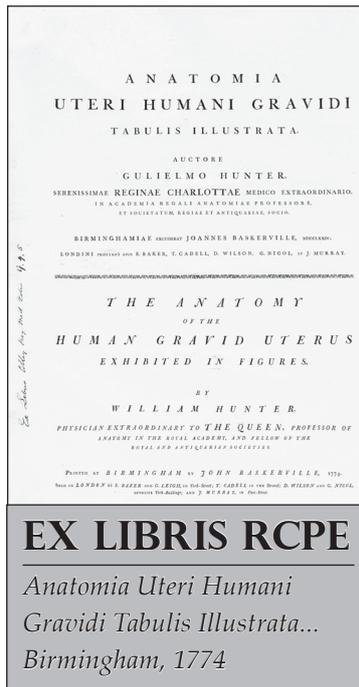


## Smellie & Hunter: Atlases of the gravid uterus. Part 2

William Hunter was born in 1718 in Lanarkshire, the seventh of ten children of a farmer of modest means. Aged 14 he was sent to Glasgow to study for the ministry where he spent five years. It was at about this time he met Dr William Cullen, who was then in medical practice in Hamilton, as we saw in Part 1 of this article.<sup>1</sup> Cullen apparently persuaded William – already doubtful about a career in the Church – that he should instead devote himself to medicine and Hunter duly joined him in Lanark in 1737.<sup>2</sup> He remained with Cullen for the next three years, living in his house and, presumably, acting as his medical apprentice. It was then decided that he should go first to Edinburgh and then to London to study medicine before returning to join Cullen in his practice. He spent 1740 in Edinburgh ‘...attending the lectures of the medical professors, and among others those of the late Dr Alexander Munro, who many years afterwards in allusion to this circumstance stiled himself his “old master.”’<sup>2</sup> The anatomy and surgery lectures of Alexander Munro primus were probably Hunter’s first exposure to the subject. In the 18th century many medical practitioners had little or no formal education in medicine, and those who attended a medical school in a Scottish university were able to pick and choose from the lecture courses offered and were not subject to a defined curriculum. It was not uncommon for a student to follow a number of courses and then to leave without presenting himself for a degree. A decade later, in 1750, Hunter was awarded a doctorate in medicine by the University of Glasgow; he could then claim to be qualified as a physician.

In the summer of 1741, William Hunter moved to London and lodged with William Smellie. But he also had a letter of introduction to yet another Scot, Dr James Douglas. Douglas is now remembered as the anatomist who described the peritoneal pouch called after him, but he was a physician and obstetrician, as well as an anatomist, who wrote and lectured on a wide range of topics.<sup>3</sup> Douglas, who was looking for a dissector, not only employed Hunter but took him into his house as tutor to one of his sons. Through Douglas’s good offices, Hunter became a surgical pupil at St George’s Hospital and the dissecting pupil of another anatomist. Douglas was impressed by Hunter’s ability but their acquaintance was sadly cut short as Douglas died in spring 1742. However, this did not end Hunter’s association with the Douglas family with whom he continued to live until 1749. He was probably engaged to Douglas’s daughter but she died in



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*Anatomia Uteri Humani  
Gravidi Tabulis Illustrata...  
Birmingham, 1774*

1744 when Hunter was studying in Paris with his pupil William George Douglas. Of the material that Hunter acquired from Douglas, Brock<sup>3</sup> says: His collection of anatomical specimens...may well have formed the basis of William Hunter’s collection. Certainly the roots of almost all William Hunter’s medical work, on articular cartilages, aneurysms, diseased bones, connective tissues, the lachrymal duct, herniae, the lymphatic system, and last but by no means least, the gravid uterus, lie in Douglas’s works and papers. It is sad that Hunter, alone of Douglas’s pupils and assistants, pays no tribute to Douglas in his published works.

It seems more than likely that the generosity of Douglas and his family provided the basis on which William Hunter built his rise to fame and fortune, a rise which, as Porter has pointed out,<sup>4</sup> would have seemed very improbable in 1741. He had worked with Smellie as a man-midwife, probably assisted Douglas in his more aristocratic midwifery practice, and may have inherited patients and hence recommendations to new patients from him. By the time he left the Douglas household in 1749 the mould for Hunter’s prosperous future was already largely complete.

By the time his *Atlas of the Gravid Uterus* was published in 1774, William Hunter was at the peak of his career. He was Professor of Anatomy in the recently established Royal Academy, he owned and taught in the most successful anatomy school in London, in Windmill Street, he had a fashionable and lucrative obstetric practice. He had attended the Queen in labour – though his memoir on this makes it clear he simply sat in an anteroom while she was delivered by a midwife. But perception was all and his appointment as Physician Extraordinary to the Queen can only have increased his reputation as London’s most discreet, proper, refined and fashionable obstetrician – a gentleman-midwife rather than a man-midwife. He was also rich enough to indulge what had become a passion for collecting books, coins and objets d’art (see Brock<sup>5</sup>). Much has been written of his influence on midwifery and anatomy and of what was perhaps his most important intellectual legacy, the early fostering of the abilities of his brother John who, in the end, exceeded him in his achievements in science. For more details of Hunter’s career and accomplishments see Brock<sup>6</sup>. William Hunter did not publish a great deal but his one major work was a remarkable tour de force – a

fact of which he, never unmindful of his own worth, was entirely conscious.

## HUNTER'S ATLAS

In the preface to his *Atlas*,<sup>7</sup> William Hunter tells us that it arose because in 1751, unusually, the body of a woman near term became available to him:

A woman died suddenly, when very near the end of her pregnancy; the body was procured before any sensible putrefaction had begun; the season of the year was favourable to dissection; the injection of the blood-vessels proved successful; a very able painter, in this way, was found; every part was examined in the most public manner, and the truth was thereby well authenticated.

In the course of some months the drawings of the first ten plates were finished and from time to time the subject was publicly exhibited with such remarks as had occurred in the examination of the several parts. Many lovers of this study approved of the author's proposal to publish the anatomy of the gravid uterus, illustrated by those ten plates: the work was immediately put into the hands of our best artists; and subscriptions were received.

The 'very able painter' was Jan van Rymsdyk. But, he goes on, further cadavers became available and the work expanded. By 1765 there were 30 folio plates but it was not until the end of 1774, 23 years after the project began, that the book was published. The slow progress of the work can be followed in Hunter's letters to Cullen:<sup>8</sup>

### 22 February 1752

In two or three weeks I shall shew one plate finished, as a specimen of the figures of the Gravid Uterus. As a piece of painting, I believe it will be found the finest anatomical figure that ever was done. So it may; it will cost me a devilish deal of money. I may be allowed to speak well of the drawing and graving, you know; no merit thence in me.

Presumably it was on the basis of this specimen that subscriptions were taken.

### 3 August 1754

Some very late occasions have increased the number of plates of the Gravid Uterus; but though that will retard the publication, the work will be much more complete for them.

### 26 February 1765

Mr Strange has brought me proofs of four plates of my Gravid Uterus, which have been engraved at Paris so well, that I believe I shall send some more there; five are now in hand in London. They will now make above thirty folio plates, and up on the whole I think

a more complete work of the kind than could have been expected.

Van Rymsdyk made the drawings for 31 of the plates eventually published; two plates, eventually numbered IV and VI, were engraved by Robert Strange himself.<sup>10,11</sup> In the Preface, Hunter implies that Strange had acted as his agent to find suitably skilled engravers for the others; in all, 18 engravers were involved, including Strange and Grignion (who had engraved for Smellie – see Part 1). Strange was a Jacobite Scot, trained in Edinburgh then Paris, who came to London in late 1750 where his first work was 'procured for him by his countryman and steady friend, Dr William Hunter...'<sup>9</sup> In Edinburgh, Strange had worked for the engraver Cooper, whose studio was, apparently, undertaking engraving for an edition of Albinus's anatomical plates which Strange says he largely carried out. Thus he was peculiarly well-placed to work on the plates for Hunter's *Atlas*. Strange had a somewhat chequered career, left London in 1760, returned in 1765 – now famous – and was eventually knighted in 1787. From the letter above, perhaps it was in 1765 that he found the other engravers for Hunter.

### 1768 (no day or month recorded)

I am now collecting in the largest sense of the word, and I have already paid above L.6000 for my habitation in Wind-mill Street, which will cost me at least two more. I shall go into it in June, and hope to print off my plates of the Gravid Uterus there, in the course of this summer. I shall have a printing press of my own. The engraving is now finished, only the letters of reference and the inscription at the bottom of the plates to be put in. They make thirty-four large plates. It will be a very considerable work for expense and show. Perhaps it will be the most considerable in that way that will ever be published, so few men can have the same opportunities or better than I have had.

The suggestion that there was to be a printing-press in Windmill Street – the address where Hunter established his famous School of Anatomy – is interesting. If he intended to 'print off' the plates of the *Atlas* he would have to have had a rolling-press to print the engraved plates in addition to a 'common press' to print the letterpress. What happened to this plan I do not know; six years later the book was printed in Birmingham by John Baskerville one of the finest the printers of the time.

### 7 December 1774

Four copies of the very first impressions of the Gravid Uterus will come to your hand about the time you will receive this, sealed up and directed by my own hand to you.

In the work as it finally appeared there is no mention of publication by subscription other than the remark in the

Preface. If there were still subscribers they must have been extraordinarily patient; perhaps this was an instance of subscription-by-order rather than by payment-in-advance. Hunter died in 1783 and there was no further edition of the *Atlas* in his lifetime, though around 1815 at least two new editions were issued, apparently from the original engraved plates. Then, in 1851, the rather short-lived Sydenham Society (1843–1857) acquired the plates and employed Day & Sons to produce an edition illustrated with lithographic facsimiles of the engravings for their members.<sup>10</sup> Though the lithographic images reproduce the details of the original large engravings faithfully, (they are, of course, the same size as the originals) the printed sheet is often folded across the long side so that the image appears across two leaves of the book which detracts considerably from its visual impact.

As with Smellie's *Tables*, space does not allow reproduction of many of the images from the *Atlas* here. The inside cover of this issue shows three of the images and a selection of them will be made available on the *Journal* website.

Choulant, in his account of anatomical illustration,<sup>11</sup> says:

These thirty-four copperplates represent the gravid uterus and its contents in life-size, anatomically exact and artistically perfect. The text is written in Latin and English in two opposite columns and contains only the anatomic explanations of the plates.

Hunter would, no doubt, have approved of this simple description of the character and quality of the illustrations. In his preface he says:

The art of engraving supplies us, upon many occasions, with, what has been the great desideratum of the lovers of science, a universal language. Nay, it conveys clearer ideas of most natural objects, than words can express; makes stronger impressions upon the mind; and to every person conversant with the subject, gives an immediate comprehension of what it represents. Anatomical figures are made in two very different ways; one is the simple portrait, in which the object is represented exactly as it was seen; the other is a representation of the object under such circumstances as were not actually seen, but conceived in the imagination.

Hunter was emphatic that his plates were made to represent the specimens exactly as they were seen, making it clear that he oversaw the work of the artist very carefully. Modern critics have recorded less simple analyses. Kemp<sup>12</sup> analyses the representation of anatomical 'reality' in the works of Leonardo, Vesalius, William Hunter and others and discusses the deceptively simple realism of Hunter's plates. He argues that, in spite of his apparently simple claims in the Preface to his *Atlas*, Hunter was well aware of the complexity of the process of appreciation by the observer (or reader) of a 'realistic'

representation of a particular instance of an object such as a drawing or engraving of an individual anatomical specimen. In distinct contrast, Jordanova<sup>13</sup> refers to it as an 'obstetrical atlas' which, unlike Smellie's *Tables*, it certainly is not, and this seems to have set the pattern for a number of more recent commentaries purporting to demonstrate that Hunter's *Atlas* is a misogynistic representation of the female body. Certainly the *Atlas* is striking and one is led to wonder what Hunter's intentions were in creating such a sumptuous and expensive book. While its anatomical accuracy is undoubted, there is little attempt to relate its contents to the practice of obstetrics and it does leave a nagging feeling that it was intended as much as an artistic tour de force and as a monument to its author as a contribution to science. On all of this readers will no doubt form their own views.

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