

John Brown (1810–1882)

This year, 2010, is the bicentenary of the birth of John Brown, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, a physician of note with decided views on medicine. He made his mark as a writer of essays and short stories, including his masterpiece 'Rab and his Friends', with its memorable description of surgery in the mid-19th century.

Brown came from a line of Presbyterian clergymen. His great-grandfather, the Rev. John Brown of Haddington, was one of the most learned biblical scholars in Scotland and author of the widely used *The Self-Interpreting Bible*. Brown's father, another Rev. John Brown, was a minister in the Burgher branch of the Secession Church, during a period of theological strife in the Presbyterian Church. His temperament and learning drew him into stormy arguments, leading to his trial on a charge of heresy by the Church Synod. He was acquitted after a bitter fight.

John Brown was born in Biggar in Lanarkshire on 22 September 1810. After his mother's death in 1816 he slept in his father's study while his father studied. When he was 12 years old, father and son moved to Edinburgh, where the Rev. Brown's teaching was good preparation for the classical courses Brown was to take at school and university, and provided him with a lifetime's appreciation of the Greek and Roman classics.

Brown was educated at Edinburgh's Royal High School, at Edinburgh University and subsequently at the Medical School, receiving his degree of MD in 1833. He served his apprenticeship with the surgeon James Syme, whom he referred to as 'our greatest clinical teacher and wisest surgeon'. Brown's apprentice fee bought Syme's first carriage, in which Brown was the first person to ride. He worked as Syme's



Portrait of John Brown (artist unknown), in the RCPE collection.

dispenser, dresser, clerk and assistant, and thereafter enjoyed a life-long friendship with Syme as well as contact with the elite of the medical profession in Edinburgh.

Following this apprenticeship, Brown became an assistant to a surgeon at Chatham in Kent, at a time when tuberculosis, cholera, typhus, meningitis, measles, rubella and mumps were both common and deadly: doctors died of blood poisoning incurred during their work. Brown managed a severe outbreak of cholera in Chatham and in the locally moored and large, overcrowded prison hulks. Many years later Charles Dickens recollected the courage of the young Dr Brown, at a meal where Brown himself was also a guest.

Brown returned to Edinburgh, and soon built up a large practice, gaining a reputation as a highly sought-after diagnostician. In 1847 he became a Fellow of the RCPE and subsequently its Honorary Librarian, carefully avoiding the heated struggles in the College surrounding the Medical Reform Act of 1858. In 1859 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal

Society of Edinburgh, and in 1861 was appointed Rector's Assessor during Gladstone's rectorship of Edinburgh University.

Brown married Catherine Scott McKay in 1840, with whom he had three children, although only one, a son, survived to adulthood. He was a large, bluff, sociable man, with a kindly and religious temperament. His home was the focus of the best of the social and intellectual life in mid-19th-century Edinburgh. Catherine Brown died in 1864 after they had been married 24 years. For the last 16 years of his life, Brown's sister kept house for him at 27 Rutland Street.

Brown was 48 years old when he published 'Rab and his Friends', which achieved immediate popularity. The characters in the story include Rab, a bull-mastiff dog; his owner James Noble, a Howgate carter; Noble's wife, Ailie; a surgeon, Syme; and the narrator, a medical student called John. In writing this story, Brown drew heavily on his own experience working with Syme at Minto House Hospital in Chambers Street.

The story begins with James Noble taking his wife, in his cart, to the surgeon's consulting rooms. The medical student is first to examine her and discovers a lump, 'hard as stone', in her right breast. The surgeon then examines Ailie and determines that the breast must be removed. The operation is set for the next day, and the scene is described thus:

'The operating theatre is crowded; much talk and fun, and all the cordiality and stir of youth. The surgeon with his staff of assistants is there. In comes Ailie: one look at her quiets and abates the eager students. That beautiful old woman is too much for them; they sit down, and are dumb, and gaze at her...

The operation was at once begun; it was necessarily slow; and chloroform – one of God's best gifts to his suffering children – was then unknown. The surgeon did his work. The pale face showed its pain, but was still and silent...

'It is over: she is dressed, steps gently and decently down from the table, looks for James; then, turning to the surgeon and the students, she courtesies, and in a low, clear voice begs their pardon if she has behaved ill. The students – all of us – wept like children.'

Ailie appears to recover at first, but four days after the surgery goes into decline with 'a sudden long shivering, "a groosin" as she called it'. She dies and, showing the same heart-wrenching stoicism as his wife, James wraps her body in blankets and carries her away in his cart 'up Nicolson Street'. The narrator imagines his journey south-west from Edinburgh to the 'bleak Lammermuirs', where he lays Ailie on her own bed once more.

Brown was at his best when writing about the effects of illness, such as his poignant, biographical account of Marjorie Fleming, a precociously gifted child who died of meningitis when not quite eight years old. 'Marjorie Fleming' is chiefly a running commentary on her diary and letters.

Some of Brown's collected writings were published in 1858 as *Horae Subsecivae*, which featured a range of essays on medical topics, demonstrating Brown's firm and decidedly conservative views. He was opposed to the practice of obstetrics by men, believing that labour should be attended solely by women who were specially trained and paid for the purpose. He was also opposed to specialisation, arguing that this would destroy the valuable relationship between the family physician and his patients. Women doctors and

homeopathy were anathema to him. Another favourite topic was the dangers of some of the advances in scientific medicine which he had witnessed during his own career. Brown believed that many of the then-fashionable medical instruments were damaging to the education of the physician rather than of service. He made a strong distinction between the practice and the study of medicine. While conceding the merits of the external methods of auscultation he was unimpressed by the introduction of such procedures as microscopy and chemical analysis. Brown was of the opinion that, generally speaking, doctors ought to place less reliance on cases collected by very young men, and should be chary of giving too much significance to their findings.

He strongly advocated the apprenticeship system in the study of medicine, which avoided much of the evils of class teaching and learning from books. Another bugbear was the holding of examinations during medical studies, which he believed gave no true insight into the pupil's skill in medical science and were merely tests of memory. Brown supported the idea that ornithology should be taught as a branch of medical education, believing this would cultivate the habit of observation.

Despite these views, Brown summed up the prime qualifications of a physician in the following words: 'Let me tell you, my young doctor friends, that a cheerful face and step, and neckcloth and kindly joke, a power of exciting, a setting a-going, a good laugh, are stock in our trade not to be despised. The hearty heart does good like a medicine.'

Brown's interest in literature and art meant that if a rare engraving or ancient book was unearthed in Edinburgh, he was asked for his opinion. He was in correspondence with Gladstone and Oliver Wendell

Holmes and with notable men of letters of the period, including Ruskin and Thackeray, and acted as a guide and friend to would-be authors. Some of these letters were later published by his son. In recognition of his literary attainments Brown received an LLD from the University of Edinburgh and a pension from the Civil List of £100 per year, rare accolades for a physician.

His latter years were marred by depression, but with the support of his sister he briefly recovered his mood in 1881 and published another volume of writings. He died from pleurisy on 11 May 1882, and was buried with his father and family in the New Calton Cemetery, Edinburgh.

While Brown's writings and letters represent many views reactionary even by the standards of the day and long out of step with today's medicine, in one or two of his works – 'Rab and his Friends' most of all – he achieved greatness. The bicentenary of his birth gives us an opportunity not only to appreciate his descriptive powers but also to reflect on the extent of change affecting medical practitioners and practice since his time.

Dr Martin Eastwood FRCPEdin

Further reading

- Brown J. *Horae subsecivae*. London: Adam and Charles Black; 1882. Available from: <http://www.archive.org/details/horaesubsecivae02browgoog> ('Rab and His Friends' is available online via Google Books)
- Brown J. *Letters of Dr John Brown*. London: Adam and Charles Black; 1907. Available from: <http://www.archive.org/details/lettersdrjohnbr02mclagoog>
- Packard FR. The author of 'Rab and his Friends', Dr John Brown of Edinburgh. *Med Library Hist J* 1903; 1:77–89.
- Peddie A. *Recollections of Dr John Brown*. London: Percival and Co; 1893.