

# John Hunter

1728 - 1793



John Hunter by John Jackson;  
after Sir Joshua Reynolds

Of all the characters whose stories can be found within this collection, John Hunter is perhaps the most famous and interesting of all. His writings give us a fascinating insight into the world of Georgian surgery. However, the man often heralded as the “Father of Modern Surgery” followed a career path a world away from the highly structured and regulated training of modern day surgeons.

John Hunter was born on 14 February 1728 in East Kilbride, Scotland. As a child, Hunter hated school and although he was clearly intelligent, he made little progress and abandoned formal education aged 13.

In 1748, having grown tired of life on the family farm, Hunter travelled to London to begin work as an assistant to his brother, William, who was making his way as an anatomist and obstetrician.

John proved himself to be a skilled anatomist and over the next few years he would go on to dissect thousands of bodies delivered from the city’s gallows and graves.

Having become a master of anatomy, Hunter was keen to practise on the living and in 1750 he was able secure a surgical apprenticeship, with some help from his now increasingly influential older brother. However, it wasn’t until the summer of 1768, after 15 years of independently practising surgery, both at home and at war, that Hunter took the examination to obtain the diploma of the Company of Surgeons.

Despite his unconventional training, or perhaps because of it, Hunter was able to progress the science of surgery like nobody else before him. Unlike his peers who never thought to veer from the dogma of classical teaching, Hunter preferred to establish the facts for himself through observation and experimentation.

Evidence of this experimental approach can be found throughout Hunter’s works. In “*A treatise on the blood, inflammation and gunshot wounds*” we can see an early example of a controlled clinical trial in which he compares the treated wounds of British soldiers to the untreated wounds of captive enemy soldiers.

Similarly, in “*A Treatise on the Venereal Disease*” we can see an early example of a controlled placebo trial, where Hunter demonstrates that conventional treatment of gonorrhoea was no more effective than pills made of bread. Indeed, some even think Hunter went as far as to inoculate himself with the gonorrhoea bacterium in order to study its effects.

In 1793, John Hunter suffered a heart attack and died following argument with colleagues at St George’s Hospital over the admission of students. Sir James Paget said at the time “Hunter made us gentlemen. When he entered surgery it was a trade; when he died it had become a science.”

## References:

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