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History of ophthalmology

Thomas Wharton Jones, a nineteenth century ophthalmologist

Many eminent ophthalmologists are worthy of eulogy, but although Wharton Jones isn't famous for any single thing today, his life touched on many of the most fascinating events of his times.

He studied medicine in Edinburgh, and worked with Knox, who was a talented speaker and 'enlarged his thinking greatly,' until the terrible scandal of Burke and Hare broke. For decades afterwards, 'burking' remained common slang for choking a person, which was exactly what Burke did to any creature that he thought might grace the slabs of Knox's laboratory. Wharton Jones, having been called as a witness in the extremely traumatic court case (public opinion was running murderously high), fled to practice in Glasgow, and never discussed the matter afterwards. Burke and Hare were, of course, hanged.

Wharton Jones later taught ophthalmology to London medical students, and wore the rather archaic dress of top hat and frock coat to do so. The students rudely and predictably named him 'Mummy Jones.' TH Huxley reports that he spoke in an 'outrageous Scottish accent,' but that his lectures were extremely well constructed, if one could only understand it! He wrote several textbooks, and his 'Catechism on Ophthalmology' used the principle that short questions and answers 'bring to mind forcibly the salient points of a subject.'

For example:

Question: 'What is the best local treatment for granular conjunctiva?'

Answer: 'Scarification every second day, and immediately thereafter the application of a strong salve.'

In 1848, his acquaintance Babbage showed him a contraption for viewing the inside of the eye. Jones describes it as a handheld mirror, with the silvering crudely scraped off at one point to form a hole through which one could look. He was only mildly impressed.

If he had realised its potential, then his name, with Babbage's, would have gone down in history in place of Helmholtz's. He would have been famous. Wharton Jones probably didn't realise this when Helmholtz first revealed his discovery,

as he was appointed to the new professorship of ophthalmology at University College, and was too busy trying to catch his students calling him 'Mummy.' Three years later, he wrote a 'report' on the ophthalmoscope although, as Helmholtz's fame spread, he must have been kicking himself.

Sadly, hard times were ahead. Jones's private practice declined, as did the income from his books, and in the severe winter of 1881, one Mr Tweedy was sent – through six foot deep snowdrifts – to ascertain why Jones had missed a *Lancet* staff meeting. Some concluded that at 73, he may have had an appointment with the Almighty, and idly composed bits of epitaph as Tweedy struggled on his mission. Arriving at Jones's house in George Street, he was horrified to find the eminent professor hunched over an empty grate wrapped in shawls, and gnawing on an old piece of beefsteak and a crust. (Let this be a lesson to those of us who have not topped up our pension funds!) His colleagues swiftly persuaded Mr Gladstone to include him on the civil list, and he was saved from poverty and retired to the Isle of Wight. At this point he gave up practice completely, though couldn't resist treating his friend's tortoise at length, even after it bit him while he was putting in its eye drops.

It is hard to know whether his traumatic involvement with the Knox scandal and his 'missing' the discovery of the ophthalmoscope soured him, especially as his own main invention (stereoscopic spectacles which he ground out of amber) never caught on. The fact that he continued working until his late sixties – his colleague Godlee met him again at this time and reports that he discussed with enthusiasm the merits of particular jams and the advantages of leather overshoes versus galoshes – suggests that it did not.

FIONA ROMAN

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