### The knife man: the extraordinary life and times of John Hunter, father of modern surgery.

**By Wendy Moore. Bantam Press, London 2005. 496pp. £18.99.**

William Clift, John Hunter's last assistant, remarked after the death of his master: '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'. It is equally true that few of his many biographers have understood him. It is perhaps natural that some surgical writers should have allowed their natural admiration to influence their judgement.

At last, however, John Hunter has the biographer he has always deserved. *The knife man* is a brilliant account of the turbulent and often tumultuous life of the father of modern surgery. Set among the foetid dissecting rooms and blood-soaked operating theatres of Hogarthian London, this remarkable work succeeds in evoking the sights, sounds and particularly the smells of London in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was a period when medicine was dominated by the use of the emetic, the lancet and the purge, and when surgery, in those preanaesthetic days, was inhuman and barbaric. By the time that Hunter died in 1793, surgery was well on the way to becoming a scientific discipline; and it was one of his surgical pupils, Edward Jenner, who was to discover the technique of vaccination a few short years later.

This stunning work tells the story of a young lad who joined his brother William's anatomy school in 1748 at the age of 20. Uncouth and unlettered, his initial task was to obtain bodies for dissection from the murky world of resurrectionists and body-snatchers but he was to become the foremost anatomist of his age and the father of modern surgery. He soon became an expert dissector, making original discoveries of the lymphatic system and the foetal circulation. He trained first as a surgeon with Cheselden and Pott, then had valuable experience as a military surgeon on the expedition to capture Bellisle and in Portugal. In later years he served St George's Hospital where students flocked to him. His success was based on his anatomical knowledge and on his use of experiment to determine treatment. His famous operation for popliteal aneurysm, his attempts at transplantation and his experimental inoculation of venereal matter into a human subject were examples of his enquiring mind. (Moore disagrees with previous biographers, and presents incontrovertible evidence that the human subject for the venereal experiments was in fact Hunter himself.) Hunter was also a great collector, specimens of all varieties of pathological abnormality finding their way into his museum, along with the skeleton of the famous Irish giant. He also collected animals, keeping a menagerie at his home in Earl's Court that sometimes alarmed his neighbours. As a comparative anatomist, he was far ahead of his time, concluding from his studies that species might change. His work was to be quoted extensively by Charles Darwin. When he first beheld the Alentejo plateau in Portugal, he could not believe that such an area could have been created by forty days of flood, and that it must have been the result of an immense period of erosion by the sea, a view in conflict with contemporary theology. But then Hunter was always ready to challenge accepted wisdom.

John Hunter's descriptions of his own anginal attacks are well known. His dramatic demise at a board meeting at St George's Hospital is touchingly described in this book – as is the aftermath: the body transported back to his home in Leicester Square in a sedan chair, his family devastated. 'It is such a blow to his family,' wrote Horace Walpole, 'as he was in such repute'. There was little money after the payment of debts. Hunter's wife Anne had to give up her soirees for the life of a ladies' chaperon. His son John had to abandon his plans for a medical career. Worst, some years later his brother-in-law Everard Home burned many of his manuscripts. But his museum survived, as it does to this day. William Clift became its first curator. It was he who, speaking for all surgeons, said of Hunter: 'He alone made us gentlemen'.

This book has been extensively researched. The chapter headings perhaps owe something to the author's journalistic background – 'The Professor's Testicle', 'The Surgeon's Penis' and 'The Chaplain's Neck', for example. But the work is first class history and a rattling good read. It is very highly recommended.

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