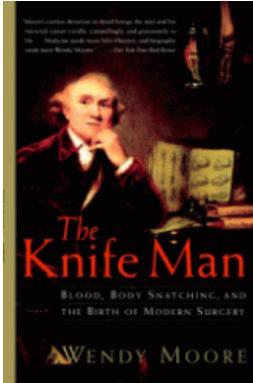


Ex Libris — The Knife Man

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We have learned to believe that modern medical knowledge and practice can perform wonders of healing without fanfare. We take such things as vaccinations, antibiotics, anesthesia, and antiseptics for granted. Beyond all this we assume a background of medical technologies and an array of medical expertise available upon demand. We seldom pause to remember how recently all this has come to pass.

The truth is that medical progress is a very recent development. Indeed, the availability of dependable medical treatments came well into the twentieth century.

This point is driven home by author Wendy Moore in her book, *The Knife Man: Blood, Body Snatching, and the Birth of Modern Surgery*. The book is a history of the rise of modern medicine through tracing the life of Dr. John Hunter, a London physician who largely pioneered the modern practice of surgery.

Hunter was born into poverty in Scotland and followed his brother to London and into the practice of medicine. As Wendy Moore explains, medical knowledge in the late 18th century was not much advanced upon that of the ancients. Knowledge we take for granted, such as germ theory and the understanding of how blood circulates within the body were unknown.

Hunter started in the field of medicine as a body snatcher. He and his accomplices would steal bodies for autopsies while it was still illegal to violate the human body by opening it to view. Moore's narrative traces how Hunter soon developed his own expertise, possessed by an uncanny skill in seeing, investigating, and sensing how the body operates.

All this took place even as America was a young nation and many of the experiments in surgery and medical treatments took place near battlefields. War has been an engine for the development of medical advances.

Of course, these advances came even as surgeons like John Hunter did not even wash hands before or between operations.

Hunter, by the way, became the model for Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *The Strange Tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In one person, he was both esteemed healer and grotesque body snatcher.

The Knife Man tells a tale few modern Americans know, and it should remind us all of how thankful we should be for the gift of modern medicine. Not very long ago, people were more likely to be hurt rather than helped by the treatments they received.

An excerpt:

Although Gregorian families no longer needed to fear the medieval scourges of plague and leprosy, there were plenty of other menaces to worry about. A child born into eighteenth-century Britain required a tough constitution and no small amount of luck to evade or defeat the innumerable infectious diseases – diphtheria, measles, mumps, scarlet fever, influenza and consumption (tuberculosis), to name but a few – lying in wait in the first years of life. Where disease failed to snare the youngster, malnutrition, neglect and misguided child rearing often succeeded. Babies were forcefed with sugared and alcohol-laced pap from germ-ridden cups, soothed with weak beer or straight gin, and swaddled in blankets

that were rarely changed. And through adolescence, there were many more epidemics to battle, from the typhus fever that reigned in jails, hospitals, and ships to the dreaded smallpox virus, which accounted for 10 percent of all deaths, killing a fifth of those it struck and hideously disfiguring many more.

Surviving this obstacle course conferred lifelong immunity against a raft of diseases, but negotiating adulthood was still precarious. Life hung on a slender string. With no modern antibiotics to fight bacteria, a healthy adult could fall suddenly sick with a contagious fever and be dead within days. For women, childbirth was an additionally hazardous experience. Many died during agonizing deliveries or succumbed to sepsis days later, especially in the “lying-in” hospitals that sprang up from the middle of the century and provided new breeding grounds for bacteria. Even for those adults who reached middle age, there were still innumerable ailments and complaints – from gout to bladder stones, venereal disease to toothache-that could cause pain and discomfort, with little hope of cure or relief.

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