of the Treasury, the Premier sanctioned the introduction of a measure by which Parliament became the purchasers of the Hunterian Collection for the sum of £15,000, and it was then trans-

ferred to the Corporation of Surgeons, in a better state of arrangement and preservation than when it received in 1793 its last addition from the hands of its immortal founder.

I have digressed into these details in order to place in its true light the debt which science owes to William Clift, and what must ever be regarded as his chief merit, viz. his single-minded fulfilment of arduous duties under peculiar difficulties, and his noble self-devotion to the achievements and memory of his great master, during the period that elapsed between his decease and the ultimate transfer of the Collection to its present worthy custodians. Mr. Clift has described the almost solitary condition in which he suddenly found himself with this great and important charge. At an age when the passions are strongest, in a metropolis teeming with opportunities and temptations,—not unconscious, moreover, of his own abilities and of the advantage which his apprenticeship to Hunter would give him in the pursuit of the practice of surgery,—neither pleasure, profit, nor ambition, could make him swerve from the course of duty to which he had devoted himself.

The Corporation of Surgeons having accepted the Hunterian Collection on the terms proposed by Government, was very properly re-incorporated by charter, dated 22nd March 1800, under the title of the Royal College of Surgeons.

One of the first acts of the College, in taking upon itself this new bond of relation to the natural sciences, was to appoint Mr. William Clift Conservator of the Museum, under the superintendence of a Board of Curators chosen from the Council. And the Board, elected on the 3rd of June 1800, in its first 'Report,' expresses "its satisfaction that the Conservator has manifested qualifications for all the important offices under the distinctions of Arrangement and Description, as well as for his other duties," p. 7. And in the first statement of the expenses of the Museum is the item—"Salary and gratuity to the Conservator from Christmas 1799"—the date of his appointment—"to Midsummer 1801"—£145.

From this time forwards the time and talents of Mr. Clift were exclusively devoted to the advancement of comparative anatomy and physiology, either indirectly by the preservation and increase of the Museum, or more immediately by anatomizing and depicting the structure of new or little-known animals.

Sir Everard Home having undertaken the charge of preparing a catalogue of the Hunterian Collection, much of Mr. Clift's time was occupied in assisting that gentleman in investigations which seemed to relate to the desired object. The results of most of these labours have been recorded in the Transactions of the Royal Society, and, with few exceptions, the illustrations of the numerous papers on Comparative Anatomy, by Sir Everard Home, are from the accurate and elegant pencil of Mr. Clift.

Pending the absence of catalogues, the preparations of the Museum were orally explained to visitors by the Conservator, whose style and matter bespoke the genuine Hunterian source from which he had derived his knowledge of the nature and scope of the Collection. On every occasion, also, Mr. Clift's time and knowledge were at the service of all who, in the investigation of any subject of anatomy, physiology, or palæontology, had occasion to consult the Museum under his charge. His own immediate contributions to science, at least those bearing his name, are but few. Two only appear in the Transactions of the Royal Society; the first is entitled "Experiments to ascertain the Influence of the Spinal Marrow on the action of the Heart in Fishes," and is printed in the 105th volume of the Philosophical Transactions in the year 1815; the second and last contribution to the Royal Society was his "Description of some Fossil Bones found in the Caverns at Oreston," printed in the volume for the year 1823.

Both papers are characterized by the clearness and simplicity of the style in which the facts and experiments are narrated, and by the soundness of the conclusions deduced from them.

By the judicious choice of the subject of his experiments, and the care and skill with which they were performed, Mr. Clift, in the first of these papers, established, in contravention of the conclusions to which M. Le Gallois had arrived, that the action of the heart continues long after the brain and spinal marrow are destroyed, and still longer when the brain is removed without previous injury to its substance; together with some interesting collateral conclusions.

Soon after the publication of these memoirs, Mr. Clift was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and served on the Council of the Society in the years 1833 and 1834. He communicated some memoirs to the Geological Society, two of which, "On the Fossil Remains

from the Irawaddi" and "On the Megatherium," are published in the Transactions of that body. Most of the works or memoirs, however, on the fossil remains of the higher classes of animals, which have appeared since Sir Everard Home's first paper on the *Proteosaurus*, in the Transactions of the Royal Society for 1814, until within a recent period, are more or less indebted to Mr. Clift, either for his determination of the fossils described in them, or for his accurate and beautiful figures of them. Numerous and hearty are the acknowledgements by their respective authors to Mr. Clift for this valuable assistance. In Dr. Mantell's original memoir on the *Iguanodon*, published in our Transactions in 1825, the author says, "Among the specimens lately collected, some, however, were so perfect, that I resolved to avail myself of the obliging offer of Mr. Clift, to whose kindness and liberality I hold myself particularly indebted, to assist me in comparing the fossil teeth with those of the recent *Lacertæ* in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons. The result of this examination proved highly satisfactory, for in an *Iguana* we discovered teeth possessing the form and structure of the fossil specimens." And Baron Cuvier, in the concluding volume of his great work on Fossil Remains, acknowledges his obligations for many drawings, "*faites par M. Clift, dont le beau talent a enrichi ce recueil de tant de planches non moins remarquables par leur exécution que par leur fidélité.*"

To return, however, to the more immediate field of Mr. Clift's labours, I find it recorded in the edition of the Synopsis of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, published by the Council in 1845, that, "under Mr. Clift's superintendence the removal of the Collection from Castle-street, Leicester-square, to a temporary place of deposit in Lincoln's Inn Fields, in 1806, and thence to the Museum of the College in 1813, was effected without the slightest damage to any of the frail and delicate preparations of which it, in a great part, consists." And the best testimony to the exemplary fulfilment by Mr. Clift of his responsible duties is afforded by the present condition of the Hunterian Collection, and the great accessions it has received during his able conservatorship. From the duties of this office Mr. Clift was allowed to retire with a full salary, which had been progressively increased to 400*l.* per annum, a few years before his decease, which took place on the 20th of June, 1849, six weeks after

that of his wife, to whom he had been tenderly attached and united more than fifty years.

He has left an only daughter, married to his successor, who combines with the office of Conservator of the Museum, that of Hunterian Professor to the Royal College of Surgeons; and this notice of the worthy and estimable colleague whose loss we now deplore, cannot better be concluded than in the words which his son-in-law has inscribed upon his monument :—" He carried a child-like simplicity and single-mindedness to the close of a long and honoured career."



