

## **The lecturers on surgery at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1731-1906.**

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## THE LECTURERS ON SURGERY AT ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S HOSPITAL 1731-1906.\*

It appears that I am the fifteenth surgeon whom it has pleased the Governors of our ancient charity to entrust with the responsible and highly honourable duty of lecturing upon the Principles and Practice of Surgery in this medical school. I enter upon my task with the utmost diffidence, because the short account of my predecessors which I shall give to-day will show you how great an influence the successive occupants of this chair have exercised in directing the progress of surgery throughout the world during the last 165 years.

The complete list of Lecturers on Surgery at St. Bartholomew's is as follows :

- 1731-1761. Edward Nourse.
- 1761-1787. Percivall Pott.
- 1787-1829. John Abernethy.
- 1829-1862. (Sir) William Lawrence, who was assisted in his later years by Mr. Holmes Coote.
- 1862-1865. Mr. Holmes Coote.
- 1865-1869. Mr. Holmes Coote.  
(Sir) James Paget.
- 1869-1872. Mr. Holmes Coote.  
Mr. Savory.
- 1872-1879. Mr. Savory.  
Mr. Callender.
- 1879-1889. (Sir) William Savory.
- 1889-1895. Mr. Willett.  
Mr. Howard Marsh.
- 1895-1897. Mr. Howard Marsh.  
Mr. Butlin.
- 1897-1902. Mr. Howard Marsh.  
Mr. Walsham.
- 1902-1903. Mr. Walsham.  
Mr. Bowlby.
- 1903-1906. Mr. Bowlby.  
Mr. Bruce Clarke.
- 1906. Mr. Bruce Clarke.  
Mr. D'Arcy Power.

Nine of these fifteen lecturers are dead and of the nine no less than six are deemed worthy to have their names included in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

\* Part of an Inaugural Lecture delivered January 9th, 1907.

*Edward Nourse.*

History does not tell us much about Mr. Edward Nourse. He was born at Oxford in 1701, where his father was in practice as a surgeon, and he was apprenticed on December 6th, 1717, to John Dobyms, one of our assistant surgeons. He determined from the beginning of his career to become a hospital surgeon, for he took the Great Diploma of the United Company of Barbers and Surgeons on December 10th, 1725, and the Great Diploma held somewhat the position of the Fellowship of the College of Surgeons at the present time. It was not often granted, and then only after a more difficult examination. Nourse was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1728, and in 1729 he was acting as Demonstrator of Anatomy at the Barber Surgeons' Hall, though he does not appear to have been formally elected until 1731. He resigned this office in 1734, having been appointed Assistant Surgeon to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, January 22nd, 1731. He became Surgeon on March 29th, 1745, and he died on May 13th, 1761.

We believe that Nourse was the first person to teach surgery at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and some evidence of the scope of his teaching—at any rate in his earliest days—still exists in the Library at the British Museum. It is a "*Syllabus totam rem Anatomicam humanam complectens et praelectionibus . . . habendis Authore E. Nourse, huic accedit syllabus chirurgicus quo exhibentur operationes quarum modus peragendarum demonstrandus. Londini, 1729.*" The syllabus provides for a course of 27 lectures, 2 of which deal with general anatomy, 20 with systematic anatomy, 1 with physiology, and the remaining 4 with surgery. The surgical lectures include a certain amount of ophthalmic surgery and a little gynaecology.

London was so small a place when Nourse began to lecture upon surgery that the United Company of Barbers and Surgeons had a teaching monopoly, and were able to enforce the attendance of their members at lecture under the penalty of a fine. The monopoly was so strict that it was impossible for a private person to teach anatomy except as one of the Company's officers. The teaching, too, was almost entirely anatomical, but in 1719 Mr. John Douglas had begun to add a little surgery to his lectures. He says in the preface to his syllabus:

My design in the second part of my course is to inculcate such an idea of the chirurgical operations and the various ways of performing them, that the student is thereby rendered capable to distinguish judiciously between the different methods proposed by authors.

In order thereto I shall show what's to be observed about instruments and operations in general; then before each operation describe the instruments that either have been, are, or ought to be used in performing it; and for their sakes whose memories or attention may have failed them, recapitulate the anatomical structures of the parts concerned that they may the better apprehend their practical uses.

At the operations I shall show the various methods of performing it and the advantages of one and the inconveniences

of the rest from the structure of the parts, instruments used, methods of using them, etc. After the operation I shall demonstrate and describe the dressings and the method of applying them; then give a short account of what's most material to be observed in the case.

If these suggestions were followed out—and we know that they were by Samuel Sharp at Guy's and in all probability by Edward Nourse in this school—the teaching of surgery from 1730 to 1745, when Pott began to lecture, was on the same lines as that of our present class of operative surgery. There was no systematic teaching, because as yet there were no general principles, for surgery in England had hardly yet emerged from the status of a handicraft except for a few individuals.

#### *Percivall Pott.*

Percivall Pott, our second lecturer, is as real a personage as Nourse is shadowy. The beautiful portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds which hangs in the Great Hall reveals him to us as he was late in life. I like to look at it and to think that he carried on the traditions of Woodall and Wiseman, that it was mainly by his work and by his blameless life that surgery became a profession and that English surgeons became gentlemen.

Pott was born, a Londoner, in 1714, and was apprenticed to Edward Nourse in 1729. He took the Great Diploma of the United Company of Barbers and Surgeons in 1736, and was appointed Assistant Surgeon to this hospital on March 14th, 1744, becoming full Surgeon on November 30th, 1749. He died in 1788—a little more than a year after he had resigned the office of Surgeon.

Pott introduced many improvements into the art of surgery during his long tenure of office in this hospital, rendering the practice more humane both to the patient and the surgeon. When he became surgeon in 1774 the cauteries were heated as soon as he entered the ward because they were in constant use for stopping bleeding, for searing wounds and to produce issues. Pott advocated less brutal measures, but he was only successful after a long struggle.

Pott's world-renowned teaching began quite humbly. He used to invite his dressers to come round to his house in Watling Street and talk over the cases they had just seen in the wards. The pupils liked it and brought their friends to listen, and thus his reputation grew steadily, but it was not until Nourse died in 1761 that the lectures which had been delivered privately and at his own house were first delivered in public at the hospital. They were given at the beginning with hesitation and some difficulty, like the lectures of John Hunter and Abernethy in the early days, but later with more complete ease and with the applause of the whole medical world. They soon became the fashion and were attended not only by the medical students of London but by those from Edinburgh and Dublin, as well as by such foreign surgeons as happened to be staying in England from time to time. The name

and teaching of Percivall Pott exercised, therefore, an unusual influence on the progress of surgery throughout Europe and the United States during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the names of Pott, Hunter, and Lister still represent English surgery in the mind of the average foreign practitioner.

Several sets of the notes of Pott's lectures taken by students are treasured in the various medical libraries. I have lately read through transcripts taken at different times, and they present a general similitude. The course in 1781 consisted of twenty-nine lectures which form a careful exposition of the surgery of the time, with references to French surgeons and their work. The lectures are illustrated by cases which had been under Pott's care, and now and again there is an apposite classical quotation.

Pott had always in view that his pupils "should practise as honest and judicious surgeons," but he did more than this for surgery. He introduced a wholesome scepticism. With a full knowledge of what his predecessors had done or thought, Pott thought and observed for himself, drew his own conclusions, and acted upon them. Thus in his treatise on fractures he writes :

I am very willing to allow that many parts of surgery are still capable of considerable improvement, and this part perhaps as much as, if not more than, any ; it being one of those in which the observance of and rigid adherence to prescribed rules have prevented the majority of practitioners from venturing to think for themselves, and have induced them to go on in the beaten track, from which they might not only safely but advantageously deviate.

Pott always expressed the utmost respect for the early writers on surgery and read their voluminous works diligently and with sagacity, yet in his practice he relied entirely upon his own observations and was largely guided by his common sense. He thus broke through the trammels of authority and may be regarded as the earliest surgeon of the modern type. He cannot be compared with any of his contemporaries ; his great predecessor was Richard Wiseman, his greater successor was his own pupil John Hunter. Like Wiseman he was a practical rather than a scientific surgeon, for pathology as yet had no existence. The descriptions of his cases are so clear and the facts are so well stated that it is generally possible to recognize the diseases from which his patients suffered, and to draw conclusions from them by the light of modern knowledge whilst the cases narrated by his contemporaries and many of his successors are incomprehensible from the mingling of theories with facts. But Pott was as far in advance of Wiseman as that surgeon was in advance of Gale and Clowes, the chief surgeons of Elizabeth's reign. He ranks in front of his pupil, John Hunter, in practical surgery, but as a scientific surgeon the pupil was far greater than his master. Pott was Hunter's superior in power of expression and in literary style, though Hunter alone deals worthily with the science of surgery and the exposition of its principles.

*John Abernethy.*

Pott resigned the office of Surgeon to the hospital in 1787, after he had served the institution, as he used to say, "man and boy for half a century." He was immediately succeeded by John Abernethy, who was entrusted with the duty of lecturing on anatomy and surgery when he was only 22 years of age. Abernethy's lectures, like those of Pott, soon became world-renowned. Contemporary accounts from different sources tell us of the effects they produced upon his audiences. Sir Benjamin Brodie says of his lectures on anatomy:

He was an admirable teacher. He kept our attention so fixed that it never flagged, and what he told us could never be forgotten. He did not tell us so much as some other lecturers; but what he did he told us well. His lectures were full of original thought, of luminous and almost poetical illustrations, so that like most of his pupils I was led to look up to him as a being of a superior order, and I could conceive nothing better than to follow in his footsteps; and thus I was led to regard the department of the profession to which he belonged as that to which I should belong myself.

Sir Robert Christison of Edinburgh gives a similar account. He says:

Abernethy's lectures were given in an evening, like all the surgical lectures in London, whilst the anatomical lectures were given earlier in the day. His position was always easy and natural, sometimes a little too homely. In the anatomical lecture he always stood, and either leant against the wall with his hands folded before him, or resting one hand on the table with the other, perhaps, in his pocket. In his surgical lecture he always sat, and very generally with one leg resting over the other. The expression of his countenance was in the highest degree clear, penetrative, and intellectual, and his long but not neglected, powdered hair, which covered both ears, gave altogether a philosophic calmness to his whole expression that was particularly pleasing. Then came a sort of smile which mantled over the whole face, and lighted it up with something which one cannot define, but which seemed a compound of mirth, archness, and benevolence. He used neither manuscript nor notes in his lectures. They were delivered spontaneously.

Mr. Macilwain says of him:

He was particularly happy in a kind of cosiness or friendliness of manner which seemed to identify him with his audience, as if we were all about to investigate something together, and not as if we were going to be "lectured at" at all. He spoke as if addressing each individual, and his voice seldom rose above what may be termed the conversational either in pitch or tone. The range of pitch was very limited, the expression of the eye and a slight modulation being the media by which he infused through the lecture an agreeable variety or gave to particular sentiments the requisite expression. There was nothing like declamation. He had no offensive tricks, for he had acquired the most difficult of all arts for a lecturer to acquire—the appearance of perfect ease without the slightest presumption.

Yet this art was only acquired by constant practice, for as late as 1795 there were many occasions on which before beginning a lecture he was obliged to leave the theatre for

a time to collect himself sufficiently to begin his discourse, though when he had once begun to talk his embarrassment left him. This was due to an unconquerable shyness, which seems to have been inherent, and was in all probability the cause of many of the eccentricities and of the brusqueness which made him the centre of numberless good stories. It is the great merit of Abernethy that he recognized the greatness of John Hunter, and took the trouble to expound and amplify his teaching, very much in the same way as Huxley a hundred years later reduced the work of T. K. Parker to the level of the ordinary understanding. In anatomy Abernethy was emphatic in advocating the advantages of comparative anatomy, whilst in surgery he put Hunter's work to the test of practice.

*William Lawrence.*

Abernethy continued to lecture with ever-increasing éclat until he resigned his office of surgeon in 1828, when he was succeeded in the office of Lecturer on Surgery by William Lawrence, in some respects the most remarkable product of our medical school.

Bred a teacher, by nature a surgeon and an orator, Lawrence added lustre even to the chair held by Pott and Abernethy. Of his lectures Sir James Paget says:

They were the best, I think, of all those given in London—admirable in their order, in perfect clearness of language, and quietly attractive manner. They were given on three evenings in each week, at seven o'clock, after dinner. He used to come to the hospital in the omnibus, and after a few minutes in the museum, as the clock struck, he entered the theatre, then always full. He came in with a strange vague outlook, as if with uncertain sight. The expression of his eyes was always inferior to that of his other features. These were impressive, beautiful and grand, significant of vast mental power, well trained and well sustained. He came in quietly, and after sitting for about half a minute, as if gathering his thoughts, he began in a clear, rather high, tone, speaking quite deliberately, in faultless words, as if telling judiciously that which he was just now thinking. There was no hurry, no delay, no repetition, no revision; every word, I believe, had been learnt by heart. The lectures were already in print in the *Lancet*, and yet there was not the least sign that one word was being remembered. It was the best method of scientific speaking that I have heard, and there was no one at that time in England, even if there were one in Europe, who had more completely studied the whole principles and practice of surgery.

Lawrence, like Abernethy, was a disciple of John Hunter, but throughout his long life Lawrence remained a surgeon, whilst Abernethy would have been a pathologist had such a science then existed.

*James Paget.*

Sir William Lawrence lectured for the long period of thirty-three years, and it was only during the last few years of his life that he delegated some of the lectures to Holmes Coote, who died of general paralysis in 1872.

During Coote's illness Sir James Paget was appointed to lecture conjointly with him, and he delivered courses on surgery during the years 1865-69, as much to his own satisfaction as to that of the students, for he brought to the Chair of Surgery the same qualities which had made his lectures on physiology so markedly successful. Writing to Sir William Turner soon after his appointment as Professor of Anatomy at Edinburgh, Paget says :

I am very happy to hear of your large class. I can feel with and for you the immense pleasure of lecturing to full benches of attentive men. Many and great as have been the pleasures that I have derived from my profession, none has been so great as this. And now after some years' lapse I have it again: for my surgical class is the largest in London and larger than it has been at St. Bartholomew's Hospital for fully twenty years.

Mr. Fairbank of Windsor writes of these lectures :

I was one of the fortunate ones to hear his last course of lectures on surgery: not a student ever missed them; he never had a note and was never at a loss for a word, and every word he said was sweet to listen to.

The memory of Paget is still green amongst us, and it is unnecessary here to say more about him than that he was a surgeon who strove to advance the art of surgery by showing how pathology may be applied successfully to elucidate clinical problems. Paget may fairly be considered, therefore, as the link in our school which connected Hunterian surgery with those later developments rendered possible by the recognition of the part played by micro-organisms in the production of disease.

*William Savory.*

Increasing professional work and a serious attack of illness too soon warned Paget to husband his strength. He resigned his appointment to the hospital, and in 1869 Savory succeeded him as Lecturer on Surgery in the medical school. For twenty years Savory maintained the splendid traditions of our surgical lectureship. His lectures were reckoned amongst the remarkable surgical efforts of the latter part of the nineteenth century. None of us who were his pupils can ever forget his mobile features whilst in magnificent periods, emphasized by his uplifted finger, he laid down to us the principles of surgery as he had received them and as he intended that they should be transmitted to his successors. The principles, indeed, remain unchanged, but from his practice we are further removed than he was from Pott.

Savory lectured in conjunction with Holmes Coote from 1869-1872, and with Callender from 1872 until 1879, when Callender died of Bright's disease; thereafter he lectured alone until 1889, when he was succeeded by Mr. Willett and Mr. Howard Marsh, who are both fortunately still with us.

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