

John Thomson (1765–1846)

This man from a very humble background, the son of an artisan weaver, was destined to be an apothecary, surgeon, physician, professor of military surgery, professor of pathology and President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh from 1834 to 1836.

From the age of eight, John Thomson worked as a helper/message boy for various tradesmen for three years, after which he was articled as an apprentice to his father, Joseph, for seven years. However, it became apparent that Thomson's heart was not in weaving but set on a career in medicine. It is said that his father gave consent rather grudgingly to him being attached to a Dr White of Paisley from 1785 to 1788.

When Thomson was 23, he was introduced to William Hamilton, Professor of Anatomy at Glasgow University, by an amateur botanist in Paisley. A year of study in Glasgow followed, although Thomson did not matriculate. He then moved to Edinburgh in 1789. It was there, much influenced by *Monro secundus*, that Thomson completed his studies but did not graduate.

His first official appointment was as an apothecary to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, but probably the most influential time was the nine months he spent in 1792–3 studying anatomy in John Hunter's private surgical school in London.

In 1793, supported by a Mr Hogg, manager of the Paisley Bank, Thomson was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and, seven years later, appointed as one of the six full-time surgeons on the staff of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. He was so interested in chemistry that he gave lecture demonstrations in his own house, the audience for some reason being principally made



John Thomson. Engraving by T Hodgetts, published in 1820 by Colnaghi & Co. and Francis Cameron.

up of young lawyers. This brought him to the attention of the Earl of Lauderdale, who was later to play a part in his amazing career.

In 1803 Thomson went to London and was accepted as an army 'hospital mate' (a post for those without formal medical training or qualifications) in the hope that should a military hospital be established in Edinburgh, he might be put in charge. There were real fears at the time that Napoleon might invade Britain. However, Thomson was soon appointed Professor of Surgery of the RCSEd, an appointment that met with much criticism.

In 1806 King George III installed him as first Professor of Military Surgery on a salary of £100 per annum. The new Chair was a bold move in Edinburgh, where the Monros had monopolised the teaching of anatomy and surgery for a long time. It is said that Lauderdale, a man of considerable political influence, may have had a part in the appointment.

In 1808 Thomson gained his only medical qualification. King's College, Aberdeen, gave him an MD degree. He is said to have suffered extreme nervousness before, during and after operating, but it has to be recalled that he worked before the days of

general anaesthesia. This may have prompted his decision to resign from the Royal Infirmary in 1810, as well as his disappointment when the managers did not accede to his request for a formal inquiry after criticism of his work by the surgeon and anatomist John Bell. What surgery he did between 1810 and 1814 is unknown, but during 1814 he visited hospitals in seven European countries and after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 he studied the treatment of the wounded. The Duke of York appointed him Surgeon to the Forces.

Edinburgh became popular as an excellent centre for studying military surgery. In 1816, Thomson's class numbered 280; 18 army and 62 naval surgeons were excused fees. Thomson was at the peak of his career as an academic surgeon but began to think of becoming a physician. He founded a dispensary in the New Town, studied smallpox and other infections and lectured on diseases of the eye – several years before the establishment of the first ophthalmic department in Edinburgh.

Thomson's application for the Chair of Physic in 1821 failed. Bitterly disappointed, he resigned his Chair of Military Surgery in 1822 and spent the next 10 years lecturing on pathology and the practice of physic in collaboration with his son, William. This led him to yet another career change.

In 1831, Thomson drew the attention of the Home Secretary to the need for a Chair of Pathology in Edinburgh and, having procured its establishment, he himself inaugurated it. His lectures were said to be erudite and delivered with vigour. At his death in 1846 he was spoken of as one of the most learned physicians in Scotland in his time.

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