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A ST. GEORGE'S HOSPITAL STUDENT'S CARD OF 1787*

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STUDENT admission cards of eighteenth-century date are uncommon medical curiosities, and the St. George's Hospital card shown is thought to be one of the earliest survivors of its kind. An identical card, that of Robert Keate, dated 11 April 1793, is preserved in the Library of the Hospital Medical School. It carries three of the signatures of the present card, but has Thomas Keate's in place of that of Charles Hawkins.

The student named on this card, Francis Hughes (Fig. 1), is not otherwise known, except that his name appears in James's Student's Register¹ under the date 10 October 1787. This is the same date as that on the card, but there is no other note. The comprehensive nature of James's Register makes it certain that no more information was available, and the name appears neither in the College of Surgeons Examination Books nor in the

* Shown to the Osler Club of London, 11 October 1956.

early lists of members. It is thus likely that Francis Hughes did not complete his medical education.

The crude engraving of St. George's Hospital shows the building as it had appeared from its completion in 1736–37. The elevation is similar to that of Isaac Ware's engraving (*circa* 1736), reproduced in Peachey's *History of the Hospital*,² though the viewpoint is frontal, and the building disproportionately narrow. Similar engravings are to be seen in the Hospital Library by Richard Wilson (1746) and by Dalgety (1797). This building was demolished in about 1830.

The main interest in the card is the signature of John Hunter (1728–93), then at the height of his fame. This was the period of the publication of the two great treatises on *Venerical Diseases* and *The Animal Oeconomy*, both of which were produced in 1786, and of the painting of the Lawrence portrait.

The other signatories were, of necessity, lesser lights in the surgical firmament, though this might not have been admitted at the time. None the less, each played a prominent part in contemporary professional life, and each, in turn, became Master of the Company of Surgeons.

John Gunning (1734–98, James, no. 12) was born at Painswick, Gloucestershire, and succeeded Hunter as house-surgeon at St. George's Hospital on 27 October 1756. He leapt ahead of Hunter in 1765 with three years' seniority in his appointment as surgeon to the hospital. But Hunter was made surgeon-general to the Army in 1790, and Gunning had to wait until Hunter's death for this position. It has been suggested that this was one reason for Gunning's undoubted animosity towards Hunter. In 1789, Gunning became Master of the Surgeon's Company. He was its outspoken critic and succeeded in ridding the Company of some of the abuses for which it had been responsible earlier in the century, when it seems to have been maintained largely for the benefit of its Court and Examiners. Gunning's speech as Master, reprinted in South's *Memorials*,³ is severely critical, and throws interesting light on the customs of the Company at that time.

It is alleged that it was Gunning who, in contradicting Hunter, fulfilled the latter's prediction that his life was in the hands of anyone who angered him, and it is certain that major quarrels at St. George's arose between the two on at least three occasions.⁴

Charles Hawkins (1749–1817, James, no. 413) was the fourth son of the redoubtable Sir Caesar Hawkins (1711–86), who was the first of a dynasty of surgeons. Caesar himself, his brother Pennell (1716–84), his son Charles, his nephew George Edward (*circa* 1750–83), and grandson Caesar Henry (1798–1884) all were surgeons to the Royal Household, and by way of redressing the balance Francis (1784–1877), brother of the last-named, was

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physician to the households of William IV and Victoria. Biographical justice has never been dealt to this remarkable medical family, who served St. George's Hospital as surgeons almost continuously for 140 years.

Charles Hawkins assisted his father at St. George's in 1773–74, and in the latter year became full surgeon. He resigned in 1792, and was thus not directly involved in the fatal struggle with Hunter. In fact, it was Charles's resignation which brought matters to boiling-point, for, in appointing his successor, Gunning supported Thomas Keate, and Hunter put forward Everard Home. Keate was awarded the position, but by a narrow margin. Hawkins was re-elected to the staff in 1798, and served till 1800. As Master of the Company of Surgeons in 1791, and as first Master of the Royal College of Surgeons of London in 1800, his administrative skill must have been as considerable as is acknowledged for his surgical technique, for he, like Gunning before him, brought reform and advancement in status to the College which he led.

William Walker (*circa* 1730–96, James, no. 140) became house-surgeon to St. George's in January 1763, and surgeon on 10 October 1783. He was Master of the Company of Surgeons in 1794, and one of the two wardens at the time of his death. This is stated to have been due to an epidemic fever, with facial swelling, which he caught at the hospital.⁵ Walker, also, was a bitter opponent of John Hunter, and was, with Gunning, involved in the final argument in the board room.

William Walker's death in office in May 1796 precipitated the curious crisis in the affairs of the Company of Surgeons, whereby, as a result of his absence from a meeting of the Court of Assistants, the latter became improperly constituted, and the conducting of business under these circumstances terminated the legal existence of the Company. Four years of legal wrangling followed, and it was not till 22 March 1800 that a Charter of George III established the Royal College of Surgeons in London, with Charles Hawkins as its first Master.⁶

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful, for their help, to Dr. G. A. Edwards, Honorary Librarian, Medical School Library, St. George's Hospital, and to Mr. W. R. Le Fanu, Librarian of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

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