

# JOHN HUXHAM\*

by

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IN THE first half of the eighteenth century there were few general hospitals in which physicians and surgeons could carry out any kind of research and, although London was, even then, the Mecca to which ambitious men gravitated, many rose to distinction in the provincial towns, and some achieved national and even international recognition, making observations and performing research in isolation, single-handed. Such was John Huxham who died 200 years ago on 10 August 1768, leaving behind a reputation so great as to justify the appellation 'the Sydenham of the West'.

Little remains in the way of records of the life of John Huxham. He was born in the village of Harberton three miles from Totnes in the county of Devon in 1672. His father was a butcher and a careful man who had acquired property in the nearby parish of Staverton. When he died, leaving a young family, he directed in his will that the income of this property be devoted to the education of his eldest son, John, for any profession to which he was inclined or for which he was fit.<sup>1</sup> The young John Huxham was placed in the care of Mr. Thomas Edgerley, a dissenting minister in Totnes, who sent him to a grammar school in Newton Abbot run by Isaac Gilling, another dissenting minister. Gilling has been described as a genial and scholarly dominee who kept a flourishing boarding school, but got into trouble in the reign of Queen Anne through not having a bishop's licence.<sup>2</sup> Under Gilling's guidance the young Huxham 'acquired a very good knowledge of the classics and showed that he had a great memory, though assisted by very little diligence and application. He was always esteemed to have very good parts and to perform his exercises well, but at the same time careless; but honest in making no pretensions to religion, i.e. he did not coincide exactly with the bigots of that time.' Later, he was moved to the dissenting academy at Exeter. Being a dissenter, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge were closed to him and, having completed his schooling, he proceeded to Leyden where on 7 May 1715 he was entered as a student under Boerhaave. Later in life he was to pay generous tribute to that great man. The medical course at Leyden required three years' study for a degree, but for financial reasons he was unable to complete his time there and, in 1717, he went to Rheims,\*\* where residence for any specified time was not required, and there he obtained the degree of M.D. He then returned to Totnes to await an opening for practice. This occurred soon after in Plymouth, but success came only slowly. As his biographer says:

\* Based on a paper read on the bicentenary of John Huxham's death at a symposium on medical history held at Harrogate as part of the Festival of Arts and Sciences in conjunction with the Yorkshire faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners.

\*\* 'Dr. Osler once called my attention to a quotation from the diary of "that gossipy parson-physician", Dr. John Ward, which throws some light on the question of why degrees were taken at Rheims and other universities rather than at Leyden. "Doctor's degree at Leyden costs sixteen pounds besides the feasting of the Faculty; at Angers not above nine pounds and feasting not necessary neither".' (John Ruhrah, *Pediatrics of the past*, New York, Paul Hoeber, 1925, pp. 401, 403.)

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Business not immediately answering expectations, he began to think of marrying into some family which might have interest to promote his business. It happened that Miss Helen Coram was then in town, and not provided for. So he made her an offer, and succeeded and being settled in a house of his own he began to look bigger and to affect much more gravity than usual, and here was the beginning of that stiff and affected behaviour which he has been so remarkable for. He pretended to believe that his awkward strut and unnatural gravity would give him respect; though he freely owned to a friend, when he was speaking to him about it, that he laughed at himself for doing it.

To begin with his views on Plymouth were not very complimentary. He said:

Plymouth was a damned, quacking place because some people were better pleased to trust themselves in the hands of an old apothecary, than with a young physician who had never been used to them. He used every little art he could think of to make people believe how much he was employed. He would often appear in boots, though he had no place to ride: he would often ride out of one gate and return by another, though he had no patient to visit, and he scarce ever went to church but his boy must be sent to call him out, though he had nothing in the world to do; and thus he went on, inwardly cursing the apothecaries who did not think it worth their while to recommend him; till luckily for him Dr. Seymour's first madness broke out. He then began to be taken notice of by the church party as well as the dissenters. His practice now increased daily and in a very few years he got an estate . . .

The Plymouth of Huxham's early days, though it may well have seemed to the young, struggling physician 'a damned quacking place', was a busy and industrious port. Defoe, who wrote his *Tour through England and Wales* about this time, and who seems to have known the town fairly well, found it to be populous and wealthy with several considerable mansions and an abundance of wealthy shopkeepers, and 'as for gentlemen, I mean those that are such by family, and by birth, and by way of living, it cannot be expected to find many such in a town, merely depending on trade, shipping and sea-faring business, yet I found here some men of value, persons of liberal education, general knowledge, and excellent behaviour, whose society obliges me to say, that a gentleman might find very agreeable company in Plymouth.'<sup>3</sup>

Having been bred a dissenter it was from that sect that Huxham first gained an entry into practice. The lady he married was of some substance and this, no doubt, helped him to spin out his patience while he waited for patients to come to him. Huxham was always remarkable for the way he dressed. The normal dress of a physician at that time was a cocked hat, powdered wigs with bags attached to them, shoes with buckles and so forth. 'Huxham wore a scarlet coat with ruffles at the wrist and a cocked hat, and this at a time when scarlet was rarely worn and almost never by the faculty, who were always sombre and decorous in their apparel. When he walked out he carried a gold-headed cane and was followed by a footman bearing his gloves, as was the fashion in those days.' However, when not calling attention to himself in these ways, he employed his time in study, reading the Greek and Latin medical classics so that when the leading physician in the town went mad, Huxham was already one of the most learned physicians of his time. His writings bear testimony to the breadth of his reading; Hippocrates and Sydenham are frequently mentioned, as well as his old teacher Boerhaave. Hippocrates he described as 'our most ancient and best master in physick' and 'the great dictator of medicine'.

The rapid increase in his practice brought him affluence which, to quote his rather

malicious biographer,\* 'enabled him to live in that splendour which he once never expected, and which on many accounts he never deserved. For he was a man that seemed to be actuated in most parts of his life by craft and treachery: he would do almost anything for his interest, and seemed to have very little regard to truth in anything that he said. He was naturally proud and ungrateful; for nothing could mortify him more than to be spoke to by a relation or friend who knew anything of his pedigree.' Hard words these but typical of the times. This notice continues 'As a physician he would have shined more, if in his prescriptions he had consulted the interest of the apothecary less and that of the patient more.' But this we know from his writings was untrue for he was in his day a moderate prescriber of the Sydenham school. Even the writer of this note has to admit some characteristics which seem not at all to accord with what he had just written, for he continues: 'He was very indefatigable in his business, and spared no pains by night or day to visit if required. Nor was he griping for his fee like Seymour, but was generally moderate in his demands, and very compassionate and generous sometimes to the sick poor. He was very tenacious of his opinion and practice when contradicted by any physician, and would rather sacrifice a patient than suffer himself to be thought mistaken or another in the right. He kept a decent character with regard to his morals, and was guilty of very few excesses in any shape.' And yet he had 'neither honesty nor virtue to make him esteemed or respected.' We may take all this as what those who were his enemies said about him, damning him with blasts of defamation intermixed with words of praise such as seem to have dropped into the sketch inadvertently.

In 1723, James Jurin, one of the secretaries of the Royal Society, appealed to all who were equipped for the work to keep daily records of their observations of the weather including readings of the barometric pressure, temperature, rainfall, and direction and strength of the wind. Their observations were to be submitted annually to the secretaries of the society for collation and analysis. In 1724 Huxham began to keep such records and, from 1728 on until 1748, he noted monthly the prevalence of epidemic diseases. These records he published in two volumes. Huxham had in his possession to estimate the weather, scientific instruments of some precision. The barograph that he used was designed by Francis Hawksbee—a long glass tube one-third or a quarter of an inch in diameter suspended in a large bath of mercury. To modern readers Huxham's scale of temperatures is confusing. The colder the day the higher the figure. Thus in September 1730 the coldest day was 39 and the warmest 22. De Lisle, in 1724, had described a scale in which 0 represented boiling point and 100 the temperature of the cellars of the Paris observatory, but it is difficult to reconcile this with the scale used by Huxham.

Sydenham in his classic had described the annual incidence of disease and in so doing had identified many types of fever more clearly than had been done by any before him. Huxham went further and described the prevalence of disease month

\* This contribution, whilst attributed in the *Monthly Repository* to the pen of John Fox (1693–1763), collected by James Northcote (1746–1831), bears all the characteristics of Northcote himself. Fox died before Huxham and it is hardly likely that a portrait of this nature would have been written in Huxham's lifetime. The less scurrilous sections are reprinted in Octavian Blewitt's *Panorama of Torquay*, who said that they were taken from a memoir of the late Jas. Northcote, R.A. from a manuscript written by an intimate friend of Huxham's.

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by month. He did not give the number of cases seen each month; to do so, in the practice of a physician of those days, would have been meaningless. 'Scattered up and down' the work—to use his own expression—are numerous notes on the diseases he met and observations on his methods of treatment.

We get a picture of the weather conditions in Plymouth for twenty years in the first half of the eighteenth century. Thus, in the month of June 1746, when Charles Wesley visited the town, only the week from the eighth to the fifteenth was sunny but an east or north-east wind prevailed. The beginning of the month was rainy and cold; after the fifteenth it was boisterous, rainy and cold with a cold south-westerly wind raging almost constantly, which rendered the atmosphere very cold and moist. It was in these conditions that the preaching of Charles Wesley was received with opposition and ridicule. September, when his brother John visited the town, was not much better. It was drier, but on the fourteenth and twenty-third there was ice. And for diseases 'Smallpox was still present, and swellings of the face, head and neck, with a violent toothache plagued vast numbers.' The Wesleys were unfortunate in their choice of dates for these revivalist meetings. Those who believe that our summers have changed their nature would find no support for their theories in a study of Huxham. This is his description of August 1735: 'From the 2nd August to the 13th the wind was perpetually in the East, in the Mean Time we had a fine, warm Season, after that a dreadful, horrid, stormy one followed: I never knew the atmosphere so moist at this Time of the Year: every Place is full of Mud and Water—the Birds die in moulting, the Bees make little or no Honey—The Leaves of the Trees fall as if it was in the midst of Autumn.'

In 1733 Huxham recorded his first epidemic of influenza. 'At this time a distemper infested this country, of all, that I remember, the most epidemic, it seized upon rich and poor, scarcely any escaped, old or young, strong or infirm, either in the town, or country.' The disease began on 10 February, a Saturday, when 'a great number of people were suddenly seized, the next day many more and by the 15th almost every person everywhere.' This is Huxham's description of the disease.

[It] began with a slight shivering, which was soon succeeded by an uncertain erratic heat, a heaviness and stoppage of the head, great and very troublesome sneezings, wandering pains of the limbs, but especially in the back, and often in the breast, but not fixed, though on account of the violent cough frequently very troublesome. By cough and sneezing a vast quantity of thick acrid mucous was thrown off—these seemed only to be the symptoms of a fresh cold as they call it: however soon after some degree of fever came on; sometimes indeed not a small one, and the pulse grew very quick, but by no means hard and tense, as that of pleuritics; nor was the urine very high-coloured, but thick, and for the most part whitish and turbid. The tongue was not dry but daubed over as it were with a great deal of whitish mucus. All complained of want of sleep; a giddiness, or sharp pain in the head, afflicted very many and sometimes a slight delirium; a noise in the ears was troublesome to a vast many, and not a few had an acute pain in the meatus auditorius, which sometimes ended in an imposthume, but a soreness and abcess of the fauces were much more common. All were very apt to sweat; which being plentiful, easy, and continued, within two or three days, carried off the fever entirely . . .

Those of us who have had influenza will at once recognize the beautifully exact description of the disease.

Huxham is credited by Dr. Ashworth Underwood in *Chambers Encyclopaedia* as being the first to introduce the term influenza to this country. This is, however, not quite correct. Murray's Dictionary quotes the *London Magazine* as reporting in

1743 'News from Rome of a contagious distemper raging there, called the influenza.' In his description of the 1743 epidemic Huxham remarked that 'the fever seemed to have been exactly the same as that which in the spring of this year was rife all over Europe, termed the influenza: nevertheless it was much more destructive in the southerly nations than it was here; nay even in London, it increased very greatly the number of burials rising them in one month only to at least a thousand.'

We could spend a long time discussing Huxham's observations in his two volumes of airs and epidemic diseases. From the extracts I have given it will at once be apparent that he showed great interest in all the phenomena which went on around him—in Nature, in the diseases which he met, in the people, and in all natural phenomena. The work was first published in Latin, and it is to Huxham's son by his first wife, John Coram Huxham who was rector of Buckfast, that we owe the delightfully fresh translation from which I have quoted. One last extract must be given, it concerns the last days of his wife Helen Coram and gives a touching insight into the character of the man. In July 1742, he wrote 'At the close of this month I lost my dear wife in a dropsy, greatly lamented by all her friends and neighbours, and indeed by every worthy person. She was about 40, slender, active, and exceeding temperate: somewhat weakly however in her constitution, and descended, alas, from an hydropic race.' And then follows a history of her illness during which she was sent into the country and rode every day; 'I diligently tried the use of emetics, cathartics, diuretics, saponaceous medicines, deobstruents, in short, the best and most proper kinds of physick; having consulted two or three very eminent physicians'. Twice she was tapped. On the last occasion 'from the opening made by the trocar a large flux of whitish, prurulent, stinking humour now issued; which carried off this excellent matron, July 27th. But where am I hurried by my affection to my dear wife?'

The first volume on airs and epidemic diseases was published in 1739. Bound with it was a separate essay on the Devonshire colic—a disease caused by drinking cider contaminated with lead which was used to line the mills in which the apples were ground. Huxham's description of lead poisoning is graphic and accurate—he even mentions the wrist-drop which sometimes accompanies the disease. It was left to Sir George Baker, another son of Devon, to find the cause of the colic. The second volume on airs and epidemic diseases appeared in 1748.\*

In 1750 Huxham published his *Essay on Fevers*. This brings together systematically his observations on the various kinds of fever which were prevalent in his day. In his preface he pays tribute to the authority of the ancients, particularly Hippocrates. He was a believer in the inoculation of smallpox saying that, 'granting all that prejudice and party have said against it, the danger in the natural way is at least ten to one of what it is in this'. Like all his contemporaries he was a believer in bleeding and, as we have seen in his treatment of his wife, with his contemporaries, he had great faith in heroic measures.

\* *Observations de aire*, 1739, relates to the years 1728–1737. *Observations de aire*, volume aterum 1748 relates to 1738–1748, and was translated by his son in two volumes, printed by J. Hunter and H. Whelwell in Plymouth 1759–67. According to Pettegrew (*Medical Portrait Gallery*, p. 185) 'In 1759 a translation of the first volume appeared without Huxham's knowledge or approbation, and in the succeeding year another was put forward with the sanction of the author.' The book was republished in 1770, edited by his son John Coram Huxham. Copies were printed in Venice (1764) and Naples (1765).



At the end of his essay on fevers he added an appendix on a method for preserving the health of seamen during long cruises and voyages. As a physician in a seaport town much used by the Navy, Huxham had many opportunities for observing the state of health of seamen. Returning ships were a great danger to the health of the town. In the spring of 1740 two men-of-war, the *Panther* and the *Canterbury*, the latter from the Mediterranean, put into port. From these ships more than 200 sick were immediately brought ashore, the greater part of whom were ill in a malignant fever. From them the fever spread to the people of Plymouth in whom it made most terrible havoc. From Huxham's description it seems that this must have been a typhus fever. In his essay Huxham drew attention to the rapid improvement in the health of seamen when the fleet returned to port, and fresh air, wholesome liquor, fresh provisions, especially proper fruits and herbage, soon purified the blood and juices of the sick and restored their health. He remarked that 'apples, oranges and lemons alone have been often known to do surprising things in the cure of very deplorable scubotic cases.' And he says 'But what will cure will prevent'. He recommended that ships going on long cruises should be supplied with 'a sufficient quantity of sound, generous cider: the rougher, provided it be perfectly sound, the better.' Every sailor should have at least a pint of cider a day besides beer and water, ships should be kept clean and the decks sprinkled with vinegar, the air should be changed by the use of Dr. Hale's ventilators or Mr. Sutton's 'contrivance'. He further remarked that in autumnal cruises a quantity of apples might also be carried, even 'lemons and oranges wrapped in flannel or something that will imbibe their exhaling moisture', and if this was not feasible a mixture of lemon juice and rum (shrub) could be carried in any quantity.

Huxham published his essay three years after the seventy-four-gun ship *Salisbury* had sailed into Plymouth harbour with the twelve scurvy patients on board who had been treated by James Lind. Lind, it will be recalled, divided the twelve patients into six pairs; to two of them he gave two oranges and one lemon daily; to two others he gave a quart of cider. The other four pairs were treated with the various regimes which were popular in those days as antiscorbutics. Those who had the citrus fruit were cured, those taking cider were improved, the others were unaffected. Lind did not publish his findings until 1753.<sup>6</sup> Did he discuss the results of his experiment with Huxham? He was then a junior surgeon's mate, so it is unlikely; but Huxham may have heard of the cures in gossip in the town. Huxham, who probably owned cider orchards in Ashburton, may have been boosting the trade when he recommended cider in preference to oranges and lemons.

The first two editions of Huxham's essay on fevers were published in 1750. A third edition in 1757 contained an essay on the ulcerous sore throat in which he gave the best description of diphtheria that had so far been written.\* By 1779 this book had

\* This was published at the same time as a separate book: *A Dissertation on the Malignant, Ulcerous Sore-Throat* by John Huxham, M.D. Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians at Edinburgh, and of the Royal Society at London. London: Printed for J. Hinton, at the King's Arms in Newgate Street. 1757/Price One Shilling/ It is dedicated to the 'very worthy president and fellows of the Royal College of Physicians at Edinburgh, Prosperity . . . in testimony of my great respect and gratitude for the honour you have done me in electing me a Fellow of your very learned Society . . .'

The copy in the British Museum is of special interest to the writer. It is in contemporary binding and contains the booksellers stamp: J. Salter, printer, bookseller and bookbinder, Dartmouth, and the signature of the owner in ink is that of John Puddicombe, whose family for generations owned the practice in which he now works.

reached an eighth edition. It was translated into French, German, Portuguese and Italian. He later added a dissertation on antimony, first published in the *Philosophical Transactions*.<sup>7</sup>

The story is told that when the Queen of Portugal was attacked with a fever which baffled the skill of the native physicians, the King summoned the physician of the British factory and his treatment was successful. When the King congratulated the physician he was told that his method was founded on the principles contained in the work of Dr. Huxham. On hearing this the King ordered that the treatise should be translated into Portuguese and he then presented Huxham with a splendidly-bound quarto copy.<sup>1</sup>

Besides Huxham's major works he contributed fourteen papers to the *Philosophical Transactions* on various subjects. Many of these contained original observations. In one of the first communications dated 1724–5 he described an anomalous epidemic of smallpox which had occurred in Plymouth in 1724. In this epidemic 'the major part of the *adult* persons, that had the unhappiness to be seiz'd with this Distemper, dy'd; among whom fell an old Gentlewoman of 72; a very uncommon Exit for a Person of her Years'. He noted the interesting fact that women who had had the infection before and sometimes severely 'had generally several Pustules broke out on the forearms, hands and breast' consequent on the necessity of close contact with the patients that they nursed.<sup>8</sup>

In 1722, Huxham reported to the Royal Society the case of a patient with eventration of the bladder who became pregnant. The patient was attended by Mr. John Bonnet, surgeon at Fowey in Cornwall. Bonnet seems to have taken exception to the inaccurate account of John Huxham and he contributed his account to the *Transactions*: 'July 18, 1722. I was sent for late at night. I found the woman with true travail. Pains upon her. The throws were excessive violent, and the continued agony had almost quite exhausted the poor woman's spirits; but the orifice of the vagina was no way dilated, Tho' the anus, thro' the violence of the throws, opened extremely wide . . . Vain were her own throws and agonies. Convulsions now had seiz'd her, and nature seem'd to have deny'd a longer life to the mother, on an entrance into it to the child.' The patient was eventually delivered by incision of the false vagina. Both mother and child lived.<sup>9</sup>

In 1739 he reported an extraordinary venereal case. In his covering letter to Dr. Thomas Stack, secretary of the Royal Society, he wrote 'I have now sent you ye uncommon venereal case, I promised in my last; which I think hath something very remarkable in it, & seems very much to confirm ye great Boerhaave's opinion, ye seat of ye Lues Venerea is in ye Membrana Adiposa.'<sup>10</sup> The case concerned a Mr. R. B. aged twenty-seven of a bilious dry constitution who 'being in the Fleet at Portobello . . . had frequent impure Conversation with some *Negro* Hussies (who probably laboured under the worst Species of Pox, called the Yaws.) . . . I now found, indeed, that Mercury and he, as well as Venus, had been old acquaintances . . .'<sup>11</sup>

Huxham devised a tincture of quinine which was known as Huxham's tincture of bark and remained in the pharmacopoeia until recent times as tinc. chiconae B.P.

Huxham continued working till his death. In his later years he paid his visits to patients carried in a sedan chair. In noticing his death, the *Gentleman's Magazine*<sup>12</sup>

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called him the ingenious Dr. Huxham of Plymouth and remarked 'his medical works do honour to his name and country'. Elsewhere in the same magazine we find him described as 'one of the four first medical characters in the world (the other three being foreigners) who have written on colica pictorum, and the efficacy of oleum pulmas christi, or castor oil, hitherto almost entirely unknown.'<sup>13</sup>

Deeply read in the doctrines of the ancients, Huxham modelled his practice on the teaching of Hippocrates, but he recognized, as few of his contemporaries did, that the great lesson the father of medicine taught was that of observation, and he did not follow his teaching blindly. In his treatment, too, though, as we have seen, he favoured heroic methods, in his prescribing he used simple remedies and complicated prescriptions are not found in his writings as they are in those of most of his contemporaries.

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