

**John Snow and Thomas Giordani Wright:
Medical Apprentices in Newcastle upon Tyne**

John Snow began his medical training in Newcastle upon Tyne where he lived from 1827 to 1833, serving as apprentice and then assistant, to surgeon William Hardcastle.¹ Very little is known about just what Snow's training actually involved but a detailed account of the experiences of another apprentice doctor, who served in Newcastle at about the same time, can be found in the diary of Thomas Giordani Wright.²

Wright kept his diary during the last three years of his apprenticeship, between October 1826 and April 1829 when, although still indentured, he worked (unpaid) as assistant in the practice of his master, surgeon James McIntyre. His duties brought him daily into contact with a variety of patients, mostly coal miners and their families in Newcastle and the Tyneside area. Wright used his diary to record many of the cases he had to deal with, giving details of diagnoses, treatments and outcomes and he often commented on aspects of how the busy practice was run: the

¹ Peter Vinten-Johansen, et al., *Cholera, Chloroform, and the Science of Medicine: A Life of John Snow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006).

² Alastair Johnson, "The Diary of Thomas Giordani Wright: Apprentice Doctor in Newcastle upon Tyne," in *Medical History* 43 (1999): 468-84. <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/picrender.fcgi?artid=1044181&blobtype=pdf>

management, organization of transport, communication with patients, and the interactions between master, assistants and apprentices.

In spite of what seems to have been a heavy work load, Wright took an interest in the social life in Newcastle and found time to follow his own interests – reading, playing the flute, visits to the theatre, concerts, parties, dances and holidays. As well as relating day-to-day events, the diary includes autobiographical sections that describe Wright’s experiences up to the time he began his diary in October 1826: his youth in Stockton-on-Tees, his schooldays in Darlington, some unhappy months indentured to a doctor in that town, and his early experiences in Newcastle. He also wrote in some detail about a session he spent as a medical student in Edinburgh (1825 – 6) when he became friendly with one of his teachers, Dr Robert Knox, later to become notorious after the Burke and Hare murder case.³

Wright’s background was rather different from that of John Snow. While not rich, his parents were comfortably off and could afford to support their only son, financing his apprenticeships and paying for him to attend a medical course in Edinburgh. As a result, his life in Newcastle would probably have been in many ways different from that of John Snow, but they did have some things in common. They went to Newcastle to serve their apprenticeships from smaller towns – York in the case of Snow and Darlington for Wright. It isn’t known why Snow chose to move away rather than be indentured to a practitioner in his home town. In Wright’s case, the reason why he chose to go to Newcastle is explained in his diary. He had just managed to extricate himself from an unsatisfactory apprenticeship in Darlington and had been advised that:

³ Alastair Johnson, “My friend Dr Knox: a pupil writes about the anatomist”, in *The Surgeon*, 3, (2005): 407 - 410.

“Newcastle was of all others the place best calculated, on account of its surgical advantages, among the Collieries, and in the Infirmary, for initiating a young surgeon in the practice of his art.”

Once established as apprentices, the situations of Snow and Wright were similar. Their masters were both young men in their thirties, at similar stages in their careers, still building their medical practices but each with more than a decade of experience behind them. And, interestingly, Hardcastle and McIntyre both began their careers in Newcastle working in the same practice.

Snow’s master, William Hardcastle, served his apprenticeship in York and in 1815, at the age of 21, became an assistant in the practice of Mr. Whitfield Burnett at Newgate Street, Newcastle. This was a prosperous medical business with a big competitive advantage: its owner was married to the sister of John Buddle, the nationally famous mining engineer and manager of Wallsend Colliery, a useful patron in getting the much sought-after colliery contracts. The connection with Buddle remained when Burnett died in 1817 and his widow, Buddle’s sister Mary, inherited a “share in the emolument of the practice.” The payments to Mary continued as part of the deal when a new owner, Grey, took over.

At the time of Burnett’s death, Hardcastle was still employed as an assistant in the Newgate Street practice, but he was away, in London, completing his training, attending the Marylebone Dispensary. He became LSA in November 1817 and MRCS in May 1818 and, almost immediately after getting these necessary qualifications, he left to set up on his own, taking over another established practice, that of the late, Mr Surgeon in Westgate Street, Newcastle. Hardcastle prospered in this new situation

and, nine years after setting up on his own, John Snow joined him as his first apprentice.⁴

Wright's master, James McIntyre, was born in Callander, Scotland, in 1795, making him about a year younger than William Hardcastle. He qualified as Licentiate of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in 1814 and joined the Newgate Street practice as a partner to Grey at about the time Hardcastle left. By 1822 Grey had retired and McIntyre was the sole owner.⁵ In March 1824 he took on Thomas Giordani Wright as his apprentice.

The medical work of the apprentices in the two practices would have been very similar. Both Hardcastle and McIntyre were essentially functioning as general practitioners. They had private patients, but a substantial part of their work was as surgeons to collieries in the area. McIntyre had contracts with up to eight mines and Hardcastle had been able to take with him a valuable contract as surgeon to Killingworth Colliery when he left the Burnett practice. The mixed practice gave their apprentices the opportunity of seeing a wide variety of cases, surgical and medical, and they learned on the job how to administer the orthodox treatments of the period. Wright's diary gives many details about the work and his descriptions of the treatments he used include copies of some of his

⁴ Spence Galbraith, "William Hardcastle (1794-1860) of Newcastle upon Tyne, and his pupil John Snow," in *Archæological Æliana* 27 (1999): 155-70.

⁵ Galbraith (Note 3) suggests that Hardcastle took over the Burnett practice in 1817 and moved it to Westgate Street. However the records, including Wright's diary, show that it remained at Newgate Street until 1828.

prescriptions for medication. Strikingly, these are very similar in style and content to those written by John Snow when he was a doctor in London about 20 years later.⁶

McIntyre's practice was a much bigger operation than that of Hardcastle, having one or two assistants and two or three apprentices as well as Wright. In 1828 it moved from Newgate Street to much more prestigious new premises in the newly-built Eldon Square, and at about the same time a wealthy physician joined McIntyre as his partner. Working in this large practice as senior apprentice meant that Wright got some management experience, such as keeping patient records, supervising juniors and looking after the accounts. As Hardcastle's sole apprentice, Snow would have had less opportunity to experience this side of the medical business. On the other hand, Snow probably benefitted from having the less-divided attention of his master in supervising his training. And, as it turned out, he had another advantage: he happened to be still in Newcastle at the time of the first outbreak of epidemic cholera – so, unlike Wright who left two years earlier, he had experience, first-hand, of the impact of this disease.

There is no mention of John Snow in Wright's diary – hardly surprising since Snow, five years younger than Wright, was still very much a junior at the time they overlapped. However, working from surgeries not more than ten minutes walk from each other, it seems quite likely that the two apprentices would have met each other. Wright does mention John Snow's master in his diary: "Mr Hardcastle & I have also got on speaking terms

⁶ *The Case Books of Dr John Snow*, in *Medical History*, Supplement No. 14, London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine (1994): xliv-lvii. <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/tocrender.fcgi?iid=172564>

by meeting on the roads together.” This was in 1827 when Wright, a mere apprentice, was pleased to be acquainted with one of the town’s established doctors.

The value of an apprenticeship in medical training was very much questioned at the time.⁷ However, although Wright was often critical of his master, in retrospect he recognized that his training with James McIntyre had been excellent; it was very appropriate for a general practitioner of the day and was the basis of his long and prosperous career as a family doctor.⁸ Although obviously a very different character than McIntyre, William Hardcastle seems to have been a very good master for Snow: progressive in his attitudes, willing to give responsibility to his apprentice and providing opportunities for him to develop his medical knowledge and skills.

Alastair Johnson

⁷ See e.g., Irvine Loudon, *Medical Care and the General Practitioner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 9.

⁸ A summary of T. G. Wright’s medical career is given in an obituary in the *British Medical Journal* (1898): 1493.

http://www.bmj.com/cgi/pdf_extract/1/1953/1493-b

See also Hilary Marland, *Medicine and Society in Wakefield and Huddersfield 1780 -1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).