

AN EXHIBITION AT THE LIBRARY OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF MEDICINE

The Mesmerist:

John Elliotson (1791-1868)



8 May to 29 July 2017

Admission free

Open to all

OPENING TIMES

Monday – Thursday: 9.00 – 21.00

Friday: 9.00 – 17.30

Saturday: 10.00 – 16.30

**The Library, Royal Society of Medicine,
1 Wimpole Street, London, W1G 0AE**

Tube: Oxford Circus or Bond Street



**THE ROYAL
SOCIETY OF
MEDICINE**

[@RoySocMed](#) [/RoyalSocietyofMedicine](#) [Royal Society of Medicine](#)

In 1837, when 19-year-old Queen Victoria ascended the British throne, medicine was a bleak and brutal business. Operations were performed without pain relief while the standard medical therapies were bloodletting, purging and dosing with toxic potions. But that summer a promising medical innovation crossed the Channel from Paris: mesmerism.

Most of the British medical establishment scorned this new-fangled French idea but one doctor, the highly esteemed physician John Elliotson, embraced mesmerism with zeal. For 18 months in 1837 and 1838 Elliotson staged dramatic demonstrations on his patients at University College Hospital which drew fascinated audiences, provoked sensational headlines and – ultimately – split the medical profession.

This exhibition tells the story of John Elliotson and his battle to promote mesmerism – hypnotism as it was later renamed – in the face of furious opposition from the medical establishment and medical press. Elliotson was President of the Medical and Chirurgical Society of London in 1833, and it was during his term of office that the Society was granted a Royal Charter to become, in 1834, the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society.

Elliotson commenced a series of mesmeric demonstrations in May 1838. Large audiences gathered at the lecture theatre at University College Hospital. Answering charges of publicity-seeking, Elliotson declared that “the hospital was not founded to fill the pockets of the professors, but to throw light on truth and nature, and to expose fallacies.”



John Elliotson

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Two sisters, aged sixteen and seventeen respectively, had been admitted to the hospital to treat the epileptic fits suffered by both of them. Described as being of “diminutive stature and childish features,” their names were Elizabeth and Jane Okey. From August 1837, Elizabeth had undergone mesmeric treatment from Baron Dupotet with the result that the seizures from which she had suffered disappeared while other therapies had proved ineffective.

Elliotson, in turn, was able to place both sisters under magnetic trances by means of passes made with his hand in front of the subject’s face. The sisters’ susceptibility to this influence brought an apparent remission of their symptoms. Furthermore, their response while in a trance state to electric shock, and to magnetised coins and magnetised tea fitted them for the role of Elliotson’s showpiece in public and theatrical demonstrations of mesmerism.

Elliotson proposed that the degree of mesmeric influence depended upon the size of the surface area used in magnetising. For instance, a magnetised coin, if laid flat on the subject’s skin, would induce a deep sleep, and partial stupefaction could be induced if a pass were to be made using just one finger, but three fingers were necessary to bring about deep mesmeric sleep.

But it was, however, Elizabeth’s increasingly bizarre behaviour that was most remarkable. Normally quiet and meek, while in a mesmeric trance, Elizabeth would sing, dance, tell stories, mimic her fellow patients and her doctors, and whistle comic tunes.

On 10th May 1838 at University College Hospital before a large audience John Elliotson presented Elizabeth Okey, then “in a state of delirium, and unconscious of the great crowd on the benches, above the first row.”

Elizabeth openly mocked the assembled medical and aristocratic dignitaries, and spoke rudely to Elliotson. Later that year, an editorial in *The Lancet* recalled how Elizabeth’s “witticisms, the sarcasms, the snatches of song, which she spouted so prodigiously, were, not unfrequently, worthy of the licensed fool of the old comedy; the audience was often amused, when the jokes derived their raciness neither from ribaldry, profanity, nor obscenity. Her very impudence was naif.”

In fact some of the things she said may be thought strangely predictive of Elliotson’s subsequent career. “I say, Dr. Ellison, ‘spose I was to knock you off your perch; how funny you’d look.”

Inevitably, doubts came to be cast on the sisters' genuineness. A Physiological Committee of the Royal Society was formed to investigate the matter, and in July 1838 The Lancet published an anonymous paper citing cases where patients had simulated the effects of the mesmeric trance. Elliotson answered that he would expect some cases of deception but saw that as "no reason why mesmerism itself should be false."

But it was Thomas Wakley, the founding editor of The Lancet, and a friend of Elliotson's since they met at St Thomas's Hospital, whose scepticism and pursuit of verifiable truth led to Elliotson's fall from grace. Wakley had reported the work of Elliotson in detail in the pages of The Lancet but, while that journal radically opposes the power and influence of the Royal Colleges, it also sought to expose quackery and subjected modish trends in medicine to rigorous scrutiny.

On 16th August 1838 Elliotson took the Okey sisters to Wakley's home at 35 Bedford Square. Ten men were present: five supporters of mesmerism, and five sceptics. Experiments were carried out on Elizabeth Okey under Wakley's direction. With a piece of thick paste-board held before her face to prevent her from seeing, Elizabeth sat before Wakley who placed a piece of lead in her hand. It produced no effect. But upon application of a piece of magnetised nickel Elizabeth's face became "violently flushed, the eyes were convulsed into a staring squint, she fell back in the chair, her breathing was hurried, her limbs were rigid." Elliotson was triumphant but Wakley remained unimpressed. Another similar test was therefore arranged.

The Hospital Committee at UCH continued to oppose Elliotson's public demonstrations believing them to bring disrepute and ridicule to the hospital and the college, and Elliotson continued to ignore their opposition.

Unknown to Elliotson, Wakley informed his colleague Mr J.F. Clarke, a reporter for The Lancet, that he would not use any nickel and gave the piece he was holding to Clarke who concealed it in his waistcoat pocket and moved to the far side of the room. Wakley then applied a carefully concealed piece of lead and a farthing to Elizabeth's skin. As prearranged, the surgeon-apothecary and phrenologist William Hering, who was present at the meeting, exclaimed in a stage whisper: "Take care, do not apply the nickel too strongly!" Elizabeth then reacted as she had previously when the nickel had touched her skin.

In fact, the severity of the symptoms appeared to have increased. Elliotson was jubilant at this apparent success, referring to the "beautiful series of phenomena" just witnessed, but then Wakley explained the trick whereby he had not used nickel on that occasion, and had not even approached the subject with it. Clarke then produced the piece of nickel hidden in his pocket. Elliotson reacted by saying that there must be a satisfactory explanation for what had happened and persuaded Wakley to repeat the experiment the following day.

The next morning Elliotson expressed his belief that the lead must have been rubbed over an area of skin already sensitised by the nickel thus causing Elizabeth's symptoms, or that he may himself have been mistaken in assuming that lead could not convey the magnetic influence. The second round of experiments lasted from 9.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m. The effects of lead, nickel, gold sovereigns, and mesmerised water were tested and retested on both sisters.

Later that day Elliotson, who was pressed for time, left for his annual six-week holiday on the continent. Wakley now saw his chance and, having invited six more independent witnesses to observe the proceedings, continued the experiments in Elliotson's absence. Again, after five more hours during which both girls were subjected to further experiments, the results were inconsistent and inconclusive, but it seemed clear that mesmerising influence had no effect on water, lead, gold, or nickel.

All present rejected Elliotson's theories regarding an invisible mesmeric force as the basis of mesmerism and Wakley declared the whole subject to be "one of the completest delusions that the human mind ever entertained." The question of how subjects as the Okey sisters could, while under mesmeric influence, fall into deep trances, withstand extremes of pain, show remission of their symptoms, and even great improvement in their general medical condition, was left aside. As J.F. Clarke, the Lancet reporter present at these experiments, remarked: "How are we to explain the phenomena which result from mesmeric 'passes?'"

It surely cannot be assumed that the terrible convulsions, the opisthotonos, which were observable in the O'Keys (sic) during the experiments were the result of simple voluntary power. I believe it impossible that it could have been so. The experiments of Mr. Wakley, whilst they proved some things failed to prove others; and, in fact, left the subject under discussion still more mysterious."



Engraved by W. H. Egleton, from a painting by K. Meadows, Esq.

Thomas Wakley

Thomas Wakley,
Source: Wikimedia Commons

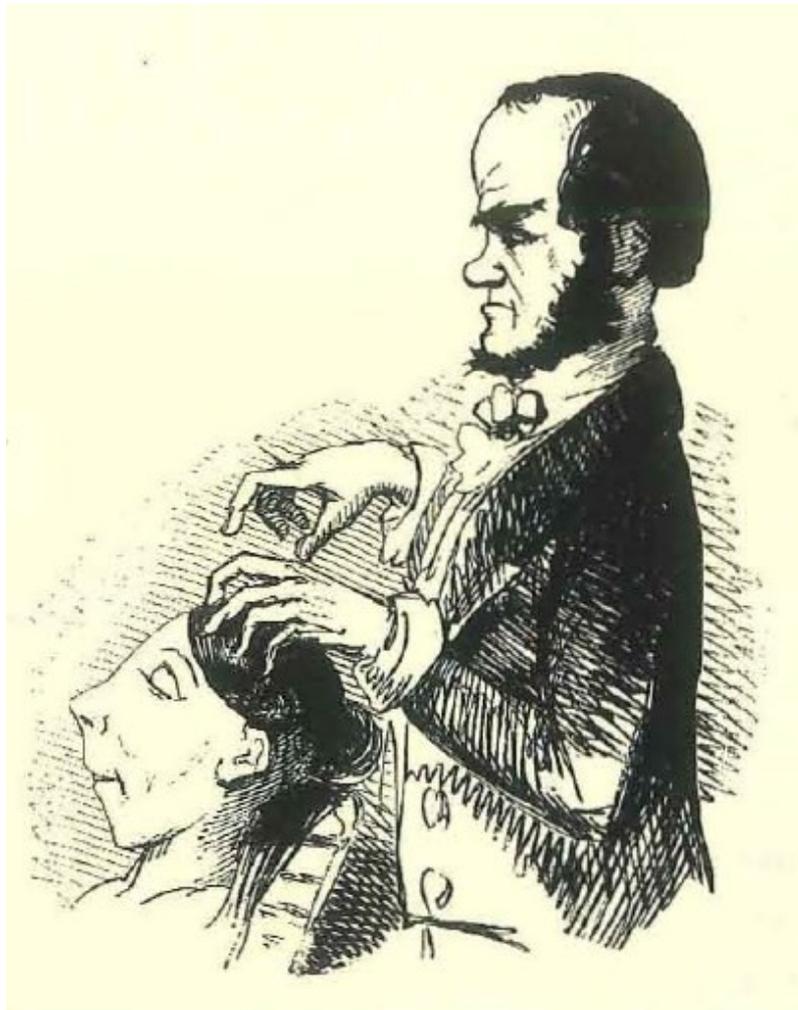
Wakley published his account of these events in a seven-page article in *The Lancet* for 1st September 1838, and published a vigorous attack in the form of an editorial entitled “Life and death of animal magnetism” in the issue for 8th September.

The *Lancet* editorial of 15th September is a concentrated attack by Wakley on the Okey sisters, describing Elizabeth’s “dark, piercing eye, her wonderful performances, and the power which she exercises over all who have come much in contact with her.” Wakley goes on to say that “The talent which she possesses in greatest perfection is imitation” and that “O’Key is excelled by few actresses on the stage.” He concludes that “No one acquainted with the fertile resources of O’Key’s mind can doubt of her ability to represent – as pieces of acting – all the states erroneously called mesmeric.”

Elliotson was, of course, outraged and deeply regretted the “evil hour” in which he took the Okey sisters to Wakley’s home only to see the whole subject of mesmerism discredited. Wakley, he said, was “a person ignorant of the subject and altogether incapable of making experiments,” and his account in *The Lancet* was “most imperfect and worthless.” In return, Wakley refused to print any of Elliotson’s letters of protest.

In November 1838 Elizabeth Okey revealed to Elliotson that, while in a trance state, she could tell when a patient was soon going to die. When standing near to a chronically ill patient she felt “a sense of great oppression, sickness, and misery” and could see a figure in a white robe standing near to the patient’s bed.

“The more intense the oppression from the emanations, the taller the figure: the stronger, therefore, are the emanations, and the nearer the person to his end.” One of the nurses confirmed Elizabeth’s story. She said, that on approaching the bed of a certain patient, Okey gave a convulsive shudder, and when asked the reason she replied that “Great Jackey was on the bed,” meaning, according to her own subsequent explanation, that “Great Jackey” was the “angel of death!” She shuddered slightly only at the bedside of another patient, “because Little Jacky was seated there!”



Punch cartoon on Mesmerism showing Elliotson

Source: Wikimedia Commons

That December Elliotson took Elizabeth to one of the male wards of the hospital to witness this phenomenon for himself. He took her hand and led her through the ward passing by all of the beds. At two of them, he felt her give a violent shudder. Afterwards, she told him that she had seen the figure of “Jack” at the foot of each of the two beds, and the nurse said that she too had heard Elizabeth shudder and had also heard her whisper; “There’s Jack.”

The next morning news of this adventure had spread throughout the hospital. The Lancet reporter learnt that one of the patients marked out by Elizabeth had, in fact, died that night, and that the other was likely to die very soon. On Elliotson’s arrival, he found the hospital in an uproar and so he immediately went to the lecture theatre and delivered an account of the science behind Elizabeth’s predictions and visions. A few days later, Elliotson was called to account by the hospital committee who wanted to know first of all why Elizabeth was still a patient.

They resolved that the practice of mesmerism should be banned from the hospital, and that Elizabeth be discharged from its care. Elliotson tried to defend himself by saying that Elizabeth was no imposter and that there was something real and extraordinary about the events that had recently occurred at the hospital. When the recommendations of the hospital committee were approved, Elliotson resigned, demanding that his students be refunded their fees and vowing never to return to the hospital or its college again.

‘The stillness, at this moment, was something awful, the calm respiration of the sleeping man alone was heard; for all other seemed suspended.’

In June 1842 a farm labourer named James Wombell, aged 42, having suffered agonising pain in his left knee for five years, and no longer able to work, was admitted to Wellow District Hospital in Nottinghamshire. William Squire Ward, the hospital surgeon, advised Wombell that his leg must be amputated at the thigh. At that time, this very painful operation was a terrifying prospect, so Wombell was unwilling to submit to the procedure no matter how necessary it was. Ward then contacted his friend, William Topham, a London barrister and an amateur practitioner of mesmerism, and suggested to him that, if mesmerised, Wombell may experience little or no pain during the operation.

Topham agreed, and the operation took place on 1st October 1842. Wombell, who had undergone some practice sessions with Topham, was mesmerised into a trance and Ward commenced the amputation by plunging his knife into the outside of the patient’s thigh as far as the bone then slowly drawing the blade around to the inside thigh. The whole operation took around 20 minutes. Wombell slept peacefully throughout and exclaimed upon waking:

'I bless the Lord to find it's all over!' When asked, Wombell declared that he 'never felt any pain at all...No pain at all; I never had any; and knew nothing till I was awakened by that strong stuff.' He also described hearing 'a kind of crunching' thought to be the sound of his own thigh-bone being sawn. The operation was a success, the wound healed, and the patient lived another 30 years.

TO DR. JOHN ELLIOTSON.

MY DEAR DOCTOR,

THIRTEEN months ago, when it seemed likely that this story had come to a close, a kind friend brought you to my bedside, whence, in all probability, I never should have risen but for your constant watchfulness and skill. I like to recall your great goodness and kindness (as well as many acts of others, showing quite a surprising friendship and sympathy) at that time, when kindness and friendship were most needed and welcome.

And as you would take no other fee but thanks, let me record them here in behalf of me and mine, and subscribe myself,

Yours, most sincerely and gratefully,

W. M. THACKERAY.

William Makepeace Thackeray's dedication to John Elliotson in the novel *The History of Pendennis* (1850)

Source: Wikimedia Commons



John Elliotson in his last years

Source: Wikimedia Commons

On Tuesday November 22, 1842, Topham and Ward gave an account of the operation to a packed meeting of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society. 97 Fellows of the Society and 72 visitors were present. As non-members of the Society, Topham and Ward were allowed to attend the meeting, but their paper was presented by Edward Stanley. The report printed in The Lancet on November 22, 1882 shows that it was met with utter derision and scepticism.

Mr Coulson regretted that Council had allowed the paper to be brought under consideration, and believed that its authors had been deceived than that the patient felt no pain. Mr Rutherford Alcock said that he had amputated limbs with the patients evincing no pain, and cited the case of one who had smoked his pipe during the operation and who watched the proceeding with perfect indifference. Dr Johnson regarded the 'insensibility' as the result of voluntary power. Dr Truman dismissed the idea that mesmerism could effect the wonders that its disciples professed as ridiculous, and gave the example of schoolboys, who, when flogged by their masters, were determined to show no sign of pain.

The physician and neurophysiologist Dr Marshall Hall offered a more detailed critique of the paper pointing out that while one limb was being amputated the other had remained motionless and that, unless man differs from the other animals, this could not be. Why had the patient heard the sawing of the thigh-bone, which is unendowed with sensibility, while remaining insensible to the contusion of the sciatic nerve whose sensibility was extreme? What physiologist could believe such an absurdity? Could the man keep his heart quiet, as he did the muscles of his face and leg? Why were not the actions of the heart, the number of the pulse, carefully noted?

In 1843 Elliotson published a vigorous defence of mesmerism and its application to painful surgery. Numerous cases of surgical operations without pain in the mesmeric state: with remarks upon the opposition of many members of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society and others to the reception of the inestimable blessings of mesmerism.

In Vol.9 of the Zoist published in 1851 Elliotson continued his attack on the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society with a paper entitled False accusation in the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society against a poor man because he suffered no pain while his Leg was amputated in the mesmeric coma; and cruel refusal of the Society to receive his solemn denial of the truth of the false accusation.

Here he condemned the Society as being “satisfied beforehand, without any acquaintance with the subject of mesmerism, but by the force of irrational prejudice and bad feeling, that mesmerism was an absurdity and imposition.” In answer to accusations that “the poor patient was a rogue, and the two gentlemen concerned in the case (Topham and Ward) a pair of blockheads or rogues,” the paper also includes the text of an affidavit taken from Wombell on 22 Mar 1851 stating that he had not felt any pain during the operation and signed with a cross.

“We suppose we shall now hear no more of mesmerism and its absurdities as preparatives for surgical operations.”

“The destruction of one limb of the mesmeric quackery will be one not inconsiderable merit of this most valuable discovery.”

On Monday 21st December 1846 an operation was performed at University College Hospital. It was an operation to amputate the leg of Frederick Churchill, a butler employed at a house in Harley Street. The operation was performed by Robert Liston and took a mere twenty-five seconds. It was also the first operation using ether vapour as an anaesthetic. The patient evidently felt no pain and on recovering consciousness asked when the operation would start.

Less than three months before this operation, ether anaesthesia had been successfully used by William Morton, an American dentist when he extracted a tooth from a local Boston merchant, who felt no pain. An account of Morton's success appeared in the London Medical Gazette on 18 December, under the headline 'Animal Magnetism Superseded.'

Liston had been Elliotson's most fearsome rival at University College Hospital. The operation he carried out on this occasion was the very same operation carried out four years earlier on a patient in a mesmeric trance by Topham and Ward, and also at University College Hospital. Liston was clearly making a point.

His friend Thomas Wakley happily reported in the *Lancet* that Liston's successful use of ether anaesthesia meant that "we shall now hear no more of mesmerism and its absurdities as preparatives for surgical operations. The destruction of one limb of the mesmeric quackery will be one not inconsiderable merit of this most valuable discovery."

A FULL DISCOVERY
OF THE
STRANGE PRACTICES
OF
Dr. ELLIOTSON
On the bodies of his
FEMALE PATIENTS!

AT HIS HOUSE, IN CONDUIT STREET, HANOVER SQ.

WITH ALL THE SECRET

EXPERIMENTS HE MAKES UPON THEM,
AND THE
Curious Postures they are put into
while sitting or standing, when
awake or asleep!



A female Patient being blindfolded, to undergo an operation.

THE WHOLE AS SEEN
BY AN EYE-WITNESS,
AND NOW FULLY DIVULGED!
&c. &c. &c.

Books on Display

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

Address, delivered at the opening of the medical session in the University of London : October 1st, 1832

London : Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, [1832]

Tr.B.108(10)

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

Correspondence with Mr. Robertson on the case of J-- L-- : [phrenological opinion on his skull].

Chatham, 1827.

Tr.B.91(11)

Elliotson founded the Phrenological Society of London in January 1823. Its fortnightly meetings were devoted to the reading of papers on the subject, and to feeling the cranial bumps and surfaces of volunteer subjects.

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

Cure of a true cancer of the female breast with mesmerism / by Dr. Elliotson ; with introductory remarks by Dr. Engledue.

London : Walton & Mitchell, 1848.

Tract B.427(4)

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

Dissertatio medica inauguralis de inflammatione communi : quam, annuente summo numine, ex auctoritate ... Georgii Baird, ... pro gradu doctoris, ... / eruditorum examini subjicit Joannes Elliotson, Londinensis

Edinburgi : excudebant Abernethy & Walker, 1810.

Heritage Centre (ELL)

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

The Harveian oration : delivered before the Royal College of Physicians, London, June 27th, 1846

London : H. Baillière, 1846.

Tract B.376(11)

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

Human physiology / by John Elliotson with which is incorporated much of the elementary part of the Institutiones physiologicae of J.F. Blumenbach.

5th edition

London : Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1840.

Heritage Centre (ELL)

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

Numerous cases illustrative of the efficacy of the hydrocyanic or prussic acid in affections of the stomach; with a report upon its powers in pectoral and other diseases.

London : Burgess and Hill, 1820.

Tr.B.92(6)

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

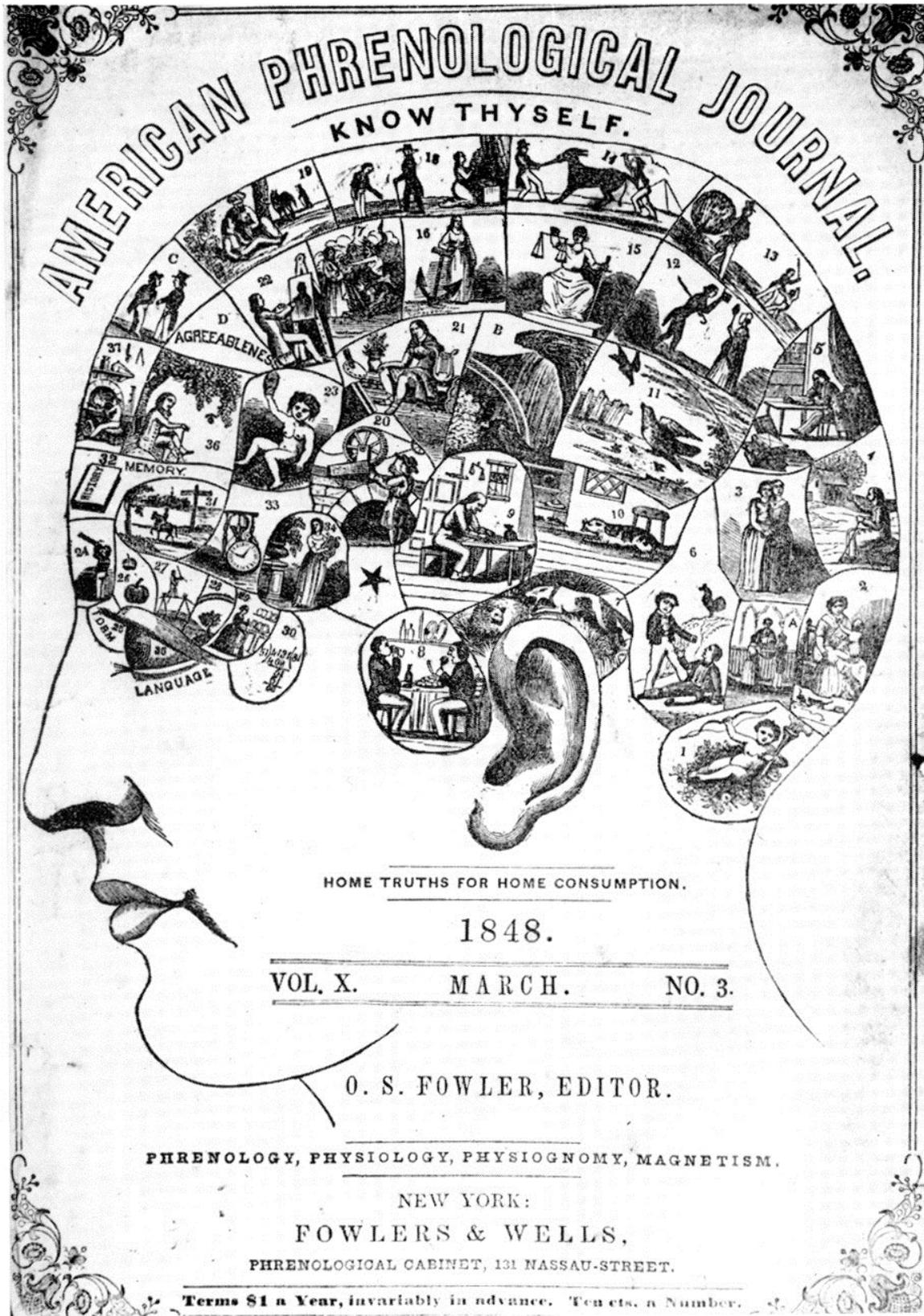
Numerous cases of surgical operations without pain in the mesmeric state : with remarks upon the opposition of many members of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society and others to the reception of the inestimable blessings of mesmerism.

London : H. Baillièrè ..., 1843.

Tr.B.312(6)



Source:: Wikimedia Commons



American Phrenological Journal

Source:: Wikimedia Commons

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

On the recent improvements in the art of distinguishing the various diseases of the heart : being the Lumleyan lectures delivered before the Royal College of Physicians in the year 1829.

London : Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1830.

M.8.b.4

John Elliotson (1791- 1868)

The principles and practice of medicine; founded on the most extensive experience in public hospitals and private practice; and developed in a course of lectures, delivered at University College, London / by John Elliotson. With notes and illustrations; by Nathaniel Rogers.

London : J. Butler, 1839.

Heritage Centre (ELL)

George Combe (1788 – 1858)

A system of phrenology.

4th edition.

Edinburgh: Maclachlan & Stewart; [etc., etc.], 1836.

Combe attended the lectures given at Edinburgh by Spurzheim. At first he was sceptical, but, following his own researches, he “appealed to Nature by observation, and at last arrived at complete conviction of the truth of Phrenology.” He founded the Edinburgh Phrenological Society and became Britain’s leading champion of the subject calling it “the greatest and most important discovery ever communicated to mankind.” Elliotson sent him a cast of his own head, as well as those of his mother and two sisters and became a corresponding member of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society. In a letter to Combe, Elliotson wrote: “I love truth, & believing phrenology to be founded in truth, study it as a science connected with my professional pursuits.”

Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776 – 1832)

Phrenology, in connexion with the study of physiognomy.

Part I: Characters. With thirty-four plates.

London : Published by Treuttel, Wurtz, and Richter, 1826.

In 1816 Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, a disciple of Franz Gall, visited Edinburgh where he performed a number of brain dissections. It was he who introduced phrenology to Britain.

Transactions of the Phrenological Society, 1824.

[Edinburgh]: John Anderson Jun., Edinburgh, and
Simpkin & Marshall, London

No more published

Robert Hanham Collyer

Psychography, or, The embodiment of thought : with an analysis of phreno-magnetism, "neurology," and mental hallucination, including rules to govern and produce the magnetic state.

Philadelphia : Sold by Zieber & Co., Philadelphia; Sun office, New York; Redding & Co., Boston, 1843.

A colourful figure and a former pupil of Elliotson's, Collyer left England and toured the United States and Canada giving demonstrations of mesmerism.

Sir John Forbes (1787 - 1861)

Mesmerism true--mesmerism false.

London, Eng. : John Churchill, Princes Street, Soho,
1845.

James Esdaile (1808 – 1859)

Mesmerism in India, and its practical application in surgery and medicine.

London : printed for Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, Paternoster-Row, 1846 London: printed by A. Spottiswoode, New-Street-Square.

Esdaile was an East India Company surgeon born at Montrose. From 1839 to 1846 he was in charge of the Hooghly Hospital. In 1845 he successfully performed surgery on a mesmerised convict to remove a double hydrocele. Esdaile admitted that until then he “had never seen any one mesmerised, nor read a mesmeric book, and had only conversed with one person who had witnessed the mesmeric phenomena.”

Esdaile’s fame spread across India and patients suffering similar tumorous growths travelled great distances to be treated by him. Elliotson wrote: “Dr. Esdaile has removed with success and perfect painlessness tumors so vast and so numerous that he would leave all the surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland in the shade, even had he not performed them without pain. I know of no other surgeon living or dead who has done such mighty things, or things approaching to such exploits.”

Baron Jules Du Potet Sennevoy (1796 – 1881)

Cours de magnétisme en sept leçons.

2. éd. augm. du Rapport sur les expériences magnétiques faites par la Commission de l'Académie royale de médecine en 1831.

Paris: Roret, 1840.

Dupotet arrived in England from France in June 1837.

Having failed to attract an audience for his lectures and demonstrations of animal magnetism, he offered his services to the London hospitals. The surgeon Herbert Mayo allowed him to visit the Middlesex Hospital where he found a large crowd of doctors and patients few of whom would take him, or his demonstrations, seriously.

Elliotson, however, invited him to University College Hospital where he treated a patient named Thomas Orton who suffered from epileptic fits. Dupotet induced Orton into mesmeric sleep by passing his hands slowly up and down in front of Orton's face. After several weeks of daily treatment by Dupotet, Orton was declared cured and was discharged from hospital.

Harriet Martineau (1802 – 1876)

Letters on mesmerism.

2nd edition

London : Edward Moxon, 1845.

Tract E.78(1)

The writer and journalist Harriet Martineau had suffered ill health for much of her life and in 1838 she fell seriously ill with a prolapsed uterus, most probably caused by an ovarian cyst. She went to live at Newcastle-upon-Tyne to be near to her brother-in-law and doctor Thomas Greenhow. In June 1844 Greenhow chaired a demonstration of mesmerism by Spencer Hall who later visited Martineau and placed her under a mesmeric trance. After three months of being mesmerised daily, she was back to a full state of health. In six letters to The Athenaeum published in 1844, she wrote an account of her cure. In answer, Greenhow published a pamphlet in which he attributed her cure to “the imagination and the will” rather than to mesmerism. Martineau, however, declared: “I am in robust health, and have not had one day’s illness since I avowed my cure by mesmerism.”

James Fernandez Clarke (1812 – 1875)

Autobiographical recollections of the medical profession.
London: J. & A. Churchill, 1874.

244.h.6

In 1834 when Clarke was still a medical student he wrote an account for the London Medical and Surgical Journal of an operation performed by Elliotson's rival Robert Liston to amputate the toe of a young girl. Liston suggested he should write for The Lancet and introduced him to its editor, Thomas Wakley. Clarke declared Elliotson "the most accomplished physician of the period" but was an equal admirer of Liston.

Francis Joseph Gall (1758 – 1828) & Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776 – 1832)

Anatomie et physiologie du système nerveux en général et du cerveau en particulier : atlas.

Paris, 1810.

981.b.3

The German physician Franz Gall introduced the theory of localisation of cerebral function. He argued that emotions and personality were governed by different parts of the brain, and that they could be detected by measuring the contours of an individual's skull. At first, Elliotson considered Gall to be "the finest philosopher that ever existed," but was soon accusing him of being greedy and grasping. He similarly admired Spurzheim but later considered him a "vile pilferer."

James Braid (1795 – 1860)

Neurypnology: or, The rationale of nervous sleep, considered in relation with animal magnetism. Illustrated by numerous cases of its successful application in the relief and cure of disease.

London : J. Churchill, 1843.

A.2.b.24

Braid introduced the term “hypnotism” (from the Greek for “nervous sleep”) to the English language, and wished to avoid the controversial methods of mesmerism. Elliotson preferred what he called “the old-established modes of mesmerising” and condemned the “course method practiced by Mr. Braid.” Braid held that mesmeric sleep involved changes in cerebral circulation and was not due to transfer of mesmeric fluid or animal magnetism. It was most easily brought about when the subject fixed their gaze on a small bright object held 8 to 15 inches away and just above the eyes. Elliotson once attempted to induce sleep in this way but, according to his own account, “no effect came” and so “all was in vain.”

Chauncey Hare Townshend (1798 – 1868)

Facts in mesmerism : with reasons for a dispassionate inquiry into it.

Second edition, revised and enlarged.

London : Hippolyte Baillière ... ; Paris : J.B. Baillière ... ; Leipzig : T.C. Weigel, 1844.

The poet and collector Chauncey Hare Townshend was a close friend of Charles Dickens. Both were intrigued by mesmerism, and they met at Elliotson's house in 1840. Dickens became Townshend's literary executor and dedicated his novel Great Expectations to him.

Thomas Capern

The mighty curative powers of mesmerism, proved in upwards of one hundred and fifty cases of various diseases.

London: H. Bailliere, 1851

268.e.36

Capern was the resident mesmerist at the London Mesmeric Infirmary. He went on to practice independently in the West Country and by 1864 he could claim to have cured over 600 patients.

Lemuel W. Belden (1801 – 1839)

An account of Jane C. Rider, the Springfield somnambulist: the substance of which was delivered as a lecture before the Springfield lyceum, January 22, 1834. Springfield, Mass., G. and C. Merriam, 1834

224.a.7

This book was donated by Elliotson to the Library of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society.

Bibliography of Sources Consulted

Roger Cooter.

The cultural meaning of popular science: phrenology and the organization of consent in nineteenth-century Britain.

Cambridge, London, etc., Cambridge University Press, 1984

Alan Gauld.

A history of hypnotism.

Cambridge, New York, etc.,
Cambridge University Press, 1992

Antonio Melechi.

Servants of the supernatural:

The night side of Victorian science.

London, Heinemann, 2008

Wendy Moore.

The mesmerist:

The society doctor who held Victorian London spell-bound. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017

Exhibition curated by Robert Greenwood, *Heritage Officer*

Booklet compiled by Ashley Phillips, *Library Assistant*