

News, Notes and Queries

WILLIAM HUNTER'S MANUSCRIPTS AND LETTERS THE GLASGOW COLLECTION

WILLIAM HUNTER (1718–83) bequeathed his great library to the University of Glasgow 'as a permanent foundation for the public benefit and the use of students and scholars of all time.'

Among his effects were many bundles of documents, mainly deriving from Dr. James Douglas (Hunter's mentor in his early days) but including also many letters addressed to Hunter and many manuscript notes in Hunter's own handwriting. Until 1964 the bundles had been left undisturbed for many years, perhaps even since they were thrown together by Hunter's executors. In 1964 Dr. Bryn Thomas,¹⁴ in the course of his research on the life of Douglas, described the documents and enumerated them in their original order.

Those documents which relate directly to Hunter have now been withdrawn from the bundles, classified, arranged by subject, enclosed in polythene envelopes and filed in three large volumes, with a cross index relating them to Dr. Bryn Thomas's list.

Altogether the collection includes nearly 200 manuscripts (many occupying several pages) relating to the following subjects:

1. Printing Greek in the fifteenth century.
2. Natural history (Incognitum of Ohio, Elephant, Nyl-Ghau, Orignal).
3. Various diseases (Diseases related to pregnancy and childbirth, fracture of the patella, lithotomy, treatment by mineral waters, gout powder, diseases peculiar to the female sex, morbus gallicus, diseases of the throat, teething, post-mortem examinations).
4. Letters to Hunter (a) from his students (b) about patients and specimens.
5. Miscellaneous subjects (Dr. William Harvey, Dr. James Parsons, Royal Academy, lightning, various).
6. Relating to the purchase of books.
7. Catalogues, prescriptions, various.

THE ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF PRINTING GREEK IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

This section includes twenty-three documents of which eighteen are in Hunter's handwriting. The first is an essay occupying eleven folio pages, evidently the draft of a paper for presentation to a learned society. Internal evidence indicates that it was composed in 1782.

It is not known how long the subject of early Greek printing had engaged Hunter's interest. He had purchased several early Greek printed books at the Gaignat sale in 1769. Certainly by 1775 he was something of a connoisseur for several of the notes among the documents in this section must have been made at or before the Askew sale in that year.

The essay begins with a dissertation on the considerations which influenced the early printers in their choice of founts, and continues: 'From the time of printing the first book with a date, viz. the Psalterum at Menz in 1457, printing went on for

eight years without the use of any greek type. Then in 1465 they began to print greek sentences and quotations, in greek characters; and after being possessed of greek type they continued this process for eleven years before they attempted to print any one greek book, viz. as low down as the year 1476'.

The first book with isolated Greek characters was Cicero's *de Officiis*, printed at Mainz by Fust and Schoeffer in 1465. Hunter possessed a copy, which he had bought at the Askew sale and a second copy (printed in 1466) obtained subsequently. He referred to these and other early productions and went on to describe the further progress of Greek printing during the succeeding thirty years. Finally he gave a list of fifty-two books printed wholly in Greek during the fifteenth century. It is a tribute to his assiduity that the most modern authority¹² has been able to add only eight others. But perhaps his accuracy is not surprising for he possessed the *Editio Princeps* of twenty-four of these early books and later editions of others. He had been aided in this task by a catalogue compiled by Dr. Dampier, 'a gentleman of great learning and particularly versed in the history of printing'. Dr. Dampier's catalogue is enclosed in the bundle, but it is clear that Hunter had compiled his own list before receiving it, for the additional items mentioned by Dampier have been inserted between the lines.

Hunter invited comments on his essay from Jacob Bryant, the scholar and bibliophile who at that time was secretary to the Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim Castle. Bryant's reply is contained within the bundle. It is clear that as a pedant and lover of verbal precision he disapproved equally of Hunter's amateur approach to bibliography and of the laxity of his prose. Hunter's reaction to his pedagogical chiding is not known. He did not incorporate Bryant's amendments in his essay but this may have been due to sickness, for Hunter is known to have suffered a long illness before his death in March 1783.

Several of the documents in Hunter's handwriting refer to the first book printed wholly in Greek, the *Grammatica* by Constantine Lascar which was printed by Paravicinus for Demetrius Damilos in Milan in 1476. There is a minor mystery about this book. When Dibdin² visited Glasgow in 1838 he reported that the Hunter Collection possessed a copy, but if so it has since disappeared. One of the manuscripts shows that Hunter examined the book at the time of the Askew sale. He is known to have spent £500 at that sale but the Lascar was not among his purchases. According to Hunter's own catalogue of the sale it was bought on behalf of the King; but according to the catalogue now at Harvard it was sold (for twenty guineas) to a buyer named Nicol. In 1775 two brothers G. and W. Nicol were in business in London as booksellers. It is tempting to speculate that one of them was the purchaser and that Hunter, who certainly had his eye on the book, bought it from him subsequently.

Hunter's scholarly interest in bibliography is evident from a critical commentary, occupying several pages of notes contained in the bundle, relating to the volumes of Pliny's *Natural History* published by Spira or Speyer of Venice in 1469. One of the volumes contains an isolated sentence in uncouth Greek characters which is stated to have been derived from a 'Delphic tablet of old brass, dedicated to Minerva, and preserved at this day in the Palatium'. The primitive form of the lettering had been taken by previous writers as evidence that Spira was ignorant of the Greek language. Hunter took up the cudgels on Spira's behalf, quoting examples from other of Spira's

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productions to show that he must have been familiar with Greek letters, and maintaining that in this instance the original inscription must have been obscure in character, possibly phoenician in origin, and that Spira had simply made a facsimile representation of the manuscript set before him.

This picture of William Hunter as a scholar, so different from his brother John, is borne out by manuscripts in the University Library other than those contained in these bundles, notably a detailed commentary on Cicero's *de officiis* (now attached to the flyleaf of that volume); some correspondence with Patrick Russell of Aleppo relating to Arabian writings; and correspondence with Robert Foulis relating to some books of disputed provenance.¹⁰

NATURAL HISTORY

As was usual among educated men in his day, William Hunter was interested in many aspects of science, from antiquities to the physical sciences, from zoology to the nature of disease. His museum collection, which included fossils, ores, shells, corals, preserved animals and plants as well as anatomical preparations gave him a wide reputation as an authority on Natural Philosophy.

Thus we find him being called in as an expert when the house of Mr. Charles James Fox was struck by lightning, and consulted when bones from an ancient grave are found to be infiltrated with lead,⁶ and we find among his papers letters from correspondents in England, Ireland, France and America inviting his opinion upon all sorts of curiosities.

The manuscripts in this section include the rough drafts of papers which Hunter presented to the Royal Society on the mammoth bones found in North America⁴ (the 'incognitum of Ohio') and on the Indian antelope or Nyl-Ghau.⁵

In addition there are drafts for a paper which was doubtless prepared for presentation at a learned society (but never printed) on the Orignal or Moose Deer. Four of these animals had been imported from the River St. Lawrence and one was presented to the Duke of Richmond by General Carleton. 'Dr. Brocklesby obligingly carried me to see it; then introduced me to General Carleton, who gave me leave to get a picture of it made by Mr. Stubbs; in the execution of which, no pains was spared by that great artist to exhibit an exact resemblance both of the young animal itself and of a pair of horns of the full grown animal which the General had likewise brought from Quebec and presented to the Duke' (the picture by Stubbs is now in the possession of the University of Glasgow).

There follows a general description of the animal, concluding, 'The Orignal gives me the idea of a mule produced between horse and deer. His horns and legs are of the deer kind; his head, neck and body are like the horse or ass. Aristotle's word *Hippelaphos*, which has been translated *Equi cervus* and which in English we call Horse-Deer, gives a more perfect idea of him than all the descriptions which I have read in authors'.

VARIOUS DISEASES

This section includes (1) the record of a Caesarian section performed by John Hunter on 13 August 1774 (2) drafts for William Hunter's paper on 'Cutting the Symphysis of the Ossa Pubis'^{8,15} (3) several manuscripts relating to Aneurysm and

(4) an unpublished essay and related manuscripts on the origin of syphilis (*morbus gallicus*).

THE MORBUS GALLICUS

Syphilis appeared suddenly in Europe towards the end of the fifteenth century. It spread rapidly in all the countries bordering on the Mediterranean as a new and terrible disease comparable in danger to smallpox. Its method of transmission was not understood at first. 'Crowned heads, statesmen, senators, judges, bishops, physicians, matrons, in short all ranks of men and women were everywhere affected, and they were talked of with as much freedom and pity by their friends for being tortured with the *French Disease* as we are now martyrs to gout or rheumatism.'

The view that syphilis had been brought back by Columbus' sailors from America in 1493 had been put forward by Jean Astruc.¹ Hunter possessed a copy of the English translation of Astruc's book which appeared in 1737. He must have studied it well for 'the more I considered it the more I was convinced that the poison was not brought from America and that instead of receiving it from the Americans with their gold we took their gold and gave them the poison in return.'

Hunter had been brought to this view by studying another book in his possession, the letters of Peter Martyr,¹¹ published in 1530, which seemed to indicate that the disease had existed in Spain, under the name Bubes, and in Italy, where it was called *Morbus Gallicus*, before the return of Columbus from the New World. The critical piece of evidence was a letter from Peter to Arius Lusitanus, Professor of Greek in the University of Salamanca, who was afflicted with the new disease. The letter was dated Giennium, nonis Aprilis, 1489.

A friend of Hunter's expressed doubt as to the accuracy of the date since Arius was believed to have reached Salamanca only in 1495. Hunter determined to follow the matter to a conclusion. He wrote to David Hume, then Secretary to the British Ambassador to the French Court, to Lord Graham and to the Comte de Viris in Turin, requesting them 'to get some man of learning at Salamanca to search the annals of that ancient seat of learning for more precise evidence about Arius'. And he studied the career of Peter Martyr, finding confirmation of the accuracy of his letter in the circumstance that Peter had visited Jaen only twice, in April 1489 and January 1490. He was thus confirmed in his view that the disease was prevalent before Columbus returned from his voyage.

This is as far as Hunter's manuscripts and letters take us. According to his biographer, Samuel Foart Simmons,¹² Hunter read the paper in a preliminary form to the Royal Society in 1774 but later he was convinced that his testimony was of less weight than he had at first imagined. 'He therefore very properly laid aside his intention of giving his essay to the public.'

LETTERS TO HUNTER FROM HIS PUPILS

Three letters³ are included in this section (1) a letter dated 18 March 1761, signed 'By order of the Class' and probably inspired by John Morgan, expressing their appreciation of Hunter's action in rescinding his decision to retire from teaching (2) a letter from Shippen, dated Philadelphia 5 November, giving some news about

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the new medical school and (3) a letter from Hunter's students regretting that he had not yet published his Introductory Lectures and his long-promised work on the Gravid Uterus.

LETTERS TO HUNTER ABOUT PATIENTS AND SPECIMENS

The eighty-four letters in this section come from far and near and are concerned with a wide range of subjects. William Adair, a surgeon recently returned from Minorca, proposed 'doing myself the honour of breakfasting with you at your usual hour on Saturday Morning'. Dr. Burchell from Manchester wrote about his successful operation on a man with a traumatic aneurysm of the femoral artery, caused by the fall of a sharp-pointed scissors being used for 'what the good women here call a step-mother's blessing at the root of one of his finger nails'. Henry Thomson of Leadenhall Street wrote informing Dr. Hunter that 'Stevenson the Shoemaker in Wapping is now dead and if it would suit you to inspect the state and condition of the parts which formerly were bony I will attend you any time tomorrow'. (Several parts of the skeleton are preserved in the Hunterian Collection at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary.) Dr. Fordyce wrote 'Dr Doctor I like your Commentary much. There is not one Bitt too much Greek or latin in ye notes. Tho my remarks or criticisms are very trifling yet I have given you them as a mite of what I owe you'. T. Jekell wrote about a cure for the dry belly ache which involved the administration of a mixture, pills and an emollient clyster. Many others wrote about specimens they wished to present to Hunter's museum.

MISCELLANEOUS SUBJECTS

This section includes a nine-page article in Hunter's handwriting, entitled 'Historical Anecdotes of Dr. William Harvey', which seems to have been prepared for a Memorial Lecture. Its most noteworthy feature is a list of Harvey's portraits more complete than that given by modern authorities.⁹ There are some documents which form the draft for Hunter's Inaugural Lecture at the Royal Academy. At the time of foundation of the Academy, in 1769, Hunter had been appointed Professor of Anatomy, with Samuel Johnson as Professor of Ancient History and Oliver Goldsmith as Historian. In his lecture Hunter begins with the loyal encomiums and adjurations customary on such occasions. He continues with a lengthy discussion of the artist's choice between copying Nature herself precisely and presenting that which his creative mind makes out in imitation of nature. Finally he comes to the particular problem of depicting the human body, infinite as it is in form and every movement changing it under the influence of an infinite variety of muscle action. He illustrates his views by referring to the forearm, which takes one form when extended, one when bended and twenty others in the intermediate states; and the hand, which takes different forms when the palm is prone or supine, the wrist extended or bent, the fingers stretched or contracted. He criticizes painters for depicting their subjects at rest, composed and inactive, and makes a plea for animation, spirit, fire, force and even violence.

The rest of the manuscripts include letters and bills from Hunter's book agents, various catalogues and curiosities, and some medical prescriptions.

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SIR CHARLES ILLINGWORTH

WANTED

THE EDITOR is urgently seeking the following back issues of *Medical History* in order to complete a set and would be grateful to any reader who may be able to supply them.

Volume I (1957) no. 2; volume II (1958), no. 4; volume III (1959), nos. 1, 3; volume IV (1960), no. 4; volume V (1961), all.

F.N.L.P.