



JACOB HEMET **Dentist to Royalty and Entrepreneur Extraordinaire**

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In the late 18th century, England began to rival France as a centre of advances in dentistry. Although the first book on dentistry in English was published in York in 1685 by Charles Allen, it was not on a par with what was produced a century later. By the latter part of the 18th century, an attempt was made to more or less follow scientific principles, as far as they were then understood. Thomas Berdmore, court dentist to George III, made a significant contribution with the publication in 1768 of his comprehensive text, “A Treatise on the Disorders and Deformities of the Teeth and Gums.” (1)

At about the same time, one of the most advanced and influential dentists, Bartolomeo Ruspini, Italian-trained and practising in London, brought out his “Treatise on Teeth.” (2) Ruspini had a substantial influence on the younger dentists who followed him. One of his preceptoral students was R. C. Skinner, who immigrated to the United States and authored the first book on dentistry in America. Ruspini himself came to America a number of times, practising in New York City, but each time returned to England.

An important figure in English dentistry during the last quarter of the 18th century was Jacob Hemet, but very little has been written about him. Where Berdmore was dentist to King George the Third, Hemet was appointed dentist to his Queen as well as to the Prince of Wales and the Princess Amelia, King George’s favourite daughter. Although he advertised that “he practised dentistry in all its branches,” he was obviously much more interested in being an entrepreneur, manufacturer and salesman of dentifrice. This in itself would not make him different from the many others who were practising dentistry in England in the 1780s and 1790s. What set him apart was the fact that he was first to patent his dentifrices and to travel throughout Europe and even to America to publicize – and sell – his product.

Dire Circumstances

What makes Dr. Hemet’s story even more interesting is the fact that he cultivated the nobility and concentrated on serving only the wealthiest; he repeatedly addressed his advertisements “to the gentry.” This was at a time when economic conditions in England were so bad that the disparity between rich and poor was enormous.

The beginning of industrialization allowed for the cultivation of great wealth; however, the wealth could only be obtained by relatively few at the expense of a majority that became poor. In King George III’s reign, over three million acres were appropriated, and this shattered the simple economic structure of English village life. Small farms were swallowed up by bigger farms to improve productivity. But a series of poor harvests crippled the poor, and the continuous wars, with France and the American colonies, put a tremendous strain on living conditions. Rickets and scurvy were rampant and among the remedies for loosened teeth were “scurvy grass or gittings to put in the children’s ale.” The poor could avail

themselves only of that “dentistry” that was practised by blacksmiths, hairdressers, corn-doctors and innumerable charlatans.(3)

“The contrast between the life led by the poorer classes and that led by the rich was immense... a few families owned huge tracts of the countryside, some of them amounting to hundreds of thousands of acres... Such estates supported their proprietors in great luxury, and provided them with the very best that [England] could offer.” (4)

London, however, was different. It was crammed with the poor, most of whom had been dispossessed from their land when they could no longer meet their mortgage payments. This came about because the Industrial Revolution and the widespread use of machines reduced the need for human labour. Included in this huge number of struggling poor were a relatively few, whose wealth was equal to that of all the rest combined. It was to this small minority of the upper class that Hemet made his appeals. (5)

A Family of Dentists

The Huguenots were Protestants who were severely persecuted and often murdered by the reigning Catholic monarchs of 17th-century France. Many of them fled to England and Jacob Hemet’s ancestors, who apparently had some experience and clinical training in dentistry, were among them. Moreover, some Huguenots who had been skilled artisans in France, such as goldsmiths, watchmakers and jewellers, decided that their manual dexterity qualified them to be “prosthodontists” of a sort; and ligaturing some ivory teeth to the teeth on either side of a gap didn’t demand any real clinical knowledge.

The first of the Hemet family to arrive in England was Peter Hemet Sr. (1670-1747). He had been born in Caen, France and he arrived in London in 1687. He was licensed to practise as a surgeon in 1702 and was soon appointed “Operator of the Teeth” to Queen Anne. He was obviously a very successful dentist, because when he died, in 1747, he left an enormous fortune of £20,000. He had two sons, one of whom was Peter Hemet Jr. (1696-1754), who inherited his father’s dental practice as well as his royal appointment and was also named dentist to the Prince of Wales and King George II. The other son, Francis Hemet, of whom little is known, was the father of Jacob Hemet, the subject of this paper, whose year of birth is given as either 1727 or 1729. (6)

Accumulation of such wealth through dentistry is not hard to understand when we consider the fees charged by those who catered to the upper classes. The flamboyant dentist Martin van Butchell, anxious to attract only the very wealthy, publicized that his fees were among the very highest in London. He charged £5 for a single artificial tooth, £42 for a full lower denture and £63 for a full upper. And he insisted that all fees were to be paid in advance. (7)

It was apparently obvious from Jacob Hemet’s zeal for marketing that he had a greater predilection for business than patient care, since London’s “Town and Country Magazine” in 1777 had this to say about him:

“He was designed for a mercantile life, but not being very fond of plodding at the counting-house desk and having a lucky name for drawing of teeth, upon the demise of some of his relations who bore it and had gained reputation as dentists, he turned operator, as it were, in spite of his teeth. He dropt the pen and took up the pelican, which soon screwed him into chariot.”

In an advertisement he ran in August 1790, Hemet claimed that he had been in active practice for more than 40 years. This would mean that he most likely began practice in the late 1740s, his first office being on Great Portland Street. When his appointment as dentist to Queen Charlotte was announced in June 1776, his office was on Little Tichfield Street, near Oxford Market.

When he was about 61 years old, he took on an apothecary-surgeon, Thomas Scarman, as partner, but soon thereafter retired from the active pursuit of dentistry and moved to Hastings in Sussex. Unfortunately his retirement was very short, for he died of a stroke on August 22, 1790, at the age of either 61 or 63 and was buried in St Clement Danes. (8)

Life as an Entrepreneur

Advertising by dentists was commonplace from dentistry's earliest days in Europe and in America. The earliest advertisements in this country were by two brothers-in-law in New York City. One, James Reading, styled himself a "tooth-drawer." Their ads appeared as early as January 1735. (9)

Jacob Hemet, much like the modern purveyor of consumer goods, advertised widely in areas where he never practised and placed his ads in numerous media. In 1768, his advertisement appeared in the London Chronicle. In 1769, it was displayed in a New York newspaper, and in 1770, in the Philadelphia Pennsylvania Journal. In some cities, primarily in Massachusetts, he apparently practised for short periods, as noted in his ads in Boston newspapers of 1772 and 1773. (10)

In contrast to the advertisements by his contemporaries, which stressed the fact that they filled teeth, extracted them if necessary, and constructed full or partial dentures, Hemet's ads were devoted exclusively to singing the praises of his dentifrices. These dentifrices, he claimed, were the answer to all the problems pertaining to the teeth and gingiva.

The promotion of mouthwashes and dentifrices was found in ads of other dentists of the time. The eminent Italian-turned-British, Bartolomeo Ruspini, in an advertisement in Aris's Birmingham Gazette of January 22, 1787, stated that his dentifrice was sold in containers, which carried on their lids his coat of arms and further, that each purchaser would receive a copy of his booklet "Treatise on the Teeth." (11)

But Hemet was unusual in that he was the first to patent his creations. On January 22, 1773, he received Patent Number 1031 for his two cleansers: "Essence of Pearl" and "Pearl Dentifrice." This small extract from his patent application gives some idea of the materials he used for his concoctions:

"To form the essence of pearl the following substances are used: amber, alcohol, benzoin, native mineral alkali, the odorous particles of the flowers of oranges and roses extracted by watery infusion, an essential and vegetable salt, vitrifiable earth and orrice root, the fruit of the aromatic aracus. These different ingredients are digested and that which comes over on distillation is the essence of pearl. The pearl dentifrice is made by thoroughly incorporating together the insoluble particles which remain after making the essence, adding to them the aromatic substances mentioned above."

In 1998, the Tate Gallery in London held an exhibition of the drawings of the renowned British artist J.W.M. Turner, "Turner and the Scientists." One of the drawings is that of a

dentist's office and laboratory and pictured is a still, most likely the kind that Dr. Hemet used to distill his "Essence of Pearl" dentifrice. (12)

A quote from one of Hemet's advertisements of 1790 perfectly captures his claims: *"But as some Persons may not yet be acquainted with their peculiar Properties, he begs Leave to mention that the Essence of Pearl and Pearl dentifrice are greatly superior both in Elegance and Efficacy to any Thing hitherto made use of, that they will effectually preserve the Teeth in a perfect sound State even to old Age, will render them white and beautiful, without in the least impairing the Enamel, fasten such as are loose, keep such as are already decayed from becoming worse, prevent the Toothache, perfectly cure the Scurvy in the Gums and make them grow fast and close to the Teeth, they likewise render the Breath delicately sweet and remedy almost all those Disorders, that are the Consequence of scorbutic Gums and bad Teeth."*

In a later portion of the ad he recommends his dentifrices to "those who have the Care of Children," assuring them that they were perfectly safe for even the tenderest teeth, yet will prevent a premature decay of the first teeth and will prevent those "swelled Faces and violent Pains which Children are so much subject to in the shedding of them." Then he promised that use of his material would ensure that the second teeth erupt in perfect fashion and last for the remainder of the person's life. Great claims, indeed! (13)

His dentifrices were sold by perfumers and apothecaries in many of the major cities of Europe, as well as in England. Jacob Hemet, as a producer and distributor of dentifrice, was far ahead of his time. One can consider him the ancestor of the modern toothpaste companies, who also rely on mass advertising, blanketing nations with claims of their products.

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