

THE SURGEONS OF EDINBURGH IN THE SEVENTEENTH  
CENTURY

AFTER the recognition of the combined surgeons and barbers as one of the guilds of craftsmen in Edinburgh, a definite history commences, which has extended up to the present day. The united guild originally stood ninth or tenth in order of seniority, but, partly by virtue of its important nature and partly owing to the high social position of the surgeons included in it, the guild of surgeons and barbers gradually attained the first position. Under Gilbert Primrose as Deacon, in 1582, this craft took precedence as the first of fourteen then in existence. Many of the surgeons were men of wealth and owned lands near Edinburgh, such as James Borthwick of Stow, Alexander Pennycuik of Newhall, and Christopher Irving of Bonschaw. During the 17th century, three Deacons of the surgeons, viz., James Borthwick, in 1661, Arthur Temple, in 1669, and George Stirling, in 1689, held the position of one of the two members returned by Edinburgh to the Scottish Parliament.<sup>1</sup>

The place of meeting of the crafts at this time was the Magdalen Chapel in the Cowgate, which belonged to the Guild of Hammermen. From the year 1581, also, the barber-surgeons appear to have held regular meetings, of which they kept minutes, and in this year the craft included sixteen masters, together with their apprentices.

It should be mentioned in passing that the surgeons signed the National Covenant on 25th August, 1638, and ordained all their apprentices and servants to subscribe it as well, declaring that no apprentice or servant should be admitted in future except such as should subscribe the Covenant.

Shortly after this time, a change took place in the nature of the craft. Pharmacy was now taught along with the art of surgery, whereas previously a surgeon had sometimes been an apothecary as well, but, as a rule, had not. The apothecary's calling appears to have been regarded as of higher standing than that of the surgeon, if we may judge from the fact that James Borthwick, who had been a very prominent member of the surgeons' incorporation, was described on his tombstone as "pharmacopœus" only.<sup>2</sup> Troubles also arose in connection with the extension of the city, for the rights of monopoly possessed by the surgeons and barbers in Edinburgh did not extend to the Canongate and other suburbs. It must be remembered that, at this time, anyone who desired to practise medicine and surgery in Scotland might do so without let or hindrance,

<sup>1</sup> John Gairdner, M.D.: "Historical Sketch of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh," Edinburgh, 1860, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Maitland: "History of Edinburgh," p. 193.

so long as he did not invade the district in and around Glasgow supervised by the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, or practise as a barber-surgeon in one of the burghs where a guild existed. The necessary qualification elsewhere consisted simply in the ability to obtain patients.

From 1657 onwards, when Borthwick and Kincaid set up as surgeon-apothecaries, pharmacy had a greater attraction to the apprentices than the barber craft. Barber-surgeons who practised shaving, hair-cutting and minor

surgery thus fell off in numbers, so much so that in 1682 the Town Council made a complaint to the incorporation that there were only six barbers following the trade within the city walls.<sup>1</sup> The change in medical practice in Edinburgh at this time was a very complicated one. Simple barbers, as they were called, who had no desire to practise minor surgery, set up shops; simple apothecaries also, who did not practise surgery, possessed shops for the sale of spices, drugs and similar commodities. A careful watch was kept by the incorporation of surgeons upon these to see that the privileges of the incorporation were not invaded, and numerous prosecutions took place and fines were levied. The simple barbers, whose trade in wig-making at the end of the 17th century had, owing to the prevailing fashion, become very profitable, wished to be free of surgery and the surgeons; and



JAMES BORTHWICK'S TOMBSTONE IN GREYFRIARS CHURCHYARD, EDINBURGH

Note the 17th century representations of surgical instruments in the panels

accordingly, as the result of an action brought in 1718, a final cleavage between these two crafts took place. In 1682, the apothecaries had come under the protection of the College of Physicians, founded in 1681, and could to a large extent bid defiance to the surgeons, so long as they did not grossly offend by performing any serious operation.

In other parts of Scotland, the surgeon-apothecary, during the course of the 17th century, became the type of practitioner who looked after the health of the community, and lost all connection with the calling of the barber. His training consisted solely in an apprenticeship, usually of five years, to an

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Creswell: "The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh," Edinburgh, 1926, p. 103.

established practitioner, although, in the case of a man who wished to attain reputation and success in practice, he had usually taken occasion in his youth to hear lectures at one of the Universities or in some Continental Medical School.

On 22nd May, 1778, a charter was granted to the incorporation, embodying it anew under the name and title of the Royal College of Surgeons of the City of Edinburgh, and thus the final separation from barbers on the one hand and apothecaries on the other was legally ratified. In 1798, the College petitioned the East India Company to recognise a diploma issued by the College as sufficient evidence of qualification for appointment to their service without further examination, and this request was granted. About 1808, the diploma was similarly recognised by the Army Medical Board after a revisal of the laws relative to examination in 1806. More stringent regulations regarding the diploma were made in 1816; and after the passing of the Medical Act of 1858, the College of Surgeons and the College of Physicians instituted a double qualification. In 1884, these two Colleges joined with the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow to establish the Triple Qualification by which the licentiates of all three bodies might have the qualification necessary for practice, viz., of holding a diploma in both medicine and surgery.



JAMES BORTHWICK (1615-1675)  
*(Original in the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh)*

From an early period of its existence, the craft of surgeons and barbers had taken an interest in the study of anatomy, and had been granted, in 1505, the privilege in this respect conveyed by the Seal of Cause. In terms of the Seal of Cause, instruction in anatomy was given by the members in rotation for more than a century, but when we come to the year 1645 we find for the first time a

definite teacher of Anatomy mentioned. In this year James Borthwick, a burghess of Edinburgh, having duly passed his examination, was admitted as a Master Surgeon for the special purpose of "desceting of anatomie for the farder instruction of prentissis and servandis." Borthwick's admission was a special one: he paid 200 pounds of entry fee instead of the statutory five pounds.<sup>1</sup> Instead of the usual apprenticeship, he had served abroad as a surgeon along with Alexander Pennycuik. Pennycuik was Deacon of the Craft in 1645, and had been surgeon to General Banner (Commander of the Swedish Forces in the Thirty Years' War), and later Chirurgeon-General to the Auxiliary Scots Army in England during the Civil War, and to the Scots troops with Prince Charles in 1650.<sup>2</sup> A petition of 1663, which indicates the important military services of Alexander Pennycuik, was recommended by Commissioners after the Civil War for payment by His Majesty Charles II. Pennycuik had accompanied the Scottish Army, fighting for Charles II., and had been present at the battles of Preston and Worcester. He petitioned for a sum of £3668 6s. 8d. as balance of pay and disbursements made by him during six years' service. He also claimed £166 13s 4d. for damage done to his lands and plundering of his house in Edinburgh by the "English usurpers."<sup>3</sup>

It had been the custom till now to hold the meetings of the Craft in the house of the Deacon for the time being, and one can imagine that the anatomical instruction must have caused some awkwardness in his domestic arrangements. In 1647, however, David Kennedy and James Borthwick reported that they had taken as a place of meeting, "three rowmes of ane tenement of land in Diksone Close, for payment of fourtie poundis zeirlie."<sup>4</sup>

By 1669, it was found that even this was unsuitable, and the Craft decided to build a "convening house" on a piece of ground, in the south-east angle of the city wall, presented to them by the Town Council in 1656, each member subscribing £100 for that purpose.<sup>5</sup> On 24th October, 1694, a member of the Incorporation, Alexander Monteath, apparently on the instigation of Dr. Pitcairne, obtained from the Town Council a gift for thirteen years "of those bodies that dye in the correction-house," and of "the bodies of fundlings that dye upon the breast," together with a room for dissections. Immediately the other members of the Incorporation presented a petition (2nd November, 1694) for similar privileges. The ingenuity of the Town Council was somewhat taxed to discover other sources of anatomical material, but they succeeded by granting "the bodies of fundlings who dye betwixt the tyme that they are weaned and their being put to schools or trades; also the dead bodies of such as are stiflet in the birth, which are exposed, and have none to owne them; as also the dead bodies of such as are *felo de se*, and have none to owne them; likeways the bodies of such as are put to death

<sup>1</sup> "Records of the College of Surgeons," 20th March, 1645.

<sup>2</sup> "Works of Alexander Pennycuik," Leith, 1815, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> "Acts of the Scottish Parliament," Vol. VII, Appendix, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> "Records of the College of Surgeons," 26th September, 1591, and 15th July, 1647.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 18th May, and 26th May, 1669.

by sentence of the magistrat, and have none to owne them." The grant was to take effect in the winter time, and there was an important condition attached, that the petitioners should, by Michaelmas, 1697, build, repair and have in readiness an anatomical theatre for public dissections, the hall of 1669 being apparently not large enough, or otherwise unsuitable.<sup>1</sup>

The new Surgeons' Hall was ready on the site of the old one, and the gift confirmed by December, 1697, and from this time the teaching of anatomy in Edinburgh became systematic. The surgeons also laid out round the Hall a garden in which medicinal herbs were grown, and, at a later date, established a bath in connection with their premises.

Pitcairne and Monteath joined other members of the Incorporation in giving combined anatomical demonstrations, and we find Pitcairne writing, in 1694, to a friend in London that he proposed "to make better improvements in anatomy than have been made in Leyden these thirty years."<sup>2</sup>

There is a minute of the Incorporation for January, 1703, showing how the anatomical demonstrations were then (November, 1702) carried out by the various members appointed for the purpose: *First day*, a general discourse on anatomy, and the common teguments and muscles of the abdomen, by James Hamilton, the Deacon. *Second day*, the peritoneum, omentum, stomach, intestines, mesentery and pancreas, by John Baillie. *Third day*, the liver, spleen, kidneys, ureters, bladder and parts of generation, by Alexander Monteath. *Fourth day*, the brain and its membranes, with a discourse of the animal spirits, by David Fyfe. *Fifth day*, the muscles of the extremities, by Hugh Paterson. *Sixth day*, the skeleton in general, with the head, by Robert Clerk. *Seventh day*, the articulations and the rest of the skeleton, by James Auchinleck. *Eighth day*, the epilogue, by Dr. Pitcairne.<sup>3</sup>

Another and longer course of ten demonstrations is minuted in the records of the surgeons (18th May, 1704) as having taken place in the preceding April.

About the year 1705, there appears to have been a general desire that one man should take over the management of these lectures, and there was considerable competition for the privilege of being appointed to do this. Robert Eliot was chosen by the Incorporation as "public dissector," and later in the same year (29th August, 1705) he also received from the Town Council a salary of £15 per annum. Eliot was thus the first "Professor of Anatomy" in the Town's College, and the earliest professor of this subject in Britain. The appointment was a double one, the town providing the salary and the surgeons supplying the theatre. In 1708, at his request, Adam Drummond was conjoined with him in this post, receiving half of the salary.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Gairdner: "Historical Sketch of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh," Edinburgh, 1860, pp. 16 and 17.

<sup>2</sup> A. Bower: "History of the University of Edinburgh," 1817, Vol. II, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Creswell: "The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh," Edinburgh, 1926, pp. 123-194.

<sup>4</sup> J. Struthers: "The Edinburgh Anatomical School," Edinburgh, 1867, p. 14.

Anatomy now became a very popular study, and the supply of bodies from the sources already mentioned proving inadequate, recourse was had to body-snatching. As early as 1711, there were great complaints of graves in Edinburgh being rifled. The Incorporation of Surgeons felt themselves called upon to forward to the Magistrates a memorial which, in the first place, denounced

this as "a scandalous report, most maliciously spread about the town," and entreated the Magistrates to exert their utmost power for the "discovery of such an atrocious and wicked crime." Expulsion from the Incorporation was also threatened against any of its members or apprentices who should be found concerned in the fore-said crimes. The whole memorial, however, sounds rather exculpatory than sincere, and the practice probably continued, though with greater precaution.<sup>1</sup>



JAMES HAMILTON

Deacon of Surgeons, 1702

(Original in the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh)

years later they resigned their posts—"as the state of their health and business were such that they could not duly attend the said professorships"—in favour of Alexander Monro (*primus*). Monro (1697-1767), a young man of twenty-two, had been particularly educated by his father John Monro, an old army surgeon, to fill this post. John Monro had been a pupil of Pitcairne<sup>2</sup> at Leyden in 1692, so that he readily fell in with the schemes of the latter for the establishment of a medical school at Edinburgh, and continued to work for the foundation of a

On the death of Robert Eliot, in 1714, John M'Gill was associated with Adam Drummond as Joint Professor of Anatomy in the Town's College. Two

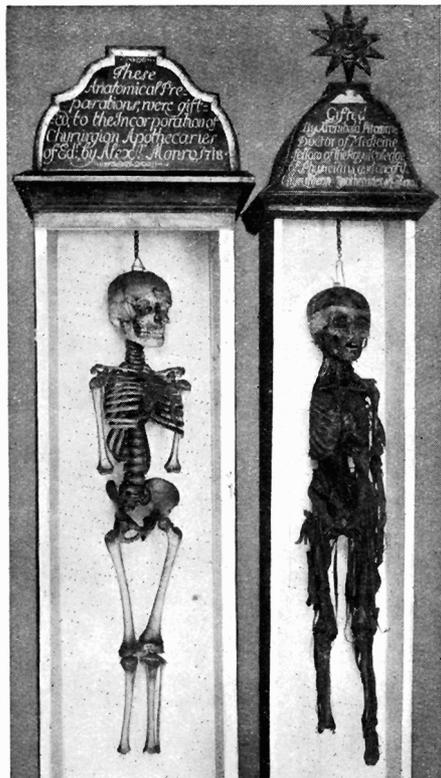
<sup>1</sup> A. Bower : "History of the University of Edinburgh," 1817, Vol. II, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> Album Studiosorum Acad., Lugduno-Batav., 1575-1875.

hospital there after Pitcairne's death. Alexander Monro had a special knowledge of anatomy, had studied under Cheselden in London, and had been admitted a Master of the Calling three months previously. He was now (29th January, 1720) elected "Professor of Anatomy in this city (Edinburgh) and college," the yearly salary of £15 being continued. On 14th March, 1722, Monro's appointment was confirmed *aut vitam aut culpam*, instead of the previous tenure of office "during the Council's pleasure."<sup>1</sup>

In 1718, Alexander Monro had presented to the surgeons "some anatomical pieces done by himself," including an articulated skeleton in a glass case, and dissections preserved in spirit; of which the skeleton and case are still extant. Monro lectured in the Hall of the Surgeons from 1719 till 1725, when, following upon a public riot directed against body-snatching, he removed his preparations for greater security within the walls of the University, as the Town's College had come by this time to be called.<sup>2</sup> Once more on this occasion (17th April, 1725) the Incorporation of Chirurgeons published a notice, which was printed and distributed through the town, deprecating and denying body-snatching. It contains the following curious passage:—

"As also, the Incorporation understanding that country people and servants in town are frightened by a villainous report that they are in danger of being attacked and seized by Chirurgeons' apprentices in order to be dissected; and although this report will appear ridiculous and incredible to any thinking person, yet the Incorporation, for finding out the foundation and rise thereof, do promise a reward of five pounds stg. for discovering such as have given just ground for this report, whether they be Chirurgeons' apprentices or others personating them in their rambles or using this cover for executing their other villainous designs."



DISSECTIONS BY ALEXANDER MONRO  
(*primus*) AND ARCHIBALD PITCAIRNE  
(Preserved in the Royal College of Surgeons at  
Edinburgh)

<sup>1</sup> Bower: Vol. II, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> Bower: Vol. II, p. 184.



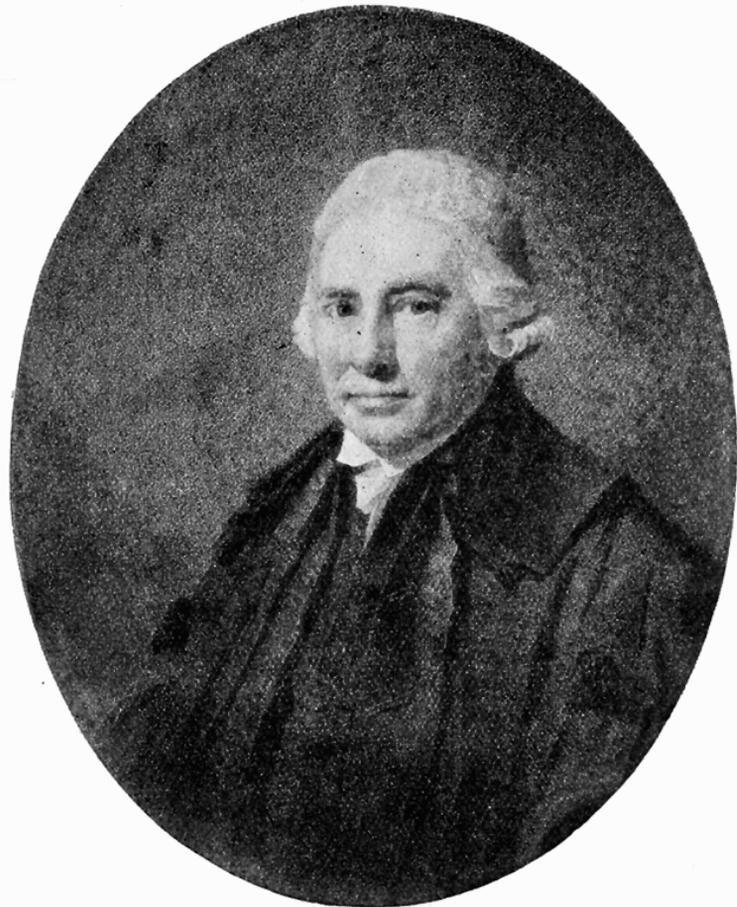
JOHN MONRO

Deacon of Surgeons 1712; died about 1737



ALEXANDER MONRO (*primus*)

(1697-1767)



ALEXANDER MONRO (*secundus*)  
(1733-1817)



ALEXANDER MONRO (*tertius*)  
(1773-1859)



SURGEONS' HALL OF 1697

The figures in front include Benjamin Bell, A. Monro (*secundus*), and Alexander Wood; the city wall and Curriehill House appear in the background. The ground flat, with the door and date, still remains: a third flat has been added

(Original in the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh)

There are, however, records which give some colour to this report; for example, in 1724, after a woman had been executed, there ensued a fight between her friends and some surgeon-apprentices for possession of the body. In the middle of the fracas the supposed corpse came to life, and lived for many years with the popular appellation of "half hangit Maggie Dickson." It was not till a century later that the report received dreadful confirmation in the revelations at the trial of Burke and Hare.<sup>1</sup>

Monro (*primus*), being appointed Professor of Anatomy, immediately introduced an extended course of instruction lasting from October to May, and embracing the following subjects: He began with a history of anatomy, which he apparently treated very fully. Next he took up osteology, dealing not only with the form and structure of the bones, but also with their uses and the diseases and accidents to which each is liable. Next he demonstrated on adult subjects—the muscles, viscera and brain, and on the bodies of children, the nerves and blood-vessels, again dealing not only with anatomy as we regard it, but with disease in the various organs. He further illustrated the anatomy of the human body by the dissection of various quadrupeds, fowls and fishes, comparing the structure and uses of their organs with those of the human body. He proceeded then to consider the diseases for which chiralurgical operations were commonly undertaken, and to demonstrate the operations on the cadaver, as well as the bandages and various instruments and appliances used in surgery. Finally, he concluded his winter course with some general lectures on physiology.<sup>2</sup>

From 1726 onwards, the anatomical lectures were conducted in the Town's College, and the progress of anatomy became part of the history of the Medical Faculty in the University for three-quarters of a century.



SEAL  
ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS  
EDINBURGH

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Creswell: "The Royal College of Surgeons: Anatomy in the Early Days," *Edin. Med. Journ.*, 1914, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> "Works of Alexander Monro," published by his son, Edinburgh, 1781.