

Percivall Pott 1714-1788

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Who could say who was the greatest surgeon in Britain after Wiseman? The extraordinary fact is that the 18th Century produced a great flowering of surgical talent. The medical profession in general was looked down upon by the people who employed it and, of course, scientists, particularly in France, derided such physicians, who adhered to the Galenic Humoral Theory, and who had been laughed off the stage even in the plays of Molière. Like drowning men, some still clung to their theories, because there was, at that time, precious little on which to cling. To practice medicine, an intelligent man must have some background of ideas on which to base his treatment, so they adhered to Galen's Theory as the 19th Century physicians did to blood-letting.

If something had to be done, for example, a boil lanced, or a tumour removed, etc., the surgeon was the necessary attendant and these men had improved their technique and also their social standing. Dr Samuel Johnson, writing to his wife, advised that her apothecary should call into consultation no less a person than Ranby, 'who is said to be the best for a guinea, which you need not fear to part with on so pressing an occasion'. Ranby was surgeon to the Court and one of the best in his day. The surgeons were becoming respectable and in the earlier 18th Century the great Cheselden dominated the first part of the 18th Century as Pott, and later John Hunter, did the second part.

Percivall Pott stemmed from a family that resided in Cheshire, England, in Tudor times. He was born in a house which was on the site of the Bank of England, his father being a Scrivener, which in those days was the equivalent nowadays of running a large duplicating or computer agency. He was a well-to-do man but, unfortunately, died at an early age, leaving his widow to bring up the children in straitened circumstances. She was helped by a family relative, Bishop Joseph Wilcocks, who was a wealthy man, because he was also Dean of Westminster. It is to him that we owe the restoration of the West Front of the Abbey. It is said that he even declined preferment to York. Young Pott was apprenticed to Edward Nourse, then assistant surgeon to St Bartholomew's Hospital, for the princely sum of 200 guineas, a large sum at that time. Such was the system in England, and it did ensure that relatively well-educated young men were admitted as pupils. Pott could not have had a better master and he was duly made a member of the Barber Surgeons' Company in 1736, gaining a licence to practice, which he did with considerable and increasing success. When Nourse was made surgeon to the hospital Pott became assistant in 1745, an important year for him because he was one of those who was instrumental in separating the Barbers from the Surgeons, who then became a separate City Company. In 1749 he had become one of the foremost surgeons of his time and

was duly elected full surgeon at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Unfortunately, in 1756 ill-luck struck an untimely blow, but this ultimately turned out to his advantage—he was thrown off his horse in the Old Kent Road, Southwark, and sustained a severe compound fracture of the ankle. He refused to be moved, lying in the January chill until two Sedan chairmen could be summoned, a door purchased and the Sedan poles nailed to it; he was then carried carefully for two miles, on his improvised stretcher. When seen by his surgical advisers he was being prepared for amputation, but happily rescued from this by the arrival of his old teacher, Edward Nourse, who advised against it.

It was during his convalescence, when he had time to think, that he started to write, just as Richard Wiseman did, 'making a virtue of necessity', when stricken with pulmonary tuberculosis. The fracture, of course, became Pott's Fracture. But his first effort was the well-received, 'Treatise on Rupture' (1756) and published again in 1757. Thereafter, there was a spate of literary efforts—'Observations on that Disorder of the Eye, commonly called fistula lachrymalis' (1758); 'Observations on the nature of wounds and contusions of the head ...' (1760); he wrote on hydrocele, (1771), hernia of the bladder, (1764), fistula-in-ano, (1765) and once again on skull injuries (1768). In 1768 his work on fractures and dislocations made a considerable impact in his day, although his treatments were superseded in the 19th Century. He produced an infinite variety of work and wrote also on Cataract in 1775 (Fig. 1).

His last work was the well-known 'Remarks on that kind of Palsy of the lower limbs, which is frequently found to accompany a curvature of the spine ...', published in 1779 and again in 1782. Pott's books were translated into a number of languages and a number of editions were necessary. It is only right that Pott's Disease of the spine should be so called. It has been suggested that Jean-Pierre David wrote on the same subject in 1778, but his work was disregarded and forgotten until 1858, a fate not uncommon.

Pott became particularly interested in the disease, partly because he attended a person who was related to him and who suffered from it. Pott's description of the condition was meticulous. He describes the muscles of the patient, when trying to walk, or even stand and also the usual type of curve. Pott wrote that the condition was often misdiagnosed and neglected. He always had a respect for ancient customs and pointed out that Hippocrates noted the paralysis with 'an abscess in the back or loins'. Pott showed that often more than one vertebra was affected, even three or four, causing the caries and the cartilaginous destruction.

In regard to differential diagnosis he stated that the paralysis did not occur in ordinary spinal malformations, by which I think he was referring to conditions, such as, congenital hemivertebra; nor did it occur in 'those deviations from right shape, which growing girls are so liable to, however great the deformity may be ...' I believe that this was one of the earliest references to Postural Scoliosis. (Fig. 2).

Pott had great hopes for his treatment, hopes which were unwarranted, because he merely drained the abscess by incision, by using a seton or by caustics, which he favoured; but his treatment would be liable to introduce secondary infection. Some of his patients recovered by natural resistance. The drainage of the abscess was Pott's main concern and it sometimes removed the pressure on the spinal

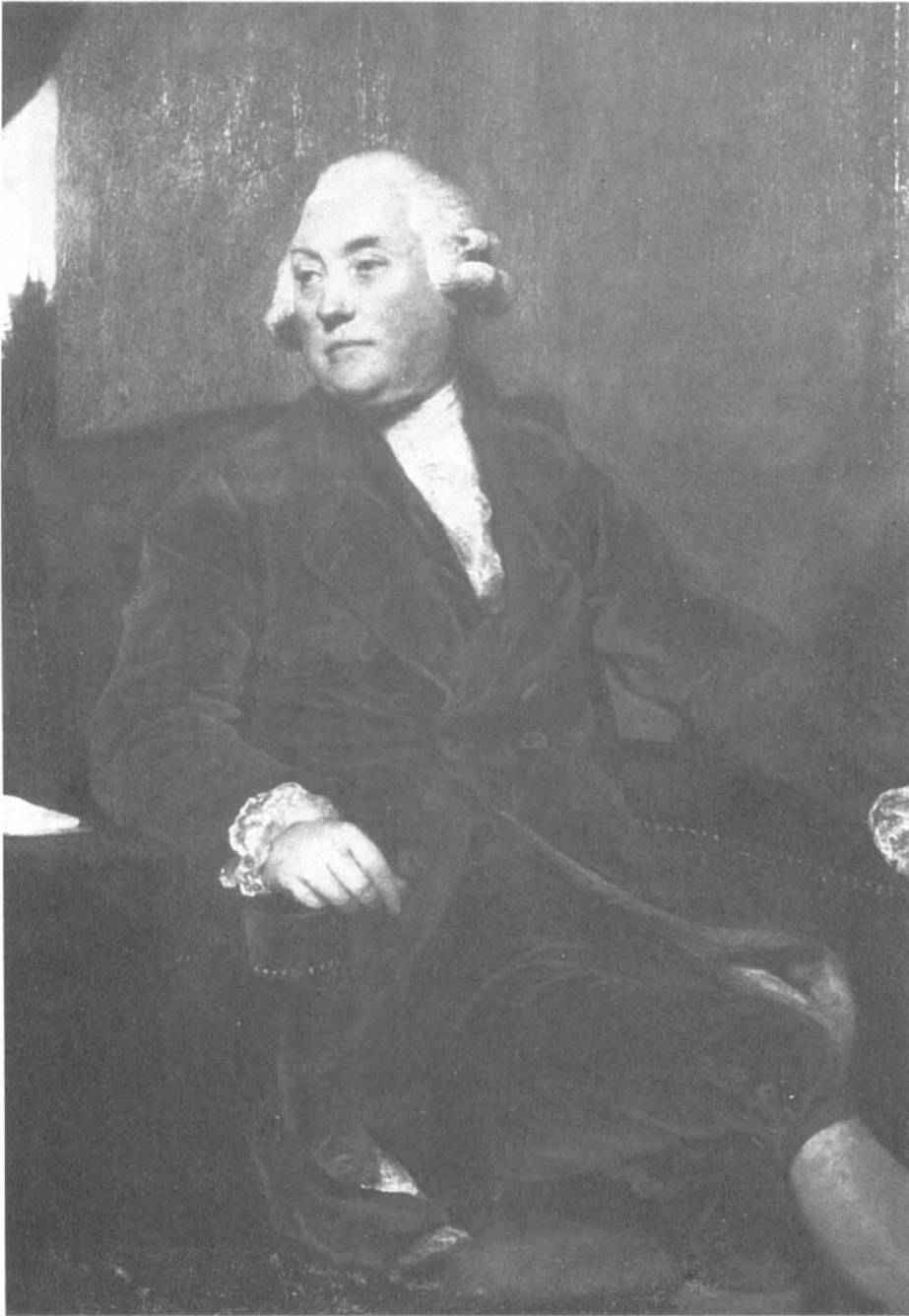


Figure 1. Percivall Pott. Portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, presented by James, Marquis of Salisbury 1790. Reproduced by permission of the Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew.

including a stone' is told most lucidly and he obviously operated with meticulous care and patience. He always insisted on using the simplest of instruments, and like Ambrose Paré, seldom used the cautery; at the same time, he was most versatile and would also deal with cataract, head wounds, fistulae—always using common-sense, questioning his decisions and ever having the interests of the patient at heart. Although Pott could not in his day have a real knowledge of pathology, he did show an interest in it, which is not surprising when he used to carry out anatomical dissections when he was apprentice to Edward Nourse. He was in fact called upon to carry out a post mortem examination in a medical-legal case, reports of such at this period are rare (Forbes, 1975).

A man may be judged by what he bequeaths to mankind. We have a short but interesting memoir of Pott by his pupil and son-in-law, Sir James Earle, his successor at St Bartholomew's Hospital, who was again succeeded by his son, Henry Earle. Pott had many friends and pupils, including the great John Hunter. In Pott's early days surgeons were still merely craftsmen, having no knowledge of pathology; but in Hunter's time a few surgeons were becoming scientists. In the 18th Century they were looked down upon by scientists who had the technological tools which medical men lacked, and without which no advance could be made. The new age in Surgery was slowly becoming acknowledged, for example, Percivall Pott, a mere surgeon, was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1764, an almost unheard of honour (Fig. 3).

The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh also honoured him with a Fellowship in 1786. There is no record of his attendance and failure to attend could be excused because he was then 72 years of age. The two other Honorary Fellows were distinguished laymen—the Duke of Buccleuch and the Rt. Honorable Henry Dundas, both of whom would be most useful to the College. The latter was important in the Government and, as a friend of Pitt, was useful in manipulating support in the House of Commons. Pott was elected as 'the first gentleman of the Faculty, they had thought proper to bestow the honour on' (Fig. 4).

Percivall Pott was universally liked, respected and noted for his kindness; frequently there were living in his house a few impecunious young colleagues, as Johnson also collected hangers-on. He had served St Bartholomew's Hospital

The meeting unanimously elected His Grace the Duke of Buccleugh, The Right Honorable Henry Dundas, Treasurer of the Navy and Percivall Pott Esq. Surgeon in London Honorary fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons, and they authorised Mr Hay & Mr Wood, to wait upon his Grace and Mr Dundas, to inform them thereof and to write Mr Pott into the minutes the same to him.

Figure 4. Citation from the Royal College of Surgeons (Edin.) Minutes concerning Fellowship of the College. Reproduced by permission of The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

'man and boy, for about fifty years', which would be quite a record in those days. His private practice was considerable and greatly increased after the death of Sir Caesar Hawkins. He numbered the famous amongst his patients, including Dr Samuel Johnson, who consulted him on account of 'sarcocele'.

Sir D'Arcy Power sums up Pott's great influence in these words, (and who could improve on them?) '... in his practice, he relied entirely on his own observations, and was guided by his common-sense. In this way, he broke through the trammels of authority and may be regarded as the earliest surgeon of the modern type'. It is said that Pott himself used to joke about being the last Barber-Surgeon apprentice to have been appointed to St Bartholomew's Hospital! He surely knew the truth himself that he was indeed the first of a new school.

Sometimes, when walking through Hanover Square, I remember that it was near here that Pott died, in 1788. Early in December, in severe weather, Pott went to attend a patient twenty miles from London, he returned ill and in a few days had developed pneumonia; when dying, he said, 'My lamp is almost extinguished, I hope it has burned for the benefit of others'.

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The most interesting account of Pott is written as a Memoir prefacing Sir James Earle's edition of 'The Chirurgical Works of Percivall Pott, F.R.S.', published in three volumes in 1808.

I must also mention the account of Pott, given by Sir D'Arcy Power, published in the Dictionary of National Biography.

Miss Jessie Dobson's account of Pott was also of help.

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