William Cheselden

BRITISH MASTERS OF OPHTHALMOLOGY SERIES

21.—WILLIAM CHESELDEN, 1688-1752

BY

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No apology is needed for including a brief account of Cheselden in the British Masters of Ophthalmology Series. He was a master of the surgical craft and to him we owe the origin of the operation of iridotomy.

He was born at Somerby, Leicestershire, on October 19, 1688. It has been stated that he began the study of his profession in Leicestershire, but if this be so he must have started extremely young, for we know that in 1703 he was a pupil of the celebrated anatomist, William Cowper, and that on December 7, 1703 he was apprenticed, for the usual term of seven years, to James Ferne, Surgeon to St. Thomas’s Hospital. On December 5, 1710, he was admitted to the Freedom and Livery of the Barber-Surgeons’ Company; and he was lecturing on his own account in London in 1711. Details of his career as an anatomical teacher will be found in Dr. George Peachey’s Memoir of William and John Hunter. Peachey mentions that he has seen a copy of Cheselden’s Syllabus of Anatomy in 35 Lectures, for the use of his Anatomical Theatre, 1711; and in a foot-note states that this is the earliest syllabus he has seen bearing the name of a private lecturer, and separately printed.

In 1712 Cheselden was elected F.R.S. Two years later, in March, 1714, we find him in trouble with the Barber-Surgeons’ Company. At the March Court the Master acquainted the Court that “Mr. Cheselden, a member of this Company, did frequently procure the dead bodies of malefactors from the place of execution and dissect them at his own house, as well during the Company’s public lectures as at other times, without the leave of the Governors, and contrary to the Company’s by-law in that behalf: by which means it became more difficult for the beadles to bring away the Company’s bodies, and likewise drew away the members of the Company and others from the public dissections and lectures at the Hall; the said Mr. Cheselden was thereupon called in, but having submitted himself to the pleasure of the Court with a promise never to dissect at the same time as the Company had their lecture at the Hall, nor without leave of the Governors for the time being, the said Mr. Cheselden was
excused what had passed, with a reproof for the same pronounced by the Master at the desire of the Court."

Before this, in 1711, he had been granted the full certificate entitling him to practise. In 1719 he was elected Surgeon to St. Thomas's Hospital and he served there as surgeon for 19 years. But he did not immediately relinquish his work as an anatomical teacher, for Peachey finds an advertisement in the Daily Courant of March 21, 1721, of a new course of anatomy with comparative anatomy, to be given by Cheselden and Francis Hawksbee. The notice ends as follows:— "N.B. This course being chiefly intended for gentlemen, such things only will be omitted as are neither instructive nor entertaining, and care will be taken to have nothing offensive."

In 1727, Cheselden married Miss Deborah Knight, of London, of which union the sole issue was a daughter. In this year also he published his great surgical improvement of lateral lithotomy for vesical calculus. Two years later, in 1729, we find him admitted a Corresponding Member of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Paris, a very high honour for a surgeon; and on the institution of the Royal Academy of Surgery of Paris he had the honour of being the first foreigner elected a member of that body.

To go backwards a couple of years, we find, that in 1727, he was chosen Principal Surgeon to Queen Caroline; and in 1728 he gave his account of iridotomy to the world. His description is as follows:—

"A knife passed through the tunica scleroticus, under the cornea before the iris, in order to cut an artificial pupil where the natural one is clos'd. This operation I have perform'd several times with good success; indeed it cannot fail when the operation is well done, and the eye not otherwise diseas'd, which is more than can be said for couching a cataract. In this operation great care must be taken to hold open the eye lids without pressing upon the eye, for if the aqueous humour is sinked out before the incision is made in the iris, the eye grows flaccid and renders the operation difficult." Cheselden has also described an operation for excising a portion of a proptosed cornea, and says: "This operation is very useful, and attended with but little pain."

When St. George's Hospital was founded in 1733, it was fortunate in securing the services of Cheselden as Principal Surgeon, and to him was entrusted the cutting for stone. At the same time John Ranby, also Surgeon to St. Thomas's Hospital and Serjeant Surgeon to the King, was elected to attend to the cataract cases at St. George's. Cheselden retired from St. George's in 1737 in which year he was elected surgeon to Chelsea Hospital, which latter post he filled till his death.
WILLIAM CHESelden

In 1743, Cheselden was chosen one of the Sheriffs for London and Middlesex, but he swore off. The following is from the journals kept in the Town Clerk’s office: “28, June 1743. Willimot, Mayor. William Cheselden, Esq. citizen and Barber-Surgeon, appeared, with six other citizens (all Barber-Surgeons), before the Court of Aldermen, and did then and there take his and their corporal oaths, that he, the said William Cheselden, was not of the estate, in lands, goods, and separate debts, of the value of £15,000; he was therupon discharged from the office of Sheriff, to the which he had been elected, on the 24th inst.” This is taken from Wadd’s Memoirs and Maxims, where it is also recorded that Cheselden once received a fee of 200 guineas for a visit to Chester with an operation for lithotomy there.

In 1745 he was elected Junior Warden of the Barber-Surgeons’ Company. This was the year of the separation of the Barbers and the Surgeons and on the foundation of the Company of Surgeons, he was chosen one of the Wardens of the new Company. In 1746 he was elected Master of the Company of Surgeons and served that office for a year.

Cheselden was a patron of the arts; Wadd states that the plan of Fulham Bridge was drawn by him. He was also a patron of boxing and sports generally. His disposition was gay and genial, he was popular with all, and had the reputation of always being kind to his patients. He lives in Pope’s famous line:—

“I’ll do what Mead and Cheselden advise.”

Peachey tells us that Cheselden had an apoplectic stroke in 1751; he died at Bath, April 10, 1752. The notice in the Gentleman’s Magazine adds that death was accelerated by his taking ale on the top of hot Bath buns!

Cheselden’s will is one of the briefest on record: “Being in perfect health I write this with my own hand and declare it to be my last will and testament. I give to my daughter W. J. Cotes £500 and all the rest and residue of my estate of what kind soever to my wife and make her full and sole executrix, administratrix and assign. Witness my hand and seal. Willm. Cheselden. 24 March 1749/50.”

The very fine collection of book-plates of medical men owned by my friend, Dr. George Peachey, contains a specimen of the armorial plate of Cheselden which is in the Chippendale style. His book-plate shows that he came of an armigerous family.

His portrait is one of the most striking pictures in the Council Room of the Royal College of Surgeons, and there is a very fine mezzotint engraving of it, which is scarce.
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