

New Start

He was fat, bald, and green. He was also dead. He was lying on a slab in the Dissecting room in Edinburgh University medical School along with nineteen of his fellow cadavers. It was October 1965 and after a year of Physics Chemistry and Biology I was about to become a “proper” medical student. Until now, our classes were either at King’s Buildings, virtually in the suburbs, or in the High School Yards, in the town centre, but equally off the beaten track. Now we were proper medical students, in the New Quad, next door to the Royal infirmary, home of J.Y.Simpson, Robert Liston, John Hunter, and other giants of Medicine. We hung out in the Union (or rather the Men’s Union as it was in those unenlightened days) and The Barbecue café. Our medical career proper had begun. It was in fact another two years before we would see a real live patient.

On our first day, rather anxiously we trooped up the stairs to the Dissecting Room, known to the cognoscenti as the D.R., where the pungency of formaldehyde and the sweet smell of putrefaction assailed our nostrils as we entered. We were led to a table where six of us were to dissect this body over the coming months, by which most of the cadavers were becoming decidedly ripe, with some of them sprouting toadstools.

The room was starkly furnished, and low ceilinged, each cadaver resting on a ceramic plinth, covered in a loose cloth. Around the walls were wooden trunks labelled “Upper Limb”, “Head” or “Pelvis”. I don’t remember who first exposed the body but it was a fairly traumatic event, although of course we pretended otherwise. The Anatomy Professor George Romanes gave us an introductory talk, giving us dire warning to respect the dignity of the deceased. He didn’t spell it out but we knew that we were to behave in a sober manner, and not to stick cigarette butts in their mouths, or commit any of the other abuses we had heard about. We were also reminded to show respect for all the bits and pieces we removed from the body, as these were collected, and kept for a burial service at the end of the year (yes, really).

We wore brown lab coats, which made me feel like Mr Barnes who ran the ironmonger’s shop in Raeburn Place, and I had a small dissecting kit, consisting as far as I can remember of a scalpel, a pair of forceps, and a dissecting probe. No one wore gloves—it was regarded as being rather pretentious to do so, so for many months our hands must have stunk, though it didn’t seem to put us off going out to the landing for a quick cigarette at regular intervals. The smell in the room was all pervasive. Shortly after starting anatomy I went to visit a friend who offered me a can of beer. I took one gulp and spat it out, saying that it tasted putrid. He assured me it was not, and I soon found out that anything fermented, such as beer or bread tasted utterly disgusting. Over the next few weeks this gradually wore off, but if I pass a farmyard with a fermenting heap of muck, I’m immediately transported to those days of 56 years ago. A rather less pleasant memory than Proust’s madeleines.

We were helped in our dissections by various members of staff who with hindsight appear to have been chosen for their eccentricity. There was Dr Chinnan, who knew the classic textbook of dissection, Jamieson’s Anatomy, off by heart, and if you interrupted one of his explanations, he had to start at the top of the relevant page again. Dr Newman was a member of the Plymouth Brethren, an ascetic religious sect, who walked every day from Colinton to the Medical School, a walk of some 10 miles. He was distinguished by his wearing short sleeved lab coat, something I’ve never seen elsewhere. Dr Ferguson was a rather severe elderly lady who had one hand missing, but made up for this with a variety of attachments, the most gruesome of which was a metal hook which she used for dissection.

We rather assumed that our lecturers and demonstrators had a hang up about dealing with real people, or that in the past they had committed some kind of medical misdemeanour.

Around the table were Norman Prentice, who with his shock of jet black hair and horn rim glasses looked so Japanese that later, at his graduation ceremony, his parents applauded a real Japanese student by mistake. He became a respiratory physician and is now an owner of three racehorses. Phil Greenaway became a G.P. in Canada. I had known him from first year, where I met him on the first day. He showed me a blank cheque his father, a private dentist in Glasgow had given him in case of emergencies, and a gold toothpick. Bill Stone became a paediatric neurologist, and I later in life found out (don't ask me how) that he insisted on having a shower after sex. On reflection it may have been his ex-wife who told me. Alan Rivers became a neurosurgeon at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, where his broad Cockney accent and enthusiasm for playing Mozart on the Union piano with a pint of Younger's tartan special on top and an Embassy tipped dangling from his lip must have distinguished him from his fellows. Graham Turnbull was from Manchester, son of a G.P. who had once been shot by the husband of one of his patients. Graham was the most intelligent of us, something of a wide boy, and just after graduation he married a go-go dancer, went to America, developed a psychotic illness, returned to Manchester, blew his brains out with a gun, survived for a year and died, in a vegetative state, a year later.

With Jamieson's manual of dissection ("Wee Jimmy") in one hand and a scalpel in the other, perhaps a little shaky hand, I made an incision diagonally across the right breast, peeled back the skin and exposed the Pectoralis Major muscle. It was a new start.

Names have been changed!

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