

Book Reviews

C Helen Brock (ed.), *The correspondence of Dr William Hunter, 1740–1783*, 2 vols, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2007, vol. 1: pp. xli, 371; vol. 2: pp. 485, £225.00, \$395.00 (hardback 978-1-85196-904-30).

The assumption that a carefully edited authoritative edition of the letters of a major historical figure will shed significant illumination on his or her life may hold good in practice; Charles Darwin is a case in point. The enigma that is William Hunter, however, is hardly any less opaque now that we have all his surviving correspondence (both to and from Hunter) at our disposal in these two attractively produced and meticulously edited volumes. C Helen Brock, a zoologist by training, had an interest in the anatomist, man-midwife, and collector that extended over many decades. Her remorseless detective work in tracking down letters and identifying references in correspondence is evident throughout these pages. Further testimony to this detection can be found in the eight appendices in the second volume. Sadly, Brock did not live to see this handsome, material result of much of her life's academic work.

There are two reasons why, in spite of this publication, Hunter still remains a mystery. First, he chose not to let slip much more of himself in his letters than he did in any other way (although some letters to Hunter published here are revealing). Second, the buyer who is impressed by the sight of two stout volumes must beware, for the bulk disguises the fact that much of the material in here has previously been published or is editorial observation. Interwoven between the letters is an extensive commentary by Brock that pretty well amounts to a full-length biography of Hunter (albeit a most valuable one). The problem of republication has two dimensions. First, many of the letters to and

from William Cullen appearing here (and there are many) were published in John Thomson's *An account of the life, lectures and writings of William Cullen M.D.* (1832). Sadly the fate of the original letters available to Thomson is unknown so, although readers now easily see correspondence previously only accessible with difficulty, we are still no nearer knowing what the material looked like that Thomson edited. Second, and more disconcerting, many of the "letters" published here are not part of Hunter's private correspondence at all. They are polemical public epistles addressed to various people and published by Hunter in his lifetime in his numerous pamphlet wars. Thus, for example, when Hunter in a letter to Alexander Monro *primus*, of 1763, thanked him for sending his *The anatomy of the humane bones* and then made a "demand" for a "direct answer" to questions he had asked of one of Monro's inflammatory pamphlets and hoped, rather opaquely, "it may not be in the power of malevolence itself to accuse you of *stabbing in the dark*" (vol. 1, pp. 157–8), Hunter was, in fact, publicly stabbing Monro in the daylight, for this "letter" was published in Hunter's *Supplement to the medical commentaries* (1764). Likewise many of the case histories appearing here were published in *Medical observations and inquiries* as letters submitted to Hunter. This information is all freely recorded by the editor but it is none the less mildly upsetting to realize that the full sum of relatively unknown material published here does not amount to a great deal.

Volume 1 begins with a letter from the 22-year-old Hunter, most likely to William Cullen, in 1740, shortly after Hunter arrived for the first time in London. His account of a grain riot in Leith and a terrible storm at the mouth of the Thames immediately alerts the reader to the richness of the non-medical material to be found here. Probably because of

the uncertainty of the addressee it is one of the few letters to or from Cullen that does not appear in Thomson's *Life*. The letter is from the Hunter–Baillie papers in the Royal College of Surgeons of England, one of the richest sources for these volumes. Mathew Baillie was Hunter's nephew and had been trained by Hunter to succeed him. Hunter's collections and letters were, says Brock, treated in a "cavalier" fashion by Baillie (vol. 1, p. xv). One can only wonder, however, how far the belligerent Hunter brought this upon himself.

Not surprisingly, the letters here, from 1740 to the last dated one of April 1783 from John Ingenhouse, nearly a couple of weeks after Hunter's death, roughly resemble the pattern of his life. The early correspondence revolves around the establishment of an anatomy school, in the middle years it centres on man-midwifery, and the letters of the last twenty years focus on collecting. Patronage is a key word for deciphering these texts. Hunter had few equals in obtaining it and later dispensing it. Although he could be unpleasant in the extreme, he could make himself agreeable beyond measure *and* he clearly had talents and industry many considered worthy of support.

Broadly speaking there are four sorts of correspondents here: family, anatomists and other medical men, Hunter's aristocratic clientele, and the leading lights of the literary, artistic and scientific world, but particularly that of London. Many figures, notably John Hunter, appear in more than one category (in John's case, three). William Hunter came from a middling order family in East Kilbride and he retained some sort of connection with his close relatives all his life. In this regard, as in others, the enigma remains. He seems to have acted charitably to family members in need and, at the same time, he regarded some of them as ingrates or he was accused by outside observers of not being charitable enough. His relationship with John seems typical. He gave his younger brother a foot up the anatomical ladder and eventually (too late) tried to kick him off. The letters shed little light on their argument. Indeed a letter from John to William in 1771 only throws more obscurity

on the latter's nature. John was to be married the next day and writes of the matrimonial service "as that is a ceremony which you are not particularly fond of, I will not make a point of having your company there" (vol. 2, p. 14).

The anatomical and medical letters here are pervaded by disagreements over anatomical discoveries. But even in a world in which these controversies were commonplace, Hunter's quarrels seem beyond the high end of the Richter scale of priority-dispute measurement. Against Alexander Monro *secundus* Hunter appears to have had a case, but counting his grudges it has to be said: a single simultaneous discovery might be coincidence, two could be thievery but incalculable numbers suggest Hunter was not immune to the plagiarism of which he incessantly accused others. The mixture of manners and rudeness in these epistolary battles is extremely difficult to decode. In spite of midwifery and collecting, Hunter never ceased pursuing anatomical matters, corresponding in his later years with authorities such as Petrus Camper on the rhinoceros, orang-utan and other creatures (vol. 2, p. 173).

Hunter knew his place (although as a man-midwife he was creating a new one) and moved easily among the aristocracy. Aristocrats, in turn, displayed at times a gracious *noblesse oblige* that would become impossible in the nineteenth century. When the Earl of Sandwich's mistress showed signs of pregnancy in 1766 it was treated as the most mundane event. Hunter observed that he would "be happy with any opportunity either of being usefull [*sic*] or of shewing my attention to Miss Ray" (vol. 1, p. 246). He did not mean he would perform an abortion since he carefully detailed how a miscarriage was to be avoided. It has been suggested that the aristocratic patronage that Hunter enjoyed derived in part from the possibility that he did perform discreet abortions. Nothing here proves or disproves this. Clearly delicate matters were confided to him but their nature is usually obscure. In an undated note, the

Duchess of Ancaster told him Queen Charlotte requested his presence “but you must not mention that you was sent for” (vol. 1, p. 173).

In the world of arts and science Hunter maintained a lifelong correspondence with his countryman Tobias Smollett, assisted him and seems not to have fallen out with him. It is not often noticed that Hunter was extremely learned in the history of medicine, particularly anatomy. A draft letter to David Hume from 1764 demonstrates an impressive knowledge of texts dealing with the early history of venereal disease in Europe (vol. 1, pp. 195–7). Hume pops up again in a sad letter from James Trail, Bishop of Down and Connor, who obviously held the philosopher’s character in high regard, begging Hunter to dissuade Hume from visiting Ireland where he was “an object of universal Disgust, not to say Detestation” (vol. 1, p. 229). Collecting was one route through which Hunter met and corresponded with the well-to-do such as Lord Rockingham and Sir William Hamilton, who sent Hunter a catalogue of medals from Naples (vol. 2, pp. 171–2). Samuel Johnson used Hunter’s influence to present *A journey to the western isles of Scotland* (1775) to George III (vol. 2, p. 186). But although we know that Hunter spent much time with Sir John Pringle and that he knew people as diverse as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Joseph Priestley, folk such as these scarcely make an appearance and, when they do, their few short letters, like so many to and from Hunter, are very formal. The very public William Hunter was private to the last.

Christopher Lawrence,

The Wellcome Trust Centre for the
History of Medicine at UCL

Robert Bud, *Penicillin: triumph and tragedy*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. ix, 330, illus., £30.00 (hardback 978-19-925406-4).

The discovery of penicillin is one of the most widely known and frequently discussed scientific events of the twentieth century. Fleming’s original discovery, as well as the

work of both the Oxford team who isolated the drug, and the American pharmaceutical companies who developed mass manufacturing methods have together already generated a large—and sometimes controversial—literature. Most of the accounts, however, have been devoted to the early years and the story of discovery and development. In this book, the fruit of many years of research and scholarship, Bud explores the story of penicillin over a sixty-year period in a much wider social, cultural and geographical context. He accompanies his analysis of the “triumph”, the conquering of infection, with what he terms the “tragedy”, the excessive use of penicillin which has led directly to the growth and spread of bacteria resistant to antibiotics.

The first four chapters cover the pre-penicillin era, the discovery and development of penicillin and its creation as a “brand”, the analogy or model Bud has chosen to use for penicillin and its family of antibiotic drugs. By doing this he separates the drugs themselves and their chemical composition from the concept of the brand; this means that the brand encompasses the stories, legion and legendary, which shaped the perception of penicillin as a wonder drug, carrying with it a heavy burden of expectation of an infection-free future.

Chapter 5 charts the very rapid growth in the prescription and consumption of penicillin in the 1950s, the decade in which most of the penicillin formulations, unpatented, were manufactured across the world and the price dropped to commodity levels. At the same time the new broad spectrum antibiotics were discovered, developed, patented and marketed at prices which provided the pharmaceutical corporations with the monopoly profits they required to fund not only the growth of large institutional R&D laboratories, but also large sales forces and international expansion. Although the costs of the new drugs marketed in the post-war period were high (and there were other new products such as cortisone, as well as the antibiotics) it is arguable whether Bud gives too much significance to the role of penicillin in attributing the fall of the Labour