

THE LIVES AND TIMES OF MR AND MRS JOHN HUNTER**

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The Hunters lived during the period termed the Enlightenment. Progress in science and technology had resulted in marked changes in social life with industrial revolution under way. The rich had benefited from the national prosperity. The poor suffered, as families were disrupted in the move from country to town. England was engaged in wars in Europe, the Caribbean, India and America. In spite of all this there was remarkable self-confidence. The historian Trevelyan has described English society of this time as¹

self-poised, self-judged and self-approved, freed from the disturbing passions of the past, and not yet troubled with anxieties about a very different future which was soon to be brought upon the scene by the Industrial and French Revolutions.

By the end of the century, prompted in part by events across the Channel, there was a movement towards democracy. There arose what became known as the Romantic Movement. This was not just an artistic and literary movement; poets, artists and others took radical political action in pursuit of their beliefs.

John Hunter was born in 1728 at Long Caldenwood in Lanarkshire, the youngest of ten children. All attended the local school, but John was an indifferent scholar. He was headstrong and independent, often disappearing into the countryside because he felt he could learn more from nature in the outdoors than his school could teach him. Following a brief apprenticeship to a cabinet-maker he moved to London to join his eldest brother William, who was already well established as a physician and teacher of anatomy. John soon became a skilled investigator and decided to study surgery, attending the practices of two of London's most famous surgeons, Cheselden and Pott. He became an Army surgeon serving in 1760 in the Belle Isle campaign off the coast of France and in Portugal. His experience with battle injuries resulted in his important treatise on inflammation and gunshot wounds. He returned to London in 1763 to set up his surgical practice, but continued with the experiments and anatomical studies which led to his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society.

During his time in the Army, John became friendly with an older officer, Robert Boyne Home, a surgeon serving in the 16th Dragoons who lived in Suffolk Street, Pall Mall. It was here that John met Home's eldest daughter Anne; they were immediately attracted to each other. It was seven years before they married in 1771. There has been much speculation about this long engagement but the most likely reason was that John could not afford to marry. His career was not established, and he was never good with money. Indeed his brother-in-law said John's annual expenditure always exceeded his

* Based on a paper delivered to the Liverpool Medical History Society on 4 May 1995

¹ G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (London: Longman's Green, 1946), p. 339

income and that he valued money no further that it enabled him to extend his various and endless researches.

By 1771, now well-established and with an appointment to St George's Hospital, John was ready to marry and settle down. He was forty-three and Anne twenty-nine. He announced his wedding in a letter to William:

Dear Brother:

To-morrow at eight o'clock and at St James's Church, I enter the Holy State of Matrimony. As that is a ceremony which you are not particularly fond of, I will not make a point of having your company there ...

Married or not married,

Ever yours,
John Hunter.

The couple were very different. Physically John was short, only 5ft 2in in height, a rather braw Scot. Anne was dainty, elegant and described as 'handsome, tall, singularly dignified and lady-like in appearance, possessed of a cultivated mind with special gifts for poetry and music'. She had a lively interest in current affairs and her poetry was in the new Romantic style rather than in the classical tradition. He was an obsessive worker, sometimes impatient even discourteous, she a poet and dreamer. Porritt in his Hunterian Oration said:²

no two personalities could have been more different, and yet there was a reciprocity between them which made their combined lives both successful and happy, whilst it in no way fettered their individual activities and pursuits.

Of more significance is what John himself wrote after several years of marriage:

as to myself, with respect to my family, I can only yet say that I am happy in a wife, ... I am pursuing business and pursuing my studies ... and it appears to be Anny's enjoyment in seeing me pleasing myself; while all these concurring circumstances go on, I must continue to be one of the happiest men living.

They had four children born within five years, of whom two survived.

The Hunters' first home was in Jermyn Street where there were small houses with small rooms and gardens. St James's was a busy, noisy part of London, scarcely a peaceful place to live. John also had a house at Earls Court. This was not just a country home but the centre of his anatomical and physiological studies. It housed his menagerie which included a huge variety of animals, birds and insects. There was a dissecting room and a boiler for rendering down skeletons. Anne's rooms were on an upper floor, away from the insalubrious activities of John's research, though she cannot have been unaware of the sight of smells or John's activities. The local people were accustomed to strange sights such as carts drawn by a buffalo or a camel.

² A. Porritt, 'John Hunter's women', *Trans. Hunterian Soc.*, 17(1958-9). 89

Amongst the skeletons boiled down was that of the famous 8ft 4in Irish giant O'Brien. Hunter knew O'Brien during life and was determined to get his skeleton when he died. O'Brien knew this and was equally determined to prevent his body being dissected. He ordered for himself a lead coffin and instructed that he should be buried at sea. Hunter was the more determined, and eventually a bribe of £500 was sufficient. O'Brien is still on show in the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons.

The Hunters lived in Jermyn Street for twelve years before moving to a more spacious and elegant home in Leicester Square to which John linked a house at the back opening onto Castle Street. This contained his demonstration and dissecting rooms, library, printing press, museum and living quarters for his assistants. At their busiest the Hunters were responsible for a staff of about 60 people. By this time (1783) John was earning well, though he saved little, spending all his income on his research and his family. His working day was exacting. A contemporary biographer described him as³

one of the most industrious of men ... he rose very early in the morning and went immediately to his dissecting room, where he sometimes dissected and gave directions concerning what he would have done in the course of the day. After breakfast he attended to those patients who came to his house. At eleven he went abroad ... visiting patients — attending at the hospital ... He ate very hearty at his dinner — and rarely drank more than a glass of wine ... In the evening, he was engaged in writing down observations which he had made through the day — or preparing for publication. He seldom retired to rest till twelve or one o'clock.

Although surrounded by her husband's activities Anne found time for a busy social life, for writing poetry and not least for bringing some tranquillity into both their lives. Before she married and when she was only 23 years of age, some of her poems had appeared in 'The Lark', a popular Edinburgh publication. The earliest manuscripts at the Royal College of Surgeons in her handwriting are nine poems from about this time. They all show her affinity with the Romantic movement, being lyrical, emotional and often nostalgic in tone. Although she continued to write throughout her married life she did not publish again until her husband's death.

The late eighteenth century was noted for its literary gatherings and it seems Mrs Hunter could hold her own in this society; her salons were popular and noted for informality and lack of affectation. Her friends included Mrs Elizabeth Carter, Mrs Mary Delaney and Mrs Hester Thrale, the latter the friend and confidante of Dr Samuel Johnson. A regular attender was Horace Walpole, 4th Earl of Orford, politician, letter-writer, critic and diarist. He in return entertained the Hunters at his extraordinary Gothick mansion at Strawberry Hill.

Mrs Thrale introduced Anne Hunter to many of her friends. It was at her salon in Streatham that Anne first met Fanny Burney, best remembered for her diaries in which she has left a vivid picture of the social and literary life of her time. This acquaintanceship was important, for Fanny was the daughter of the distinguished musicologist Dr Charles Burney, organist, teacher, and writer of a monumental history of

³ J. Foot, *The Life of John Hunter* (London: T. Beckett, 1794), p. 285

music. It was probably through the Burneys that the Hunters first met the composer Haydn who, when he came to London in 1791, met Burney soon after his arrival.

At this time London was the leading musical centre in Europe. This was partly because Handel made it his home, but even more because there were numerous impresarios rivalling each other in promoting musical events. London was the birthplace of the public concert. Anne Hunter was a regular attender, her sister Elizabeth was a well-known singer.

The most significant event in Anne's musical life was when she met Joseph Haydn. Haydn (1732-1809) was court musician to the Counts of Esterhazy whose estates straddled what is now the Austro-Hungarian border. He first attended this court in 1761 when he was twenty-nine and stayed for the next thirty years. Here he led a sheltered life training musicians, composing and performing. Gradually, however, he became better known and visited Vienna to compose and perform there. By 1791 his fame had spread to England where the impresario Johann Peter Salomon persuaded the famous composer to come and perform at his concerts. Haydn made two visits to London between 1791 and 1795, both highly successful musically, financially and socially. Whilst in England Haydn was treated as a great celebrity, an experience new to him because in Europe court musicians were classed as low-ranking servants.

His contact with Dr Burney, whose daughter attended Mrs Hunter's salons, made it natural that when Haydn needed surgical advice he should have consulted John Hunter. He had long suffered from nasal polyps and in Vienna had undergone an unsuccessful operation. He has left in his journal a graphic description of his visit to Hunter. He describes him as⁴

the greatest and most famous surgeon who almost daily performed operations and always successfully ... He offered to free me of this nuisance ... a few brawny fellows entered the room, and grabbed me and wanted to force me into a chair. I yelled and kicked and hit until I had freed myself, and made clear to Mr Hunter, who already had his instruments ready ... that I did not want to undergo the operation. He was astonished at my obstinacy, and it seemed to me that he pitied me for not wanting to undergo the happy experience of enjoying his skill.

In spite of this inauspicious start Haydn subsequently developed a musical relationship with Mrs Hunter. Singing was a popular pastime in England and song-writers in demand. Haydn started to compose songs and soon produced two sets of 'Six Original Canzonettas'. The first, published in 1791, included settings of Mrs Hunter's poems and was dedicated to her. The best known are 'The mermaid's song' and 'My mother bids me bind my hair'. His second set was published a year later. Both are still performed today.

Haydn was not the only composer to set Anne's poems to music. Her 'Lament of the Cherokee Indian' appeared in several folk operas of the time, including those composed by Stephen Paxton and Signor Giordani, an indication of the interest the exploration of America was evoking at that time. Indeed the arrival in England of two Cherokees caused quite a stir and Hunter commissioned Hodges to paint portraits of them for his home. These are now in the Hunterian Museum.

⁴ H.C.R. London, *Haydn in England 1791-1795*, (London: Thomas and Hudson, 1954), pp. 178-9

Thus Anne Hunter had a wide circle of friends and entertained in her salon the leading literary, musical and artistic figures of the time, whilst she was herself active in the literary field. Her life-style might seem incompatible with that of her husband who was still obsessed with his scientific studies. However, Smith has shown that John's interests were by no means confined to his researches and that he shared in his wife's appreciation of the arts.⁵ His library contained books of literature as well as of science and he owned paintings by Reynolds, Hogarth, Stubbs and Hodges, amongst others. Whilst he did not usually join his wife's Thursday salons he often greeted the guests as they arrived or departed. Sometimes he shared wine with them before retiring to his studies for the evening. Richard Owen, son-in-law of John's devoted assistant William Clift, wrote⁶

my father-in-law has described to me the scene he often stayed to witness with sleep-laden eyes, when the master could no longer dictate, and issued from his study ... on one of Mrs Hunter's reception nights. With difficulty stemming the social stream on the staircase he would stop to give a kindly greeting to the beauty of the year, had a smart reply to the passing joke of a man of fashion, or a more serious response to the question of an administrator.

At this time both the Hunters were at the height of their fame. John, as well as being a leading surgeon, was pursuing the studies in anatomy, natural history and surgery which eventually earned him the reputation of being the founder of modern scientific surgery. Older than Anne, never very caring for his own health and always over-working, he was wearing out the faster. Their busy exciting life was about to come an abrupt end. John had been suffering increasingly from angina, and on 16 October 1793, during a Board meeting at St George's Hospital, he collapsed and died soon after.

It was soon found that John's estate was barely enough to pay his debts. His widow was turned out of both her homes. Earls Court was sold and the Leicester Square house let, though Clift remained, devotedly taking care of the museum. The annuity purchased for Anne was insufficient for her to live on. It was fortunate she proved resilient, for she was only fifty-one and was to have twenty-nine years of widowhood ahead of her. Undeterred by her new poverty she took a post as companion to two young ladies, a position she held for seven years.

Part of the problem was John's determination that his collection of museum specimens should be saved for posterity. He bequeathed it to his executors with instructions that it should be purchased for the nation. Seven years later, in 1800, after much wrangling Parliament paid £15,000 for the collection and promptly handed it over to the Company of Surgeons to look after. It was at this time that King George III granted the Company his Charter as the Royal College of Surgeons, first of London, later of England.⁷

⁵ R. Smith, 'The Hunters and the Arts', *Ann. R. Coll. Surg. Engl.*, 57(1975), 117-32

⁶ Quoted in T. Taylor, *Leicester Square, its Associations and its Worthies* (London: Bickers and Son), p 425

⁷ The Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS) might be suspected of casting John Hunter in the role of patron saint. The earliest guild of surgeons in London was founded in 1493, but the RCS usually dates its origin as 1540 when the Company of Barber-Surgeons was instituted by Royal Charter from Henry VIII. In

The sale of John's museum improved his widow's finances sufficiently for her to live modestly but comfortably. Her lifestyle may have changed dramatically, but her letters show that she led an active life and maintained her friendships and her interest in current affairs. Her great-niece said that 'she retained her wit and beauty to the end of her days'. Her two children must have been a sadness to her. Both seem to have been weak characters who were not very supportive. Her son left Cambridge when his father died without taking a degree, joined the Army but left some years later under dubious circumstances. Her daughter married a colonel in the Army but the life did not suit her and they separated. Neither had children of their own and thus the Hunter line died out. Their collateral descendants however have always taken the greatest care of their inheritance.

The only known portrait of Mrs Hunter has always been kept 'in the family'. It is attributed to Masquerier, though not listed among his works. One would have expected her to sit for her portrait when at the height of her social fame, but when John Hunter died Masquerier was only 15 years old and had not even started his apprenticeship. Anne is depicted dressed not in fine clothes, as a society hostess, but in walking dress more typical of the early nineteenth than the late eighteenth century. Avril Hart of the Victoria and Albert Museum has identified the style as 'Mary Queen of Scots revival', typical of the 1808-1811 period.⁸ It is of interest that by then Masquerier had apparently become a personal friend, for when Clift showed Mrs Hunter and her daughter round the Hunterian Museum in 1811, Masquerier accompanied them.

Anne Hunter's friendship with Haydn continued until he returned to Austria in 1795. The English demand for folksongs continued and the Scottish music publisher George Thomson sent Haydn large numbers of poems to be set to music. Anne sent Thomson many of her own poems and the Royal College of Surgeons collection of her manuscripts includes 'Eight poems set to music by Doctor Haydn' and nineteen 'Songs written for Welsh airs published by Mr George Thomson'.

The last work Haydn composed before he left England was a setting of one of Anne's poems, 'O tuneful voice'. There are several copies in her handwriting. Although Haydn's setting of this poem has been regarded as his farewell to London, perhaps it is not too sentimental to regard it as an affectionate farewell between friends. The poem is a nostalgic tribute and the setting matches the mood. Haydn's biographer Robbins Landon wondered whether it was a tribute to England, the land that brought out the best in the composer.⁹ Or was it a tribute to Anne Hunter, whose verse could unlock such a vein of poetic feeling in the elderly Haydn?

Whatever their true feelings were there was still one more musical connection. Whilst Haydn was in England, inspired by hearing Handel's oratorios (particularly 'The Messiah') he decided to write one himself. When he left for Vienna he took with him a libretto on the subject of the creation of the world. The words are from the Bible and from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The actual text Haydn set to music was prepared by the

1745 the barbers and surgeons separated, the latter forming themselves into the Company of Surgeons which in 1800 became the Royal College. John Hunter (1728-1793) therefore had a working life almost spanning the period of the Company of Surgeons. Although during his lifetime he had minimal connection with the Company, it was partly due to this clause in his will that it became a Royal College.

⁸ Personal correspondence

⁹ London, p. 400

musicologist Baron Gottfried van Swieten, although where he got them from has been a matter of speculation amongst musicologists ever since.¹⁰

'The Creation' was first performed in Vienna in 1798 and was an immense success, as it was in London two years later. The publication of the score was sponsored by private subscribers amongst whom were Mrs Hunter and her son John. The words were in both German and English. Whilst retaining its popularity ever since, the English text has never been satisfactory. The language is stilted, occasionally ungrammatical and it is not in rhyme.

Amongst Anne's papers at the Royal College of Surgeons are two manuscripts with words for 'The Creation'. (They were referred to by Smith in his Hunterian Oration 'The Hunters and the Arts'). The manuscripts are mostly, though not entirely, in Anne's handwriting. It is clear that she did not set out to write an original libretto but that she worked from Haydn's script, paraphrasing his words in the belief that she could improve on them. The first performance of the oratorio to Anne Hunter's words was given on 15 September 1993 at the Royal Festival Hall during the Hunterian Festival commemorating the bicentenary of John Hunter's death.¹¹ Her text is a great improvement on van Swieten's. It is of course grammatically correct, but it is also more lyrical, flowing and tender in the style of her other poems and it is in rhyme. It was known at the time for the music publisher Thomson wrote to Mrs Hunter:¹²

it is not the first time that your muse and Haydn's have met, as we see from the beautiful Canzonets. Would he had been directed by you about the words to the Creation! It is lamentable to see such divine music joined with such miserable broken English.

It is sad to think that Haydn almost certainly never saw this libretto written by a woman of whom he seems to have been very fond, for there is no evidence that she sent it to him. Perhaps she was just too modest to do so.

Anne continued to write poetry throughout her widowhood. Her friends persuaded her that her work was worthy of a wider audience, and in 1802 she published a volume of poems.¹³ It was well-received by the public, the critics and other writers, and was reprinted the following year.

An assessment of a writer's work must have regard not only for contemporary opinion but that of posterity. In her lifetime Anne was highly regarded by friends and public, but posterity has valued her less. She lives on in Haydn's songs rather than in modern anthologies of poetry, though she is recorded in the *Dictionary of British Women Writers of 1600-1800* and the *Feminist Companion to Literature in English*. If her work has not lasted it may be because she lived too early. She was one of the very first of the Romantic poets, but only a few years later there came Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, some of the greatest poets to have written in the English language. Her 'Ode to a Nightingale' predates by some fifteen to twenty years

¹⁰ E. Olleson, 'the origin of Haydn's Creation', *Haydn Yearbook*, 1968, pp. 148-66

¹¹ The setting was by Clifford Bartlett. It is published by King's Music, Redcroft, Bank's End, Wyton, Huntingdon, Cambs PE17 2AA, from whom the vocal score may be obtained

¹² J.C. Hadden, *Haydn*, (London: Dent, 1934), p. 116

¹³ Mrs John Hunter, *Poems* (London: T. Payne, 1820)

Keats's famous poem of the same title. It seems to be her fate to be remembered in Haydn's songs rather than in her own poems.

Anne Hunter remained well and active for many years, and began to fade only in her last year. She died peacefully aged 79, and was buried in St Marylebone Churchyard. Some years ago this church was turned into a healing centre and her remains were reinterred in Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey. Her will was proved in the sum of £6000, divided between her two children. A long obituary by Robert Nares appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* paying tribute to her qualities:¹⁴

every grace that could make her interesting in society ... command respect and attachment ...
the natural warmth and energy of her heart ... banishing affectation pedantry and dullness ...
her name recorded not for deep learning but for poetic genius, sagacity and good taste.

The Hunters' legacy

John's legacy is almost too well known to need repeating. His lectures on the practice of surgery were unique because they were based on his own experimental observations. His famous dictum 'Why think? Why not try the experiment?' summed up how he differed both from his predecessors and his contemporaries. He is highly regarded as one of the first scientific surgeons, a biologist and comparative anatomist some of whose basic pathological principles remain valid today. Many of his specimens were destroyed in the air raids of 1941, but others survive in the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons. He has earned his place as patron saint of surgeons.

His wife Anne has been neglected in the glare of appreciation of John himself. That she was a fine wife of a famous man, and that he himself appreciated this is quite clear. But she was more than this. She was a talented poet and woman of letters who was held in high esteem in her own time. Perhaps the reason her fame has not survived is because she was overshadowed by some of the greatest poets England has known.

The Hunters lived during the sparkling era of the age of Enlightenment. Both, in their different ways, added their own lustre to that age.

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¹⁴ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 91 (1821), 89