When a cane was the necessary complement of a physician

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ABSTRACT – Although Dr John Radcliffe's gold-headed cane, presented to the Royal College of Physicians in 1825, became well-known following the publication two years later of Dr William Macmichael's book, *The gold-headed cane*, little consideration has previously been given either to medical canes, or to the custom of cane-carrying by doctors in the 18th century. This article makes a brief assessment of medical canes within the social and historical framework of the period, and views Macmichael's book in its literary context, with mention of other relevant examples of books in this genre.

The gold-headed cane that once belonged to Dr John Radcliffe is a treasured possession of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP). Following the publication of William Macmichael's book, *The gold-headed cane*, in 1827, it became an emblem of physicianly medicine as practised in the 18th century (Fig 1). The book was written as if the cane were recounting its experiences while in the company of six successive generations of prominent Fellows of the RCP, the last being Dr Matthew Baillie, whose widow bequeathed it to the College in 1825. To date, there have been nine editions. The most recent, published by the RCP in 1968, was supervised and introduced by the great-grandson of William Macmichael, the late Dr Thomas Hunt.

William Munk and the gold-headed cane

Although *The gold-headed cane* has been in print for most of the past 172 years, the subject of medical canes and the custom of cane-carrying by doctors in the 18th century have received scant attention. Macmichael wrote his book when he was the College Registrar. In 1884, nearly 50 years later, William Munk, Harveian Librarian, wrote an introduction to the third edition of *The gold-headed cane*, which he edited and enlarged. In this expanded version Munk made observations concerning physicians’ canes in general and it was in this context that he used the phrase ‘... when a cane was the necessary complement of a physician’. He emphasised that Radcliffe's cane with its bar-shaped handle was unusual:

> The physician's cane proper has a rounded knob or head, often of gold, sometimes of silver, but in later times generally of ivory. In earlier times this knob was perforated with holes, and it had within, a cavity or chamber ... for aromatic or Marseilles vinegar ... of sovereign efficacy against all pestilences.

In a footnote Munk went into more detail about the supposed origin of this prophylactic against the plague:

>[It is] said to have arisen from the confession of four thieves, who, during a plague at Marseilles, plundered the dead bodies with perfect security, and who, on being arrested, stated, on condition of their being spared, that the use of an aromatic vinegar had preserved them from the influence of the contagion. The head of the cane was thus a vinaigrette, which the doctor held to his nose when he went into the sick chamber, so that its fumes might protect him from contagion and other noxious exhalations from his patient

By the time Munk was writing, however, such vinaigrette canes had become rare objects.

Adventures of inanimate objects

Macmichael's publication, *The gold-headed cane*, in which an inanimate object comments on events and affairs, belongs to a particular genre. The once popular literary device can be traced back to an article in *The Tatler,*

![The gold-headed cane](image)

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JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE-STREET.

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Fig 1. Title-page of the first edition of *The gold-headed cane.*
published in November 1710, in which 'a shilling that lay upon the table reared itself upon its edge, and, turning the face towards me, opened its mouth, and in a soft silver sound, gave me the following account of its life and adventures'. A vogue for such pseudo-histories, in much longer and more elaborate accounts than the original, continued into modern times, at least in the form of essay subjects set for children. In the 18th and early 19th centuries authors used this medium with a variety of intentions: some books written for children were instructional and moralistic, while those for adults tended to be satirical and gently amusing. The formula offered almost unlimited choice both of subject matter and geographical range. For example, *The adventures of a rupee, wherein are interspersed various anecdotes Asiatic and European* includes a satirical description of a medical consultation. After travels in the company of its master in India and China, the rupee:

... touched at Batavia where my master was seized with a remittent fever ... A consultation of doctors from all the English ships was called on my master's case, for our surgeon began to find his conscience affected at the mortality that prevailed under his management ... a doctor with a conscience about a matter of life and death is a wonder ... but in truth, gentle reader, our surgeon, from tenderness of conscience, called a consultation of the faculty.

In the same literary tradition, a pseudo-autobiography of another gold-headed cane anticipated Macmichael's account by 44 years. There is no evidence that William Macmichael was influenced by this forerunner of his book, though he may have come across it. *Phantoms: or, the adventures of a gold-headed cane, containing a general descriptive and picturesque view of human life* was published in two volumes in 1783; the author's name is given on the title page as the late Theophilus Johnson, prompter to Sadler's Wells. The publisher described the author as 'a misguided and unfortunate man' who 'having by a series of excesses and debaucheries debilitated his constitution ... [and] in the distressful moment of frenzy ... unhappily cut short his thread of life'. Despite his terminal difficulties, Theophilus Johnson wrote an informative and entertaining book about a particular gold-headed cane, which spoke as follows:

As there are so many different sorts, breeds, sizes, shapes and fashions of my fraternity of the ferril now existing in the universe, and to show you that I am of no ordinary derivation, you shall have an account of my birth and family ... You must know, Sir, I am an exotic of the breed of cane. With the rest of my brethren, we were by the hands of savages, pagans and unbelievers, all cut down in a few hours; ... and sent on board an English East-Indiaman which in a few months arrived at her moorings in Blackwall.

This cane was first bought as part of a lot for a guinea. It next went through 'about an hour's operation of glueing, filing and ferrilling ... to be equipped cap-à-pie, gold head and copper foot ... [and finally] ornamented ... with a very elegant tassel'. The cane was then offered for sale for the large sum of ten guineas.

**Canes at the Royal College of Physicians**

In addition to John Radcliffe's famous cane, the RCP has a collection of six malacca canes. All were presumably at one time owned by physicians, although only one is inscribed with a name on its decorated gold head, that of Dr. Lind FRS (Fig. 2). Dr. James Lind (1736–1812) was elected FRS on account of his scientific interests which, according to Madame D'Arlay, were a disadvantage when he was trying to advance his practice after he settled in Windsor. She wrote that 'his taste for tricks, conundrums and queer things, makes people fearful of experiments with their constitutions, and think him a better conjuror than a physician'. He was a friend of Sir Joseph Banks, became physician to the Royal Household, and is particularly remembered as the mentor of the young Percy Bysshe Shelley; while at Eton, Lind helped Shelley resist the wish of his father to have him admitted to a madhouse. Like his namesake, Dr. James Lind of scurrvy fame, he was an Edinburgh graduate and had also served in the navy.

The provenance of the other five canes in the RCP collection is unknown. Of the four ivory-headed canes, one is a 17th century example of a piquet cane, so called because of the black and silver inlay on the ivory head (Fig. 3). Such a cane was handed to a bystander by Charles I on the day of his execution. Piquet patterns, often based on floral designs, were similar to those used in embroidery of the period. The perforated ivory heads of two of the canes can be detached by unscrewing, to allow an olfactorily powerful pomander with ingredients such as ambergris, civet and musk to be inserted into their hollow tops. There is also an example of another dual-purpose cane commonly carried in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At first sight its purpose is not obvious. It unscrews at two levels, just below the head, and some way down the shaft. In the hollow shaft is a long glass phial, sealed by a stopper; in the top section should be a slender goblet. Thus, the cane served as a brandy flask, the contents no doubt suitable for administration to patients as well as providing a restorative for physicians after exacting consultations.

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**Fig. 2.** Malacca cane in the RCP collection: the gold head is inscribed with the name Dr. Lind FRS.
Canes as fashionable accoutrements

The fashionable doctor of the 18th century was 'somewhat of a dandy, with his buckskin breeches and top boots, or stockings and buckled shoes, his velvet or satin coat with gilt-buttons, his wig and three-cornered hat, his gloves and even his muff'. Such was Dr Rice Charleton (1710–1789) of the Mineral Water Hospital in Bath, painted in his finery by Thomas Gainsborough (Fig 4). His gold-headed cane was clearly an important accoutrement which, for the portrait, he carried like a swagger stick. Gainsborough painted a portrait of another physician with his cane, Dr Ralph Schomberg (1714–1792), who was in practice in Bath (Fig 4). His gold-headed cane was clearly an important accoutrement which, for the portrait, he carried like a swagger stick. Gainsborough painted a portrait of another physician with his cane, Dr Ralph Schomberg (1714–1792), who was in practice in Bath. Although none of the physicians included in the RCP collection chose to be painted holding a cane, it is evident that the gold-headed canes shown in the portraits of some fashionable and important provincial physicians look indistinguishable from those associated with other gentlemen of the time. For instance, Gainsborough painted Lord Hastings, Governor of India, with his cane which was of a kind that could just as well have been carried by a physician. Similarly, in the National Portrait Gallery, London, there is a portrait by Thomas Hudson of George Handel holding a cane with an impressive gold head similar to those of some physicians' canes.

Canes in caricature

It was particularly in England that satire and caricature flourished in the 18th century. The latter word in its Italian form, *caricatura*, was first used in England in the previous century by the literary physician Sir Thomas Browne of Norwich. Caricaturists of the 18th century seized on canes as a particular characteristic of both physicians and quacks. Thus, in Hogarth's well-known cartoon, *The Arms of the Honourable Company of Undertakers*, a forest of canes is depicted borne by a curious medley of physicians and quacks, with the heads of their canes applied to their noses (Fig 5). They are likely to be ivory-headed pomander canes, rather than the rare silver-headed vinaigrette variety. The three top figures represent well-known and successful quacks of the time. Hogarth has placed an eye in the head of Chevalier Taylor's cane (left); self-styled as Chevalier, he travelled the country advertising himself as 'Ophthalmiator.
Pontifical, Imperial and Royal. Mrs Mapp, a bonesetter, is in the middle, shown with a femur instead of a cane; known as ‘Crazy Sally Mapp’, she drove twice a week in a coach and four to consult at the Grecian Coffee House. On the right is Joshua Ward, known as ‘Spot Ward’ because of an extensive birthmark on one side of his face; he made a fortune from his pill and his drop. After he prescribed for the King, a vote was apparently passed in the House of Commons to protect him from the interdictions of the RCP, as well as to allow him the privilege of driving his carriage through St James’s Park. It has been said that Hogarth’s pictures represent a kind of literature: they must be read as well as seen.

Thomas Rowlandson also made frequent use of canes to identify doctors. In Medical dispatch, or Doctor Doubleday killing two birds with one stone (Fig 6) he labelled the doctor’s cane ‘medical staff’, thus adding to the satire by drawing attention to an ancient medical symbol, while its 18th-century owner flagrantly flouted the Hippocratic code. Several cane-carrying Fellows also feature in Rowlandson’s well-known picture of the Long Room of the RCP building in Warwick Lane15. After nearly two centuries it is difficult to judge the extent to which Rowlandson was representing reality or whether he was simply using the cane as the caricaturist’s medical hallmark.

**Some conclusions concerning canes**

In assessing the historical background and context of John Radcliffe’s gold-headed cane, the evidence from portraiture and from the canes that survive in present-day collections suggests that 18th-century physicians, at least those who were ‘well heeled – well wheeled’16, had malacca canes with ornamental gold or silver heads, and that they were conforming to the fashion of the time rather than carrying their canes for specifically medical reasons. Dual-purpose vinaigrette canes had become rare by the 18th century and were uncommon even in the preceding century. By contrast, dual-purpose ivory-headed pomander canes were widely available and apparently as likely to be carried by those with claims to belong to the medical profession as by those with more bogus pretensions as healers. Pomander canes were a gift to caricaturists.

Dr David Pitcairn handed on John Radcliffe’s gold-headed cane to Matthew Baillie in the late 1790s, at which time the cane lamented: ‘I ceased to be considered any longer as a necessary appendage of the profession’. The new century saw changes in apparel and accessories, as well as in attitudes; but caricaturists would have to wait some time before they could substitute the binaural stethoscope for the cane as a pathognomonic label for medical men. In the final paragraph of the extended edition of The gold-headed cane, William Munk recorded the reaction of the cane to changing times:

On emerging from my seclusion in the corner of the library, I was bewildered with the changes that had taken place in men and manners ... The conventional dress of the physician with
which I was familiar, was no longer to be seen; and I missed much of that staidness of demeanour, calm self-possession and scrupulously polite bearing to which I had been so long accustomed. I know not whether the change that has been wrought is to be approved or deplored; but I have been convinced that change and improvement are not synonymous terms.

The cane was no doubt expressing sentiments experienced at times by elderly physicians through the ages.

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