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### Abstract

John Thomson is arguably one of the most interesting characters to have been associated with the Royal Medical Society. His interests were wide ranging; from military surgery and the treatment of venereal disease (two areas often closely connected in those times) to chemistry and the newly emerging specialty of pathology. It is, however, with his interest in medical education and his ability to persuade those in authority to create professorial chairs for himself to occupy that I shall deal in this article.

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# Chair-Making For Beginners - Illustrated by Some Episodes in the Career of John Thomson (1765-1846)

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## Introduction

John Thomson is arguably one of the most interesting characters to have been associated with the Royal Medical Society. His interests were wide ranging: from military surgery and the treatment of venereal disease (two areas often closely connected in those times) to chemistry and the newly emerging specialty of pathology. It is, however, with his interest in medical education and his ability to persuade those in authority to create professorial chairs for himself to occupy that I shall deal in this article.

Thomson had no less than three professorial chairs created for him, prompting Robert Knox (Burke and Hare's main customer) to refer to him splenetically as the "old chair maker". Knox, however, was not above putting himself forward to sit as Thomson's successor in one of them. Thomson's success can probably be put down to his being the right man, at the right time, in the right place, with the right subject, the right gimmick and the right friends.

## The right man

John Thomson was a man of remarkable tenacity and vision as well as of courage. He also appears to have been one of genuine humanity, coming out of semi-retirement to take over the practice of a deceased colleague in order to provide for his friend's widow. It is said that he gave up a career in surgery because he could no longer face inflicting pain in these pre-anaesthetic days.

He was born in 1765 in Paisley, the son of a silk weaver in reduced circumstances. He had been employed by a number of masters from the age of eight until, at the age of eleven, he was apprenticed for seven years to his father to learning the weaving trade. When he showed more interest in studying than in weaving his father wanted him to become a minister rather than a doctor as the initial expenses would be less and the career prospects more secure. In 1785 John Thomson prevailed over his father and he was apprenticed to a Dr White in Paisley. Thomson then went on to spend the session 1788-1789 studying in Glasgow but the next year came to Edinburgh. His clinical and financial acumen was shown at that time when he refused to enrol for (and pay up front for) a course of a



Figure 2: This is annotated on the reverse:

"Sloughing gangrene of leg & foot"

It is possible that this is an example of one of the cases seen and sketched by Thomson himself when he visited the wounded after the battle of Waterloo.

year's lectures given by the great Dr William Cullen. After attending the first free "taster" lecture Thomson was said to have remarked that Dr Cullen looked too frail to last the course and that he did not have money to throw away if he was not going to get all he had paid for. His prognosis proved correct as Cullen died before delivering half of his lectures.

Thomson joined the RMS in 1790 and became a president in 1791, the same year in which he became assistant surgeon's clerk (equivalent to house surgeon). His health was not good; he suffered from asthma, and, in 1792, he had to resign his post in the RIE. He then spent some time at John Hunter's school of medicine in London. He returned to Edinburgh in 1793 and, becoming a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, was allowed to attend as a surgeon at the RIE. Seven years later, in 1800, he became the youngest of the six official permanent surgeons to the Infirmary (the equivalent of a consultant). He was then in a position to start to bring about reform in the medical curriculum in Edinburgh.

## The right place and time

At the end of the eighteenth century the Town Council was worried about the status of the city. With the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 the centre of power had moved south to London and the attendant loss of prestige was coupled with a gradually worsening financial situation. The sources of the Council's income were basically the same as they had been in medieval times and were inadequate for the demands of the day. (This eventually led to the town becoming bankrupt in the early nineteenth century.) One of the few assets attracting income to Edinburgh was the University and its Medical School. The value of this asset was being reduced, not only by the rise of the London medical schools but also by a feeling that some teachers were possibly resting a little on their laurels. The professors were appointed by the Town Council but over the years dynasties such as the Munros, the Gregories, and the Homes had come to dominate the Faculty. The danger in this sort of arrangement is epitomised in the performance of the now notorious Munro *tertius* who apparently delivered his lectures on anatomy by openly reading out his grandfather's notes without expunging such phrases as, "When I was student in Leyden in 1719", which, considering that he had been born in 1773, was stretching the credulity of his listeners somewhat even in the days before active



Figure 1: This is the only watercolour in the University of Edinburgh Library which can be almost certainly identified as being one of the Thomson collection as it is annotated on the reverse:

"Hotel Dieu de Lyons 12th Sept 1823."

It is known that Roberts Carswell was in France at this time and he did visit the Hotel Dieu. What it depicts is rather more problematical: possibly ulcers on the heels



Figure 3: This is annotated on the reverse:  
 "Large tubercles on omentum - Cancerous?"

It appears to be a case of pseudomyxoma peritonei secondary to a mucinous adenocarcinoma

learning. Even taking into account that his incompetence may have been exaggerated, that the quality of the teaching in the University was perhaps not as good as it could have been is shown by the number of extramural, non-University, lecturers who flourished in the town providing, amongst other things, for the deficiencies in the University Medical School.

There were several obstacles in the way of injecting new blood into the Faculty to improve the standard of the medical education provided by the University. The first was that the Senatus (i.e. a committee made up of the professors) was trying to assert its independence from the Town Council. The University had been founded by the Town Council as "the Tounis College" essentially to make use of a collection of books they had been left. The Senatus, however, were trying to make out that the University was a separate entity, not subordinate to the Town Council. They would thus not take kindly to dictation from the Town Council in affairs governing the quality of their teaching. Apart from pride there was another, financial, motive for resistance to any interference from the Town Council. There were two classes of medical professor in the University at that time; those whose classes were obligatory for any student who wished to take the degree of MD, and those whose classes were not. As the students paid their fees directly to the lecturers it was in the interest of the professors delivering compulsory courses to restrict their own number to keep up the attendance at, and thus their fees from, their own lectures. In addition, as each lecturer had such a large amount of material to cover, their lecture series often extended over two years, thus further increasing their income. Any attempt by the Town Council to introduce new chairs and make their lectures compulsory (as would be necessary to update the medical curriculum) would thus be strongly opposed by the Senatus.

Thomson's first attempt to improve medical teaching in Edinburgh by the creation of a new chair did not however meet with the approval of the Town Council but led him into direct conflict with it. In 1804 he became the first occupant of a Chair in Surgery created by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (to provide an alternative source of teaching to that of Munro *tertius* whose brief as Professor of Anatomy covered Surgery as well). On hearing that Thomson was about to give his inaugural lecture the Town Council sent the College Bailie round to inform him that the Town Council was the only body who could create professors in Edinburgh and that, if Thomson persisted in lecturing, the bailie and his "heavies" would come round and stop the proceedings. Thomson called his bluff and the lecture course went ahead without the riot which would no doubt have ensued had the bailie tried to break up the party. (By all accounts medical students in those days were more physical in expressing their displeasure than is acceptable, or usual, nowadays).

Two years later Thomson obtained the chair of Military Surgery in the University. After his run in with the Town Council it is perhaps not surprising that the appointment was made by the Crown. This chair was seen as a roundabout way of improving the quality of surgical teaching

under the guise of providing for the requirements for military surgeons created by the Napoleonic Wars. Thomson occupied this chair for the next sixteen years but when he resigned from it at the age of fifty seven his greatest achievement was yet to come.

#### The right subject

Whilst the Napoleonic Wars had provided an excuse for his second chair the third was justified by the emergence of the relatively new specialties of morbid anatomy and experimental pathology. Morgagni had started the morbid anatomy ball rolling; figures such as John Hunter and Matthew Baillie in London and Bichat and Cruveilhier in Paris had developed the concept of trying to explain disease in terms of the pathological changes observed post-mortem and the results of experiments. Thomson wished to promote this approach. He managed to persuade the government to issue a Commission in September 1831 instructing the Town Council to create a chair of Pathology (also making it an examinable, that is compulsory, subject) and to appoint himself to it. The Council grumbled but it knew on which side its bread was buttered and instructed the College Baillie to take Thomson (and John Turner, who had been appointed Professor of Surgery at the same time) to the next meeting of the Senatus to be inducted into their chairs.

It is at this point that the farce began. The secretary to the Senate was told that the new professors were to be inducted at the meeting of 11 October. He, however, forgot to send round the billets summoning the meeting and left Edinburgh for a few days to visit a patient. It was only on the 10<sup>th</sup> that one of the other professors realised that he had not received notice of the meeting and sent a University servitor round to remind everyone by word of mouth. In the event only seven members turned up and they were discussing other matters when the College Baillie arrived at the door with the new professors. That they were expected to induct the professors was news to the Senatus: they had not even finished formulating their response justifying why they did not want anything to do with the new chairs. Predictably they appointed a committee to try and persuade the baillie and the two professors to go away. They prevailed upon the baillie to return to the City Chambers to report that the Senatus was not ready for the new chairs. This ploy succeeded and the baillie and his unwelcome companions went back to the High Street to seek further advice. Whilst he was away the Senatus decided that the best thing was for them to close the meeting on the grounds that they had not been summoned by letter and the meeting was thus unconstitutional. Unfortunately, they took so long to think of this way out of their predicament that they were still debating it when the College Bailie returned with the professors saying that the council insisted on the professors being inducted without delay. The Senatus had no alternative but to acquiesce. Despite numerous pamphlets and attempts to suppress the chairs over the next few years both have survived to the present day.



Figure 4: This is annotated on the reverse:  
 "Usual appearances of recent pleurisy with spots of partial suppuration on the surface of lung"

It appears to be a case of suppurative pneumonia with pleurisy

### The right gimmick

One of the points that Thomson made in his application for the Chair of Pathology was that he had "procured from Hospitals at home and abroad, with considerable pains and difficulty and much expense, a large collection of Coloured Delineations of the Morbid Alterations of Structure which occur in the different Textures and Organs of the Human Body". This was a considerable advance for the time. Using pathological specimens for teaching had drawbacks. Formaldehyde had not yet been discovered and alcohol was the only available preservative. This has the disadvantage of hardening, shrinking and decolourising tissues preserved in it. John Hunter had got round the problem by having wax models made of specimens but this was a very expensive solution. Thomson sent his son, William, and Robert Carswell (later Professor of Pathology at University College, London) round the hospitals of Britain and Europe looking for likely specimens and painting them in watercolour. The collection eventually ran to 2400 images and was bought by the University in 1857 for the relatively enormous sum of £350. It has since disappeared, apart from a few watercolours in the University Library which probably formed part of it.

### The right friends

Thomson had powerful political friends, probably made when he held a series of chemistry classes in 1799-1800. At that time it was a popular pastime for the legal fraternity to go to scientific lectures and demonstrations and it is probable that there Thomson made useful political acquaintances amongst up and coming politicians. His political leanings were to the Whigs (who were in power when he was appointed Professor of Pathology) whilst the Town Council and the Senatus were Tory. In fact, at one time he was thought to be a dangerous radical associated with "The Friends of the People", an organisation asking for a modest extension

of the vote but regarded at the end of the eighteenth century as a subversive organisation, membership of which could lead to execution or transportation.

In summary, Thomson was a remarkable man. He published on chemistry, inflammation, lithotomy, smallpox vaccination, hospital administration, medical education and the life and work of William Cullen. He researched on necrosis, callus formation, hernia, haemorrhage, and the use of mercury in syphilis. (He preferred to use sarsaparilla). He gave the first lectures in Edinburgh on diseases of the eye, systematic surgery and military surgery, and was the first to organise his lectures on the practice of physic on an anatomico-physiological basis. It is, however, probably for his influence in improving the teaching of medicine at the beginning of the nineteenth century by adopting new methods and increasing the range of subjects and number of teachers that he should be best remembered. As a parting thought, even if he had not done any of these things, he would have made a significant contribution to medicine as it was he who gave JY Simpson his first job in Edinburgh and prevented that impecunious student from embarking for India as a ship's surgeon.

### Notes

There is a file of varied medical images in Special Collections in the University of Edinburgh Library. They vary from early photographs of skin conditions to copies of illustrations in 19<sup>th</sup> century pathology journals. Amongst these are a small number of watercolours mounted on card with tabs for hanging made out of red lawyers tape. These are possibly all that remains of the Thomson Collection of watercolours. A selection are shown in this article.

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