



Letters to the Editor

Cunningham and Fisher

Some observations on Shirley Zangwill's article on George Cunningham (Newsletter, October 2001). The review is a timely reminder that the ideals which he campaigned for in the field of preventive dentistry have not been fully accepted by the dental profession. Without detracting from Cunningham's work it is worth pointing out that William MacPherson Fisher of Dundee is generally recognised as the originator of dental treatment for school children. Cunningham's benefactor, Dr Sedley Taylor, paying tribute in his obituary notice to Cunningham, generously acknowledges this fact. In his reference to Cunningham's work with the Cambridge Clinic, Sedley says: "...In this connection however, it must be noted that the originator of the treatment for school children was Mr Fisher of Dundee."

It was Fisher's address to the British Dental Association AGM at Cambridge in 1885 that is generally recognised as the watershed in the approach to the dental treatment of school children. Fisher and Cunningham complemented each other's work and in 1896, it was Cunningham in his address to the British Dental Association at its AGM in Edinburgh who urged the Government to provide funding for the dental treatment of necessitous children, an outrageous suggestion to capitalist, Victorian society.

Cunningham's pioneering work in this field and his vigorous support for co-worker Fisher is well documented but the claim that the Cambridge Clinic was the first to offer dental treatment to school children in 1908 is not accurate. In 1885, a qualified dental surgeon was appointed to North Surrey District Schools at Anerley. The school directors supplied instruments and materials and the dentist who attended one day a week received a salary of £60 pounds a year. There is an even earlier record of a dental clinic at the Metropolitan and City Orphanage, Twickenham in 1880. Here 280 children received dental treatment from a qualified dental surgeon who received £20 per annum. Unfortunately no details are available as the clinic did not provide a record of the dental treatment carried out. This is undoubtedly an area for further research.

Yours etc.

Rufus M. Ross

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Arms and the dentist – and other unlikely inventors

I enjoyed reading about my late gun-toting colleague, Doc Holliday, in the splendid article by Rufus Ross (Newsletter, October 2001). John Henry and his association with Wyatt Earp have been a source of interest to several writers and directors of both cinema and television films. In the latter medium John Ford had him as a physician, his character portrayed by Victor Mature opposite Henry Fonda's Wyatt Earp ("My Darling Clementine"). Unfortunately, as Rufus points out, it was the Doc's skill with

Colt revolvers rather than dental instruments that provided the fascination with his short and sad career.

On reflection I find it interesting to note the contribution made to the advances in firearm technology by members of what might seem unlikely professions. The invention of the percussion cap, which was to make the flintlock obsolete, was by a Church of Scotland minister in the parish of Belhelvie named Alexander John Forsyth. In addition to his pastoral duties Forsyth was an enthusiastic hunter of waterfowl and had noted that the delay between the ignition of the powder in the pan and the breech gave the birds time to evade the shot. Experiments with fulminates and help from his friend James Watt, inventor of the steam engine, led to Forsyth gaining a patent for his invention in 1807.

The first truly successful machine-gun was the invention of an American doctor of medicine, Richard Jordan Gatling. Although he never practised his profession, being more interested in mechanics, there is little doubt that his creation, the gatling gun, provided work for many of his colleagues for years to come.

Weapons have had a strong influence on our kind from our earliest beginnings. Robert Ardrey saw the birth of Cain in *Australopithecus africanus* and his deadly use of an antelope's femur against fellow primates and other contemporary animals. From that dawn of our race, and linked to our use of fire and its fuels, we have consistently searched

for bigger and better means to kill our fellows, even at last using the awesome power that fuels our great star. From the bone to the bomb our destiny would seem to be linked to weaponry and has produced more than a passing fascination with those of our kind who successfully use them, which brings me back to the Doc, so thanks to Rufus for a thought-provoking contribution.

Yours etc.

Bill Smith

We would welcome more letters for the October Newsletter..