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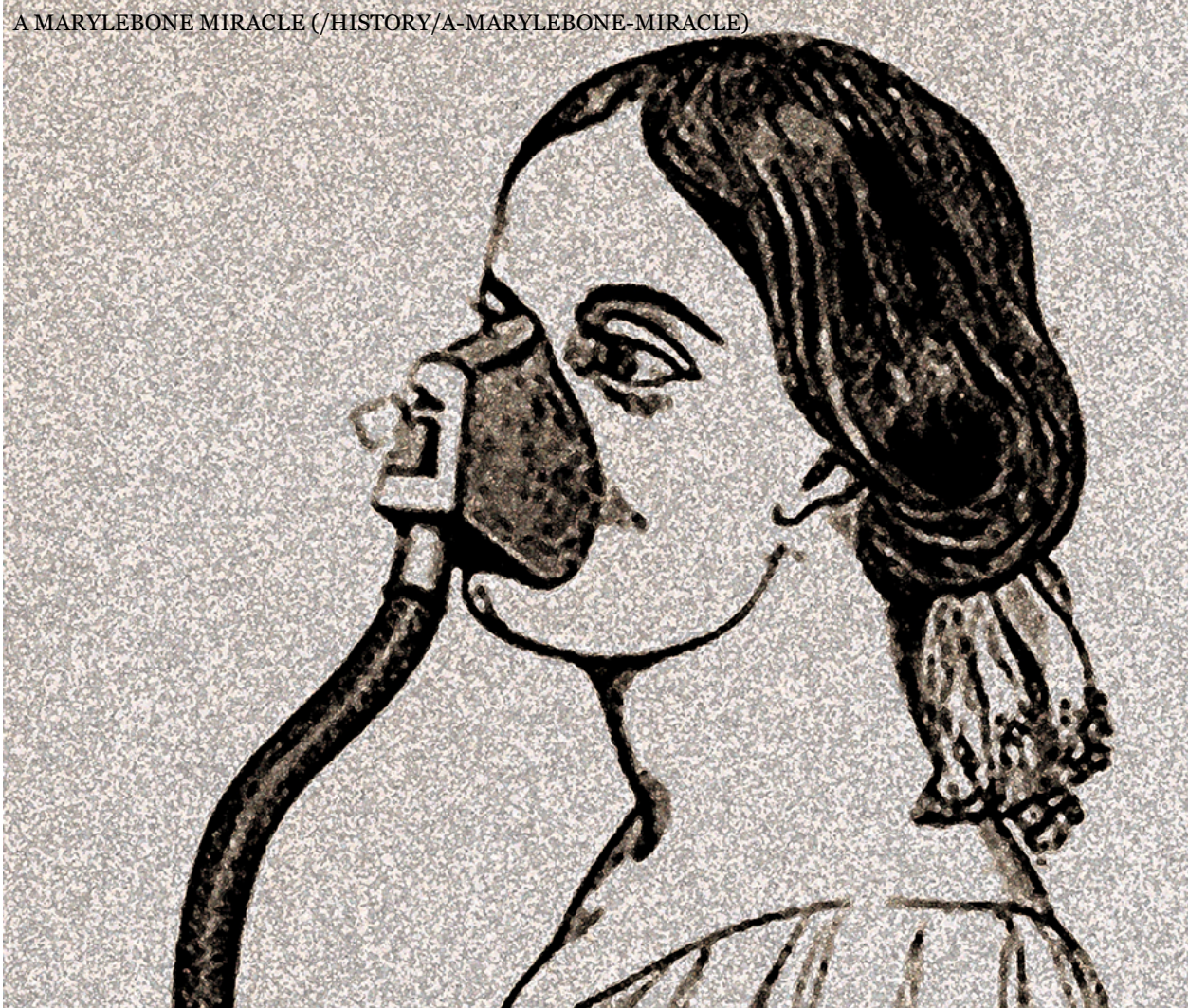
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A MARYLEBONE MIRACLE (/HISTORY/A-MARYLEBONE-MIRACLE)



## HOW A BRASH AMERICAN CAME TO MARYLEBONE WITH A MIRACLE CURE FOR TB AND ENDED UP IN THE DOCK

Twenty-five per cent of all deaths in Victorian Britain were caused by tuberculosis or, as it was better known, consumption, through which the lungs and the body wasted away to an inevitable gasping, emaciated end. Everyone feared it. Doctors fought it. Novelists exploited it – teary-eyed readers were ever moved by the “consumptive Victorian heroine”.

Thus there was some hope in the summer of 1864 when a brash young American doctor came to Marylebone to establish a practice devoted “exclusively to the elucidation and treatment of pulmonary complaints”. Dr Robert Hunter’s surgery was at 14 Upper Seymour Street. The Edwardians later redid the numbering and seekers of Hunter’s surgery will find it one door east of the present day Edward Lear Hotel on Seymour Street. The poet had lived there for a time, or as he put it, he had a “redboom near Squortman Pare”.

Hunter celebrated his presence in London by sending a series of paid advertisements, in the form of letters, to the major newspapers. In Dr Hunter’s Letters on the Lungs, he declared that a patient diagnosed with “tubercle” should not fear that he or she had been touched by “the hand of death”. Away with dread and resignation, he cried. “The question is: can consumption be cured? My answer is unequivocally Yes.”

Dr Hunter’s letters were published in book form and sold with “unexampled rapidity”. The medical profession took umbrage at this interloper. The Lancet quickly dismissed Hunter as an unknown and mocked his medical degree. It was probably “the gift of some blushing university of America”, it sneered. As for his touted cure, the Lancet demanded, unsuccessfully, that Hunter submit the details for what today we would call peer review.

Wheezing Britons nevertheless panted their way to Upper Seymour Street in great numbers to receive Dr Hunter’s proprietary secret “admixture of oxygen”. He charged one guinea for the first visit and five guineas for a month of

treatments. In September 1865 Hunter began seeing a new patient, Mrs Annie Merrick, whose husband was a tobacconist on Baker Street. A few weeks later, Samuel Merrick, accompanied by his brother-in-law, came to the surgery to give Dr Hunter a horse-whipping.

The “Extraordinary Medical Fracas” was quite soon the talk of London. Hunter told the police that the two men attacked him unprovoked. Merrick punched him and the brother-in-law, Frederick Jones of New Bond Street, “fastened his teeth” in Hunter’s ear. Only the efforts of the doctor’s attendants prevented further mayhem. Merrick insisted that Hunter deserved his beating for he had “grossly insulted” his dying wife. Two days later, having gone from accuser to accused, Dr Robert Hunter found himself in court charged with having “feloniously and carnally known and abused Mrs. Annie Merrick”.

Mrs Merrick was too ill to come to the magistrate’s court on Marylebone High Street, so the court went to her. She was found propped up in her bed above the shop on Upper Baker Street. She was in her late 20s and bore the signs of having been a woman of prepossessing beauty but was now quite ill. She had seen Dr Hunter on several occasions; his methods were simple, she was told to sit and “inhale something”. After a few sessions, she complained of continued pain in her lungs. The doctor then suggested a physical exam and asked her to strip down to her waist; however, being so thin from the effects of the disease, her clothes dropped entirely to the floor and she found herself naked in front of him and she fainted. When she awoke, she found the doctor “in an indecent position”. She called him a brute and left immediately (presumably clothed). Dr Hunter, married and with family, denied all the charges but was remanded for trial.

At the Old Bailey, Mrs Merrick told a now greatly elaborated story. She claimed that whatever Dr Hunter had given her to inhale had left her with a “stupefying powerless feeling” and he took advantage of her. Told that she must give the exact nature of what took place, she described being overpowered by the doctor’s passionate kisses before he eventually had his way.

Dr Hunter was defended by that legendary figure of the Victorian bar Serjeant William Ballentine, who showed no mercy cross examining Annie Merrick while she histrionically coughed and spat into her handkerchief. She hadn’t screamed out for help even though 14 Upper Seymour Street was crowded with patients and staff. When she left, rather than run straight home to her husband, she popped round the corner to the City of Quebec pub. Poor Mrs Merrick’s dubious past was dragged up. As was the interesting fact that her husband was bankrupt and hadn’t been paying Dr Hunter’s fees.

The jury acquitted Dr Hunter in short order and he left the court to be greeted by cheering (and hacking) patients and supporters. Samuel Merrick was later acquitted for his assault on the doctor because he had acted on false information from his perjurious wife. The ear-chomping brother-in-law did get two months.

But the problems for Dr Hunter had only begun. The Pall Mall Gazette published a leader entitled “Impostors and Dupes”. Whether Dr Hunter was guilty or not of the squalid charge brought by the discredited Mrs Merrick was beside the point. The Gazette accused Hunter of falsely using the title of MD in England. He came to Britain and knowingly established himself “in that highly respectable part of London, Upper Seymour Street, Portman Square”. By using the “pernicious puffery usually resorted to by quacks and charlatans”, he was able to play upon the fears of the ignorant and to obtain enormous fees. The doctor sued the newspaper for libel.

Hunter defended his credentials, citing two degrees earned in New York and Canada. He accused the Harley Street clique of shutting him out because he brought a radical new theory to London, namely “the carbonaceous character of tubercle and the importance of an oxygenated mode of treatment”. He was supported by several satisfied patients. A tailor from Holborn, for example, said he “found himself much better” after his course of inhalation.

The Gazette’s editors brought forward a parade of respected (some knighted) physicians from the London Hospital for Diseases of the Chest and the Brompton Consumption Hospital. Predictably, the mandarins dismissed Hunter’s theories out of hand; his carbonaceous theory was not new, it had been studied and confined to a dustbin years ago. Hunter got his “cure rate”, they testified, by frightening the nervous into fancying that the first sign of a snuffle, a cough or a sore throat was the warning sign of approaching consumption. These timid folk would hasten to Upper Seymour Street, pay their guineas and breathe in deeply that mysterious “admixture of oxygen”. Then, of course, as they most always do, the nose stops running, the throat stops rasping, and the happy patient would credit Dr Hunter with life-saving skills.

The jury took an hour to decide that Dr Hunter had been libeled by the Gazette but his reputation would have to be salved with the insulting damages of just one farthing. The Lancet offered the thanks of the entire profession for the exposure of such dubious practices.

Dr Hunter – knackered from his labours – closed his surgery on Upper Seymour Street and spent several years on the continent. Despite the scandal, he reported that he was consulted by nobility and gentry from all parts of Europe. He eventually returned to New York where he was hailed as “the father of inhalation”. He published a defense of his theories and denounced the London medical establishment for “what I cannot but regard as a conspiracy formed to destroy my reputation”. But he would not fight them any longer: “If the public is satisfied to leave things as they are, and to place all its hopes on cod-liver oil, I am sure the Consumption Hospital doctors will have no objection. It will save trouble and kill competition!”

**Words: Tom Hughes**

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