Young, Thomas

(1773–1829)

By Charles Turner, published 1830 (after Sir Thomas Lawrence, after 1820)

Thomas Young (1773–1829), physician and natural philosopher, was born on 13 June 1773 at Milverton, Somerset, the eldest son of John James Young, a Quaker linen draper and banker, and his first wife, Ann.[1] He had two younger brothers, Edward and Henry, and one younger sister, Hannah. Both parents were active and strict members of the Society of Friends, which impressed Quaker values on their son.

Education

Young’s early years were spent at the home of his maternal grandfather, who encouraged his education and introduced him to classical literature. After a short stay at a ‘miserable boarding school’ (Peacock, 4) he moved in 1782 to a school in Compton Abbas, Dorset—presumably a Friends’ school—run by Mr Thompson. There he studied Latin, Greek, mathematics, and natural philosophy, and out of the infants also taught him various mechanical skills. Although Young’s formal schooling lasted some six years it is clear that he was well read, if not largely, self-taught. Leaving the school in 1787 he joined the household of the Quaker banker David Barclay at Youngsbury, Hertfordshire. Here Young became the tutor and companion to Barclay’s grandson Hudson Gurney, who was only two years his junior. They were later joined at Youngsbury by John Hodgkin, a Quaker who was likewise an accomplished classical scholar.

With the encouragement of his mother’s uncle Dr Richard Brocklesby, who had tended him during an extensive illness, Young decided to pursue a career of a physician. Moving to London he attended the medical school founded by William Hunter and, in 1795, entered St Bartholomew’s Hospital. During this period he attended lectures delivered by many of the key men on the London medical circuit including John Hunter, William Cundall Creighton, James Edward Smith, and Matthew Raffa. In 1796 he also attended classical lectures at the home of Bryan Higgins and gained some familiarity with experimental techniques that Higgins encouraged in his students. Moreover, through Brocklesby the young Young was introduced to many of the leading lights of London society. With his developing interest in science and his eye on a successful medical career he was drawn towards the Royal Society of London. Before his twentieth birthday he presented his first paper to the society and was elected in June 1794, his election being supported by Brocklesby and thirteen others including several men of high standing.

Young has sometimes been hailed as a child prodigy, who, by the age of sixteen, had not only mastered Latin and Greek but also possessed a good working knowledge of several other languages and gained a firm background in the sciences. He clearly possessed considerable mental abilities, while his Quaker upbringing encouraged the habit of hard work and persevering intellectual effort. So effective was his memory that he claimed never to have wanted a single day. Why his academic interests were also encouraged by his parents and teachers was not to have supported his growing enthusiasm for medicine. Indeed, his mother initially hoped he might take up dancing.

While his academic interests were also encouraged by his parents and teachers they would not have supported his growing enthusiasm for medicine. Indeed, his mother initially hoped he might take up dancing. Membership of the Quaker community also stood in the way of his career. In the heady life of London the socially ambitious Young cast off the distinctive dress and modes of address associated with his Quaker upbringing and quickly became involved in a web of social and academic connections. Just over two years after he took the degree of M.B. at Edinburgh in July 1796 he presented his first paper to the Society of Antiquaries and was elected a fellow of the society. In January 1797 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and was later admitted as a fellow of the Royal Society of London. On 11 February 1797 he was told that he had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London. On 11 February 1797 he was told that he had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London. On 11 February 1797 he was told that he had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London. On 11 February 1797 he was told that he had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London. On 11 February 1797 he was told that he had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London. On 11 February 1797 he was told that he had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London.

Meanwhile, between 1794 and 1799, Young’s pursuit of a medical education had taken him to universities in three countries. The medical school at Edinburgh was still in its infancy and attracted large numbers of students, including many from dancing backgrounds. Here he attended lectures spanning medical subjects (Francis Home, chemistry (Joseph Black), and anatomy and surgery (Alexander Monro secundus)). Although Young recognized the quality of his education he presented his first paper to the society and was elected in June 1794, his election being supported by Brocklesby and fifteen others including several medical men of high standing.

Two other events deserve notice. The death of Young’s kinsman Richard Brocklesby in 1797 provided him with a comfortable living. He inherited Brocklesby and fifteen others including several medical men of high standing.

When he moved to Edinburgh in October 1794 a certificate slowly followed from the Westminster monthly meeting passing responsibility to the Edinburgh Friends, and another certificate was subsequently issued by the Edinburgh monthly meeting after he left the city. However, Young had probably broken many of the parents’ religious principles by the time he arrived in Edinburgh. Brocklesby apparently never had any of his children christened. His mother’s uncle Dr John Hodgkin, a Quaker who was likewise an accomplished classical scholar, had taken Young under his wing.

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Young was appointed to the position of secretary of the commission charged with ascertaining the length of the seconds pendulum; subsequently he became associated with the British Almanac in 1808. In 1811, he was appointed physician at St George’s Hospital, a position he held until his death. As well as his hospital job Young was a private practitioner, he spent most of his time in Woking where he worked on his patients in their houses. Young was probably renowned as a general practitioner he did not possess a congenial bulky manner and experienced difficulty in attracting patients. By temperament he was more inclined to literary and scientific studies than to being a general practitioner. He held the position of secretary of the British Almanac until 1823, in which he provided a detailed taxonomy of diseases.

In both 1813 and 1817 he was re-appointed as the secretary of the Royal College of Physicians, where he delivered an annual address. In 1817 he delivered a paper on ‘The function of the heart and arteries’ at the Admiralty disbanded the Royal Institution but the Royal Society emerged to take its place. In 1817 he delivered a paper on the ‘The function of the heart and arteries’ at the Royal Society. In 1810 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In 1810 Young was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In 1810 Young was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In 1810 Young was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In 1810 Young was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In 1810 Young was elected a fellow of the Royal Society.

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After visiting Geneva in 1828 Young's health began to fail. Progressive heart disease slowed him considerably, as with difficulty in establishing close friendships. He was certainly highly intelligent but he appears to have lacked the discipline and insight necessary to pursue topics in great depth. He was most comfortable of his political convictions; although intermarried he remained mindful and he was widely admired for his knowledge and intellectual achievements most of his acquaintances found him rather stiff and experienced difficulty in establishing close friendships. He was certainly highly intelligent but he appears to have lacked the discipline and insight necessary to pursue topics in great depth. He was most comfortable of his political convictions; although intermarried he remained mindful and he was widely admired for his knowledge and intellectual achievements most of his acquaintances found him rather stiff and experienced difficulty in establishing close friendships. 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