

## Short Articles

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### CHARLES COLLIGNON (1725-1785): CAMBRIDGE PHYSICIAN, ANATOMIST, AND MORALIST

by

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THE REPUTATION of Charles Collignon, Professor of Anatomy at Cambridge from 1753 to 1785, has suffered at the hands of most of those few historians who have considered him worthy of mention. Winstanley<sup>1</sup> said that he did not know enough about anatomy to teach it effectively, and that he had a practice in the town. He quoted the Reverend William Cole, who described Collignon as “a third rate practitioner”. However Winstanley gave no other evidence to support his assertion that Collignon was incompetent. Cole’s other comments on Collignon, which have also been widely quoted, draw a cruel caricature. “He is an ingenuous honest man, and if they had picked the three Kingdoms for a proper person to represent an anatomical professor, they could not have pitched upon a more proper one, for he is a perfect skeleton himself, absolutely a walking shadow, nothing but skin and bones: indeed I never saw so meagre a figure, much as one can conceive a figure to be after the flesh and substance is all dried away and wasted and nothing left to cover the bones, but a shrivelled dry leather; such is the figure of our present professor of anatomy; 19 June 1770.”<sup>2</sup>

Collignon’s biographer in the *Dictionary of national biography*<sup>3</sup> gave a brief and not entirely accurate account of his life, and quoted Cole, at some length.

Macalister, the historian of Cambridge anatomy, conceded that in some respects Collignon was a remarkable man.<sup>4</sup> A recent anatomist-historian<sup>5</sup> found Winstanley’s unsubstantiated statement about Collignon’s ignorance of anatomy “almost unbelievable”. During the course of a detailed study of the records of Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge, Collignon’s name became familiar as that of an active and much respected physician, who was prominent in day-to-day administration and in shaping policy, and was very unlike the rather pitiful character so frequently depicted. It seemed therefore to be of interest to attempt to reassess Collignon’s life and work.

Charles Collignon was born in London on 30 January 1725. He has been con-

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge*, Cambridge University Press, 1935, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> British Library, Cole MSS xxxiii, 264.

<sup>3</sup> G. T. Bettany, entry on Charles Collignon in *Dictionary of national biography*.

<sup>4</sup> A. Macalister, *The history of the study of anatomy at Cambridge*, Cambridge University Press, 1891.

<sup>5</sup> B. Towers, ‘Anatomy and physiology before 1850’, in A. Rook (editor), *Cambridge and its contribution to medicine*, London, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1971, p. 68. Dr. Towers is mainly concerned to redress the character assassinations suffered by Sir Busick Harwood and William Stukeley. Collignon has suffered a similar fate.

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sidered to be of French extraction,<sup>6</sup> as his name would imply, but his father was a native of Hesse Cassell in Germany<sup>6,7</sup> and minister of the Dutch Church in Austin Friars, London.<sup>7</sup> He died when Charles was still a child.

Charles was admitted a pensioner of Trinity College Cambridge in November 1743. He was M.B. on 29 November 1748, when his examiners were Russell Plumtre and William Heberden.<sup>8</sup> On 15 January 1750/51 he was granted the university's licence to practise medicine, and was examined and approved by Plumtre. He was M.D. in 1754. While still a student at Cambridge, he visited France and also studied in London.<sup>9</sup> He also spent much time at Edinburgh where, so Andrew Duncan<sup>10</sup> relates, "he not only attended the lectures of the different professors with great assiduity, but gave many proofs of his own genius, by making a conspicuous figure in the Medical Society of which he was admitted a member in 1747". He was admitted at Leyden on 16 May 1749.<sup>11</sup> There is no record of the length of time he stayed there, but he was certainly back in Cambridge by 26 November 1750, on which date he subscribed for the licence of the University to practise medicine. In 1751 he married at Colchester a lady of Dutch descent, and then settled in practice in Cambridge, where he lived in St. Sepulchre's parish. In 1753 he was elected Professor of Anatomy. He held the office until his death. The claim that he was also Downing Professor of Medicine from 1783–85 cannot be substantiated.<sup>12</sup> Downing professorships were not officially founded until 1800. Edward Christian, who was a founding fellow, was appointed Downing Professor of the Laws of England by special grace of 1 November 1788; no such grace for Collignon has been traced. As there were no students at Downing College until 1821, he cannot even have been teaching there.<sup>10</sup> The same authorities<sup>12</sup> claim that Collignon was deputy to the Regius Professor of Physic; of this appointment too there is no record. Up to the year of his death Collignon was frequently an examiner for the degrees of M.B. and M.D. Plumtre resigned his position as Senior Medic in the Caput to Pennington in 1780 and to Glynn from 1781 to 1793.<sup>13</sup> Of Collignon's teachers at Edinburgh it is probable that Alexander Monro *primus* influenced him most strongly, for Collignon's own lectures followed a similar plan, beginning with the history of anatomy and then covering each system in turn, including clinical information, and physiology.<sup>14</sup> He is likely also to have attended the clinical lectures of John Rutherford, which attracted many students.

Collignon first gave a course of lectures at Cambridge in the Lent term of 1754, and he gave similar courses in the same term until the year before his death. "They

<sup>6</sup> Bowtell Papers, Downing College, Cambridge. 'Memoranda de antiquitate Cantabrigiae', p. 200.

<sup>7</sup> A. Duncan, *Medical commentaries*, 1786, 10: 332. Cambridge University Library, Add. 4403, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Cambridge University Grace Books K, p. 89. Russell Plumtre (1709–1793) was Regius Professor of Physic.

<sup>9</sup> Duncan, *op. cit.*, note 7 above.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> R. T. Gunther, *Early science in Cambridge*, Oxford University Press, 1937, p. 306.

<sup>12</sup> Duncan, *op. cit.*, note 7 above. Gunther, *op. cit.*, note 11 above.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Miss Heather Peak, until recently Cambridge University Archivist, for this information.

<sup>14</sup> J. D. Comrie, *History of Scottish medicine*, 2nd ed., London, Baillière, Tindall & Cox for the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, 1932, 2 vols., vol. 1, pp. 294 and 298.

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were much esteemed by all his pupils".<sup>15</sup> The total number of medical students in the University during the second half of the eighteenth century was small; there were in any one year some twenty students in residence, at different stages of their course; in some years only two or three students entered upon the medical course. Collignon's lectures were advertised in the local press,<sup>16</sup> and were probably open to local practitioners and apprentices; they were given in the Schools opposite Queens' College.<sup>17</sup> The headings of the twenty-eight lectures, published in a brief *Compendium* in 1756, show a systematic approach and the inclusion of comparative anatomy.<sup>18</sup>

How frequently dissections were carried out remains unknown. Certainly subjects were in short supply, and bodies were bought from London resurrectionists. It was in March 1768 that a body in Collignon's dissecting room was identified as that of Lawrence Sterne, the author of *Tristram Shandy*, who had been buried in St. Georges' burial ground, London, a few days earlier.<sup>19</sup> A reference to Collignon's activities in a sermon in aid of Addenbrooke's Hospital, preached in Great St. Mary's Church on 28 June 1770 by Samuel Hallifax, suggests that, despite these difficulties, dissections were not infrequent. Hallifax had just been appointed Professor of Civil Law, having previously held the professorship of Arabic; he later became Bishop of Gloucester. He paid a tribute to "the learned Professors of Chemistry, Botany and Anatomy . . . , the divine wisdom in the formation of the human body is so happily illustrated from dead subjects."

#### COLLIGNON AND ADDENBROOKE'S HOSPITAL<sup>20</sup>

The hospital, founded under the will of John Addenbrooke who died in 1719, was opened to patients in September 1766. Collignon became a subscriber and as such a Governor, in which capacity he regularly attended the Weekly Board, which first met on 7 July to plan the staffing and equipping of the hospital. Collignon was very active at these meetings. On 8 September Collignon proposed that a committee be set up to furnish the apothecary's shop and buy drugs. This proposal was approved. At a general meeting of the governors on 22 September Collignon was one of six local medical men appointed physicians or surgeons to the hospital.

The weekly meeting of 19 January 1767 ordered that "in any Doubtful Case the Physicians or Surgeons shall have power to open the body of any person dying in the Infirmary, without asking any person leave". Collignon was present at this meeting, but the proposer of this unusual order is not named. It was unusual, since it was the custom in Britain to seek the permission of relatives before performing an autopsy, whilst in many European countries hospital authorities claimed the legal right to autopsy.<sup>21</sup> Collignon was the only member of the medical staff who had worked on the continent.

<sup>15</sup> Duncan, *op. cit.*, note 7 above.

<sup>16</sup> e.g., *Cambridge Chronicle*, 15 February 1775.

<sup>17</sup> These were in part of the University Printing House at the corner of Silver Street and Queens' Lane. H. Rolleston, *The Cambridge Medical School*, Cambridge University Press, 1932, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> C. Collignon, *Compendium anatomici medicum*, Cambridge, 1756.

<sup>19</sup> Rolleston, *op. cit.*, note 17 above.

<sup>20</sup> Unless other sources are cited, all information concerning Addenbrooke's Hospital is derived from the Manuscript Governors' Minute Books, main series.

<sup>21</sup> W. D. Foster, *A short history of clinical pathology*, Edinburgh, Livingstone, 1961, p. 6.

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Collignon attended the weekly meetings and the general quarterly courts at the hospital with great regularity, and was a member of many *ad hoc* committees. On 11 January 1773 the weekly meeting gave the porter leave “to be absent during the time of Dr. Collignon’s Anatomical lectures, he putting in a Deputy and attending in person every Board Day”. On 8 May 1775 the weekly meeting received a letter from Collignon announcing his “intention to resign his attendance as physician to this hospital, at which they expressed their great concern and ordered that the thanks of the Board be given to Dr. Collignon for the great favour of his past attendance”. The reason for Collignon’s resignation is not apparent. He continued to attend the weekly meetings and the quarterly courts. He was indeed entrusted in March 1776 with the delicate task of drafting a letter refuting an anonymous charge of financial mismanagement of the apothecary’s shop and of the housekeeping. On 17 June 1776 Collignon informed the weekly meeting “that he was much requested to resume the office of physician”, and that he was willing to do so. On 22 July he was unanimously re-elected. He continued his regular attendance at meetings and his work as a physician until shortly before his death in 1785.

#### COLLIGNON AND THE ROYAL SOCIETY

On 15 November 1770 Collignon was admitted a Fellow of the Royal Society. The document recommending him “as a person in every way qualified to make a valuable and useful member”, bears nine signatures.<sup>22</sup> Seven of the nine have been identified. Anthony Shepherd was Plumian Professor of Astronomy at Cambridge; Michael Lort was Regius Professor of Greek; Samuel Wegg was a barrister who was treasurer of the Royal Society for thirty-four years; Thomas Anguish was Accountant General and Master in Chancery; Thomas Astle was an antiquary and palaeographer; Charles Rogers was known only as an art collector; Edward King was a barrister and an antiquary. About Henry Putman and S. Harper no information has been obtained. These seven men shared antiquarian interests, and not one was a medical man.

Collignon’s only communication to the Royal Society was made on 25 June 1772<sup>23</sup> and was appropriately of both medical and antiquarian interest. It was entitled ‘Some account of a body lately found in uncommon preservation under the ruins of the Abbey at St. Edmundsbury, Suffolk; with some reflections upon the subject’. A lead coffin, containing a body believed to be that of Thomas Beaufort, uncle of Henry V, had been found by workmen and examined by Thomas Collum, surgeon, at Bury. Collignon discussed the factors which favour the preservation of bodies.

#### COLLIGNON’S WRITINGS

*Tyrocimum anatomicum, or an introduction to anatomy* was published in 1763 and was intended for those who had attended his lectures and wanted to know more of the nature of the study, and what books to read. After a short historical introduction, he wrote, “The first and principal end of the Study of the human body should be to awaken in us an awful sense of the amazing power of the Creator”, but he emphasized the importance of the post-mortem examination to establish the cause of death,

<sup>22</sup> Information from the Librarian, the Royal Society of London, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond.*, 1772, 62: 465.

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though this could not always be discovered.<sup>24</sup> He referred the reader to Bonet's compilation of autopsy findings.<sup>25</sup> He then discussed various aspects of the forensic autopsy.

In his next publication Collignon adopted a more philosophical approach. It was entitled *An enquiry into the structure of the human body relative to its supposed influence on the morals of mankind*, and was published in 1764.<sup>26</sup> The author's intention was "to remove the objections that have been made against Providence by some, as if he had formed men of such materials as almost necessarily impelled them to illicit actions". "The remedies which physicians apply have no innate and absolute qualities but such only as the nature of the parts which they touch will allow them to exert."<sup>27</sup> The same is true of diseases. Whatever the "Morbific cause", the relative fitness of a body may be necessary for its admission. "And upon this relative fitness of causes and their effects is built the whole of rational treatment".<sup>28</sup> He frequently emphasises the influence of mind over body. "Man is compounded of Soul as well as of Body, and so compounded that they frequently struggle and occasionally conquer each other."<sup>29</sup> "A rootless anxiety about present health is to poison at the fountain head the source from which most blessings flow."<sup>30</sup> He advocates temperance and moderation, and concludes "so that if we will confess the truth, we shall be forced to own that we bring on ourselves much the greatest part of the mischiefs, which we are so fond of attributing to the influence of our bodies."<sup>31</sup> This small volume of sixty-seven pages reached a third edition in 1771. In 1765 was published *Medicina politica or reflections on the art of physic as inseparably connected with the prosperity of the state*. In this work Collignon accepted that "the health and happiness of individuals is a desirable circumstance in a state".<sup>32</sup> He took it "for an indisputable fact that without a Knowledge of the body any attempt to keep it in health [and] to repair its decay . . . must prove unsuccessful."<sup>33</sup> "But if opportunities are not given under the sanction of law for a sufficient number of subjects to be dissected by the numerous students of physic in this Kingdom, they must be obtained at all costs."<sup>34</sup> Once the normal structures were known "the changes of those introduced by disease", must be studied, and "this can be learned from such as die in hospitals".<sup>35</sup>

In 1769 Collignon published *Moral and medical dialogues*.<sup>36</sup> These were so pretentiously elaborated that they are almost unreadable, but they include some interesting allusions, for example to the work of Ramazzini.

<sup>24</sup> C. Collignon, *Tyrocium anatomiae, or an introduction to anatomy*, Cambridge, 1763, pp. 9 and 13.

<sup>25</sup> Théophile Bonet, *Sepulchretum, sive anatomia practica ex cadaveribus morbo denatis*, Geneva, 1679.

<sup>26</sup> C. Collignon, *An enquiry into the structure of the human body in relation to its supposed influence on the morals of mankind*, Cambridge, 1784, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> C. Collignon, *Medicina politica, or reflections on the art of physic as inseparably connected with the prosperity of the State*, Cambridge, 1765, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> C. Collignon, *Moral and medical dialogues*, Cambridge, 1769.

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In 1776 a much more interesting pamphlet appeared. It was entitled *Explanatory remarks on the great utility of hospitals for the sick and poor*. In it Collignon challenged some of the principles on which Addenbrooke's Hospital, and virtually all other contemporary hospitals in Britain, were run. The rules specifically forbade the admission of certain classes of patients; these usually included the incurable, epileptic, and patients with venereal disease, though some hospitals made special provision for the latter. Collignon wrote, "—my inclination tends to admit almost hopeless cases in order for trial. . . . If the impossibility of giving any relief [is] confirmed . . . I make no scruple to answer, the patient ought to die with us." As regards early reference, "if they come to us however in a far advanced state of evil, in God's name let us spare no expense for their recovery." He would prefer to see fewer patients more effectively treated. He endorsed the contemporary opinion that "the sight of this [an epileptic fit] has been known to occasion the same disorder in persons not before affected", but he feels that there are circumstances in which they should be admitted.

#### CHARLES COLLIGNON

Of the personality and of the personal and family life of Collignon very little is known.<sup>37</sup> There were four children of his marriage;<sup>38</sup> three died in infancy. The remaining child, Catherine (1755–1832), translated from the French the four-volume *Historical and biographical dictionary* by the Abbé Ladvoat. She died in Bromley, Kent.<sup>39</sup> No portrait of Collignon is known to have survived. Cole's unkind account of Collignon's personal appearance, already quoted, may be exaggerated, but at least gives some impression of him. He died on 1 October 1785.

#### CONCLUSION

Collignon has been too harshly judged. He was well educated in medicine. He lectured regularly during his long tenure of the Chair of Anatomy, and illustrated his lectures by dissections when subjects were available. In his writings he repeatedly stressed the importance of a knowledge of normal anatomy to the physician, and the need for better provision for the legal supply of subjects. He stressed also the value of post-mortem examinations to increase knowledge of diseases, and he persuaded the Governors of Addenbrooke's Hospital to authorize routine autopsy whenever the cause of a patient's death was uncertain. He was an active physician to the hospital and played a prominent part for many years in the work of its committees. His views on the criteria for the admission of patients to hospital and for their discharge were enlightened and humane.<sup>40</sup> His writings attracted sufficient interest amongst

<sup>37</sup> The libraries of Trinity College and of the Department of Anatomy, Cambridge, have no material concerning Collignon, nor have the principal medical libraries and archives in London. Librarians in Edinburgh have also searched in vain.

<sup>38</sup> Register of the Parish of St. Sepulchre. Only one child is mentioned in the *Dictionary of national biography*.

<sup>39</sup> Neither the Kent County Archives nor the Bromley Public Library possess any material concerning the Collignon family.

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his contemporaries to be reprinted in a single large volume<sup>41</sup> by subscription in 1786, the year after his death.

Collignon made no original contributions to medical science, but there is every reason to believe that he carried out his university and hospital duties conscientiously and effectively. He was indeed in practice in the town, as Winstanley<sup>42</sup> complained, but university stipends were so low that a large proportion of medically qualified academics practised privately until the twentieth century was well advanced.

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<sup>40</sup> The admissions policy of the voluntary hospitals is summarized and discussed by J. Woodward, *To do the sick no harm*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 36–44.

<sup>41</sup> C. Collignon, *The medical works of Charles Collignon M.D.*, Cambridge, Hodson, 1786.

<sup>42</sup> Winstanley, *op. cit.*, note 1 above.