

BOOK REVIEW

The Memoir of John Butter: Surgeon, Militiaman, Sportsman and Founder of the Plymouth Royal Eye Infirmary

By Dee and Mike Tracey (Editors)

Hardback, 232 pages, 10 illustrations
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This attractive softback comes from a niche publisher of specialist historical works, including the Devon and Cornwall Record Society, and is comprised of an Introduction and the Memoir of Dr. Butter. The latter's nineteen notebooks were transcribed by an Exeter gynaecologist, Pat Russell, who had a strong history interest and it covers the years from 1807 to 1863. The Introduction sets out in considerable detail a relevant history of Plymouth.

Butter was born in Woodbury near Exeter in 1791 and died in Plymouth in 1877 where he is buried in Ford Park Cemetery; he had purchased the Park in 1827. He trained at the Devon and Exeter Hospital and then at Barts and Guy's Hospitals in London. Early in his career he recorded his operations for fractures, lipomata and cataracts at Huddersfield and Homefirth [sic] and subsequently was appointed surgeon to the South Devon Militia.

Butter became deeply involved with eye surgery in Plymouth where he founded the Royal Eye Infirmary, recently subsumed into Derriford Hospital in 2013. He was principal manager of the charity for thirty-four years. He also became a magistrate.

Early eye surgery in Britain was the province of surgeons who were not specialised and who generally felt that specialist eye surgery was unnecessary but in 1805 the first eye hospital opened in London's Charterhouse Square, The Dispensary for Curing Diseases of the Eye and Ear, later to become known as Moorfields in 1822. This was followed by the second, the Exeter Eye Infirmary, in 1809. In 1816 Lord Palmerston established the Military Ophthalmic Hospital particularly for those returning from Egypt and India. In 1821 the Plymouth Eye Dispensary opened and eventually in 1828 become the Royal Eye Infirmary. Butter noted that failing vision could result from overworking the eyes and he himself went blind in 1853.

There is an interesting section regarding his Continental travels in 1817 where Butter met the anatomist Scarpa in Pavia and purchased several anatomical wax models in Florence. He was elected FRS in 1822. He described operations to open and bleed one or both temporal arteries to reduce the risk of apoplexy. He wrote in two phrenological journals on the perception of colour. He commented on the potentially deleterious impact of water leakage from a cemetery into a well.

There is much in this book to interest those concerned with persons and ephemera and which includes important medical history information based upon prolific first-hand knowledge.

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