



Maltese teaser

Who was John Eskdale Fishburn? All that is known about him at present is that he was the first person to be awarded the Diploma in Dental Surgery of the University of Malta. He achieved this in 1919 despite the fact that the university at that time provided no classes in dentistry. Its role was restricted to that of an examining body, and applicants had to provide evidence of having studied the subject in a recognised institution abroad before they were eligible to sit the diploma examination. So it is not even known where John Eskdale Fishburn pursued his studies.

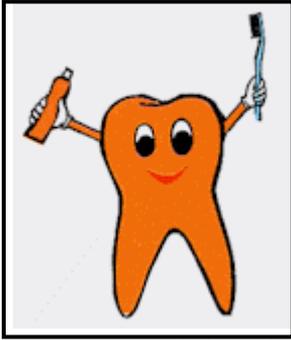
Professor George Camilleri, Professor of Dental Surgery at the University of Malta, would like to find out more about the elusive Fishburn and has written to ask if anyone in the group can help. He even offers a reward for information received – a visit to Malta.

Professor Camilleri, who himself has the distinction of being the first Maltese dental graduate to devote his energies to scientific research, has strong links with Glasgow. After postgraduate training at Glasgow Dental Hospital he obtained the Higher Dental Diploma of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in 1959. He then gained the Fellowship in Dental Surgery of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and subsequently won a research Fellowship in the department of dental science at the RCS(Eng). It was there that his research abilities were recognised, primarily in the field of oral exfoliative cytology in experimental carcinogenesis, which he introduced into Malta on his return in 1964.

His early career history, however, would make it entirely fitting if vital clues about Fishburn's identity were to come from Glasgow. We hope to be able to publish a follow-up in the next newsletter.

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Special issues



Readers will remember the article on dental themes on stamps by W. Neithercut in our issue of April 2000. Further explorations in dental philately may be made through an Internet site run by Dr Henri Aronis, honorary president of the Medical Dental Society of Belgium, who has drawn our attention to this remarkable electronic stamp collection. Every country on the world can be investigated by clicking on a map. This makes the site interesting even for strict non-philatelists, who can study the different national priorities apparently reflected in the themes. In this respect Belgium itself emerges honourably, with a recent issue devoted to preventive dentistry: it depicts a child brushing his teeth as a teddy sits astride his shoulders. The UK, in contrast, is somewhat lacking in directly dental themes – Lister, Darwin, and some smiling faces displaying white teeth are the most that can be managed. Things have not moved on much since W. Neithercut expressed the hope that the UK postal authorities would one day recognise the contributions made by eminent campaigners to the development of dentistry in the country.

The site, at <http://timbreetdent.free.fr/> includes a link with HDRG's website.

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Word of Mouth – 2

Published exactly 100 years ago, Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks" makes a timely choice for the October issue, if also a somewhat grim one. The novel chronicles the decline of a prosperous nineteenth-century merchants' family in Lubeck and the crumbling of the values on which their business had been built. It is perhaps not too fanciful to say that dental decay played at least a putative role in the decay of the family fortunes, since it was immediately after the traumatic treatment described below that Senator Thomas Buddenbrooks collapsed in a gutter, never to rise again. This signalled the end of the family business, which his will decreed should be wound up on his death.

Once again, we invite contributions to this series, with or without an expert opinion attached. Examples from Scottish fiction would be particularly appreciated.

They passed through the large light room to the operating-chair in front of one of the two largest windows. It was an adjustable chair with an upholstered head-rest and green plush arms. As he sat down, Thomas Buddenbrook briefly explained what the trouble was. Then he leaned back his head and closed his eyes.

Herr Brecht screwed up the chair a bit and got to work on the tooth with a tiny mirror and a pointed steel instrument. His hands smelled of almond soap, his breath of cauliflower and beefsteak.

"We must proceed to extraction," he said, after a while, and turned still paler.

"Very well, proceed, then," said the Senator, and shut his eyes more tightly.

There was a pause. Herr Brecht prepared something at his chest of drawers and got out his instruments. Then he approached the chair again.

"I'll paint it a little," he said; and began at once to apply a strong-smelling liquid in generous quantities. Then he gently implored the patient to sit very still and open his mouth very wide – and then he began.

Thomas Buddenbrook clutched the plush arm-rests with both his hands. He scarcely felt the forceps close around his tooth; but from the grinding sensation in his mouth, and the increasingly painful, really agonising pressure on his whole head, he was made amply aware that the thing was under way. Thank God, he thought, now it can't last long. The pain grew and grew, to limitless, incredible heights; it grew to an insane, shrieking, inhuman torture, tearing his entire brain. It approached the catastrophe. "Here we are," he thought. "Now I must just bear it."

It lasted three or four seconds. Herr Brecht's nervous exertions communicated themselves to Thomas Buddenbrook's whole body, he was even lifted up a little on his chair, and he heard a soft, squeaking noise coming from the dentist's throat. Suddenly there was a fearful blow, a violent shaking as if his neck were broken, accompanied by a quick cracking, crackling noise. The pressure was gone, but his head buzzed, the pain throbbed madly in the inflamed and ill-used jaw; and he had the clearest impression that the thing had not been successful: that the extraction of the tooth was not the solution of the difficulty, but merely a premature catastrophe which only made matters worse.

Herr Brecht had retreated. He was leaning against his instrument cupboard, and he looked like death. He said: The crown – I thought so."

Thomas Buddenbrook spat a little blood into the blue basin at his side, for the gum was lacerated. He asked, half-dazed: What about the crown?"

"The crown broke off, Herr Senator. I was afraid of it. – The tooth was in a very bad condition. But it was my duty to make the experiment.

"What next?"

Leave it to me, Herr Senator."

"What will you have to do now?"

"Take out the roots. With a lever. There are four of them."

"Four. Then you must take hold and lift four times. "

"Yes – unfortunately."

"Well, this is enough for today," said the Senator

Comment: change and decay

In this novel there are several comments on dentistry and the dentition. The vividness of the commentary suggests an intimate and personal knowledge of the pattern of caries, pulpitis, dental infection and exodontia without anaesthesia. It illustrates all too clearly the fear and horrors of dental disease at that time. The principal character in the

book, Thomas Buddenbrook, as a child had his teeth described as "not very good, being small and yellowish."

The prelude to the final act of decay of this family was the onset of acute pulpitis in a lower left (?) third molar tooth. Senator Thomas Buddenbrook suffered an all-consuming pain which necessitated his premature departure from the Senate meeting in the town hall to find his dentist. His description suggests personal experience – seedy look, pallor, watering eyes, mouth tightly shut and teeth clenched, and a low voice when he said, "I'm suffering frightfully – I'm nearly blind with pain." There was no choice but to go to Herr Brecht. The vivid description of untreated dental pain, followed by the attempted extraction of the carious molar which failed and then the sheer inability to cope with the removal of the roots, suggest a personal experience which Thomas Mann had probably endured himself.

With the thought of returning the following day the Senator left the surgery. Crossing the street he either fainted and struck his head with great force against the wet pavement, or alternatively he suffered a cerebrovascular accident, perhaps due to hypertension from the stress of his recent experience. He did not die straight away; the babblings suggest he had difficulty with speech and the gurgling sounds might represent an inability to swallow. Thomas Mann knew that people did not die of a bad tooth. He had had toothache, the crown had been broken, and the Senator had simply fallen in the street. ("*Was ever the like heard?*") The ignominious end of the Senator also proved to be the last straw in the death and decay of that prominent merchant family.

The lack of use of any analgesics, especially narcotics, which were freely available at that time, as well as alcohol, was surprising. General anaesthesia for dental extractions had been described in the United States by Wells (nitrous oxide in 1846) and Morton (ether in 1847) but perhaps had not yet arrived in the German cities in 1875. It came quickly to the UK and was demonstrated at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1867, but was it used in Germany - or did they just grin and bear it? Cocaine had limited use at the turn of the century, mainly because of its side-effects. It was not until the early twentieth century that the great German chemists produced the local anaesthetic (novocain) which was to become so prominent in the management of surgical conditions in the German-speaking area of Europe.

Khursheed F. Moos

Firebrands and fishbait

We invited further comments on our April extract, which described the tooth-pulling technique of Tom Sawyer's auntie, who thrust a hot coal in his face to distract him from the operation. We are delighted to print the following two contributions.

When I first read this novel (at around 12 years of age) I was struck by Tom's whitewashing scam. Now I recognise it as an excellent example of behavioural management.... how to turn an unpalatable chore into highly prized artistry.

The tooth-pulling scene is equally surprising, but quite brutal. The link between poverty, single parent families, demographics, low education and dentistry was there

even then for all to read; they are echoed in a more recent Scottish publication: the SIGN Guideline *'Prevention of Dental Caries in Children at High Risk'*.

Sometimes I wonder, in this new millennium, have we really improved dental services for children at all? Why has it taken so long for us to begin to develop better methods of extracting teeth in these, the underprivileged children of our society? I'd rather have a firebrand than a GA... **Marie Therese Hosey**

My rather tenuous link with the extract is the reference to fishing – a fondness for which I share with Tom, and indeed Huck Finn.

In my boyhood days in Millport I developed a non-vital central incisor – the result of a close encounter of the traumatic kind with a classmate's head during games. I subsequently gained a front tooth with a most interesting dark colour of which, I am sure, Tom Sawyer would have been most envious. My parents did not share my appreciation and I was sent round the bay to seek treatment from our local dentist, Willie Patrick. Mr Patrick had both a home and a practice in Glasgow and a house in Kames Bay in Millport. A small front room had been converted into a surgery where, at weekends and holidays, treatment was provided for local residents. Cumbrae was without electric power in those war-time days so any fast rotary work was done with a splendid foot-treadle engine.

Small rowdy boys would assemble in the old bathing station across the road from the practice and await the dreaded summons from the hand of the district nurse who doubled as Mr Patrick's DSA. To while away the time and calm our adrenalin-soaked bodies we fished, if the tide was in, for saithe which schooled in considerable numbers under the diving board.

My visit was mercifully brief. A quick burst on the dental engine after which a thing resembling a small wire corkscrew was inserted into my tooth and something was removed. "I see," said Willie, peering over his half-moon glasses, "that you are keen on fishing." (He was a fair angler himself.) "Here's some bait for you." Something that smelt of my mother's bleach was inserted into my tooth, followed by something else that tasted of cloves, and I was soon back with the boys, carefully unwrapping a 2 by 2 which contained one necrotic pulp. This was quickly placed on a hook and my line lowered into the sea. Within seconds a small fish had taken the dental lure. Too quickly, I hauled up my line whereupon the saithe dropped back into the water and shot off to rejoin its shoal, presumably swallowing my pulp in the process.

I often think of this and hope that, while my enjoyment of scuba diving continues, this is the first and last part of me to be consumed by a fish.

Bill Smith