Sir George Baker

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George Baker was born 250 years ago on 8 February 1722 in the vicarage at Modbury in South Devon. He was a scholar at Eton, and in 1742 entered King’s College, Cambridge. After completing his arts degree he journeyed to Leyden, where he matriculated in the faculty of medicine on 18 February 1745. He did not take a degree at Leyden but, after a year, returned to Cambridge to continue his medical education.

He received his MD on 6 July 1756 and moved to Stamford in Lincolnshire to begin his practice. Munk (1878), in his biographical sketch, says that Baker went to Stamford because he had been invited there by a large circle of friends whom he had met at Cambridge. But it seems clear that Baker had early set his sights on London, perhaps encouraged by William Heberden whose pupil he had been at Cambridge, for shortly after he settled in Lincolnshire he presented himself as a candidate for election to the College of Physicians. On 6 August 1756, he journeyed to London to the College, then situated in Warwick Lane, for the first of his three examinations. He was admitted as a candidate for election on 30 September of the same year, and in the year following he became a Fellow of the College and was destined to become one of its most glorious ornaments. He filled at one time or another all the high offices of the College. First elected Censor in 1761, he held that office again in 1764, 1774, and 1780 (and also for part of 1771 to replace Swithen Adee who resigned from office) and he was an Elect in 1784. When William Pitcairn resigned as President in 1785 Baker was elected to succeed him. It was the first of several occasions on which he held the position of first physician in the land.

Baker’s progress in London was rapid. Not only was he elected Censor the year he moved from Stamford but he was also invited to deliver the Harveian Oration to the College, and in 1762 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. Baker’s satisfaction at his early success is shown in a letter written to his friend Maxwell Garthshore in Uppingham (Baker, 1761). He thanked Garthshore for the present of two dozen bottles of claret and told him that: ‘I have had a very considerable run of busyness with considerable People; & the prospect dayly grows clearer.’

Later, however, his optimism was at a low ebb. He wrote again to Garthshore (Baker, 1762).
'I go on in busyness tolerably well; that is (talking medically) my ingesta rather exceed my egesta. Notwithstanding this (such is my ambition) I am often uneasy, & apprehensive about the event. Whenever I mention my fears to Hunter, he assures me that there is not the least danger in my case. This comforts me. The critical time is now coming on, & I grow very serious and thoughtful.'

Hunter's advice was sound, for in 1764 Baker was appointed physician in ordinary to the queen. That he fulfilled his functions to her satisfaction is evident, for in 1776 he was created a baronet, and in 1787 he became physician to the king when George III dismissed the eccentric Richard Jebb from that position. This appointment, however, was the source of much worry for Baker for, in the June of the year following, the first signs of the king's impending madness were noted. The king's mysterious illness progressed throughout that summer and into the winter and for Baker it was a time of great unhappiness. Unlike some of the other physicians surrounding the king, he was reluctant to give a favourable prognosis for a disease he did not understand and consequently he lost the Queen's favour. In addition he found himself at the heart of the regency crisis, subjected to stringent examination by three committees appointed by Parliament and, on occasions, he was even attacked by his royal patient. Fortunately, George III made what seemed to be a complete recovery from his malady in February 1789 and when the illness recurred in 1801, and again in 1804, Baker's place as senior physician had been taken by Thomas Gisbourne and so he was not asked to attend the king.

In his day, Baker was renowned both as a physician and as a scholar. 'No man', wrote Munk (1878), 'ever followed the career of physic and the elegant paths of the Greek and Roman muses with more success. As a scholar he had few equals and no superior'. Nichols (1817) compared his classical abilities with those of Richard Bentley. Baker entered King's College as a scholar on the day that Bentley died, 'so that when the golden tree of classic learning had lost one branch, another shot out in its place'. And writing to the Gentleman's Magazine, Academicus (1801) noted that: 'Sir George Baker has long enjoyed the well-earned reputation of writing Latin with a degree of purity and elegance, which distinguishes the composition in that language of few of his countrymen.'

Baker's standing among his professional colleagues was enormous. In a celebrated passage, Macmichael (1884) said that—

'To him the whole medical world looked up in respect, and in the treatment of any disease in the least degree unusual, if it was desired to know
all that had ever been said or written on the subject, from the most remote antiquity, down to the case in question, a consultation was proposed with Sir George Baker. From his erudition everything was expected'.

The possessor of such intellectual gifts might be supposed to be a forbidding figure, but Baker had a lighter side to his character and a ready wit. This often expressed itself in verse, which he composed for relaxation. He wrote to a young girl to ‘dissuade her from marrying an elderly Gent’—

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Lot's wife, looking backwards (a very great fault)
Was instantly lost in a pillar of salt.
Look forward dear Mary, & take my advice;
Or your fault will be harder—a pillar of Ice.
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And the following exchange took place one New Year between Baker and his wife—

In beginning of Year,
'Tis usual my Dear,
For your little Honey,
To wish for some Money.

To this plea, Baker replied in kind:

I'm needy & poor
This Christmas, that's flat,
You can have no more
Than the skin of a cat.

Baker was 63 before he became President of the College in 1785. He held office continuously thereafter until 1790 but in 1791 he lost office to Thomas Gisbourne. There may have been some intrigue surrounding his removal from office, for when he was re-elected the following year Maxwell Garthshore wrote to Joseph Banks commenting on his pleasure at seeing Sir George restored to the presidency of the College from which he had been removed 'by a manoeuvre'. Baker was President again in 1793 and 1795, Gisbourne holding the office in the intervening year. His fame was by no means confined to the capital. On his re-election as President in 1793 Baker was sent a tribute from Dr J. Crane of Wells—

‘Fam’d Eton’s sons (so judgement has decreed,) In ev’ry branch of knowledge take the lead; 
Baker, in letters skill’d, in Science more
To you fair Nature has display’d her lore.
Nature’s a Mistress kind, as she is fair
To those who court her with assiduous care;
For like the beauteous daughters of the land,
Her conscious worth she seems to understand;
Prompted by Pride, the negligent to shun,
"She will be woo’d, and not unsought be won";
This is the surest road her heart to gain,
'Twas thus you woo’d, nor have you woo’d in vain;
To you her choicest secrets she reveal’d,
And nothing from your piercing sight conceal’d;
Hence 'tis Sir George! Your well supported claim,
Has plac’d you foremost on the list of fame;
Hence 'tis distinguished Honors, and Renown,
From time, to time, your useful labours crown;
Hence 'tis the College yet exults to see,
The first in skill, plac’d first in Dignity.'

Baker’s years as President were noteworthy from many points of view. Both he and Gisbourne acted with liberality towards the Licentiates who had been treated summarily by the College earlier in the century. Events had overtaken the College; Licentiates now outnumbered Fellows and included in their number some of the richest doctors, the best scientists and the greatest social celebrities in London. They could hardly still be considered subordinate to the Fellows; indeed, they could afford to be condescending towards the Fellows. The Society of Collegiate Physicians, which had been founded by the defiant Licentiates at the height of their quarrel with the College in 1766, relaxed two of its rules in 1786. No longer were Fellows refused membership of the Society, and no longer did the Society’s members boycott the Medical Transactions of the College. In addition, a new rule was made which allowed the President of the Society to invite not more than four Fellows of the College to the quarterly dinners. Baker, in his capacity as President of the College, came to the Society’s dinner at the Crown and Anchor Tavern on 1st November 1786. He made himself thoroughly agreeable over dinner and so helped to heal the rift between the opposing factions, and afterwards the Society faded quietly away.

One of the first actions Baker took after his election as President in 1785 was to start the work necessary for the preparation of a new edition of the Pharmacopoeia Londinensis. It appeared in 1788. Many of the more exotic concoctions, that owed more to sorcery than medicine, were dropped, a tribute to the pioneering work of Heberden. New and more useful items were included, and for the first time the Linnaean system of classification was used for the botanical preparations.

The pharmacopoeia was published in Latin, Baker himself writing the preface that was notable for its style and elegance and in which the aims of the College—and thus of Baker himself—were clearly stated. The science of chemistry had advanced considerably since the publication of the previous edition in 1746, chiefly through the work of Cavendish, Priestley and Black, and Baker (1788) wrote that: ‘it became our duty to examine anew the common instruments of the art of healing, and we thought that duty required us to employ all the assistance which could be derived from modern chemistry; and, from its collected light, render our work more clear and luminous.’

Baker’s life had been spent in applying, so far as he was able, the scientific
method to medicine, and the preparation of this volume was no exception, as he was anxious to underline.

'It was our principal wish that every chemical matter, applicable to the practice of Physic, should be introduced by us, not only freed from error, but more perfect and neat, as well as more scientifically digested, than has been usual among us.'

For this reason much of the useless rubbish found in the 1746 edition had been omitted. 'Great care had been taken', he emphasised, 'that very few traces should remain of anile superstition'. Many of the remedies, which had enjoyed the protection of tradition or the authority of long usage, disappeared forever, 'a manifest proof that neither the authority of ancient custom, nor reverence of antiquity, has any longer too much dominion over use'. Baker, however, realised that not all readers would be enchanted with the objectives and achievements of the compilers who might have to content themselves with faint praise. Thus—

'We are not ignorant how very great the difficulty is of forming a Dispensatory in every respect complete and perfect, nor of the little reason there is for hoping it would please all mankind:—we pretend not to undertake any such thing; and shall really congratulate ourselves, if the trouble employed for the public health on this work, answers in some degree the purpose of alleviating the evils of sickness, and rendering their cure more prompt and expeditious'.

During Baker's first year as President, the third volume of the Medical Transactions of the College was published. The previous volumes, published in 1767 and 1771, had proved extremely successful, sold well, and had run into two or three editions. Baker had contributed six papers to the first volume and five to the second. The first volume included not only his classic paper on the Devonshire Colic, for which he is chiefly remembered today, but also three other remarkable papers on topics connected with lead poisoning. As a young man growing up in the South Hams of Devon, noted for its cider, Baker would have known of the Colic and most likely had seen for himself patients with the disease. In his paper he showed that the disease was only one of the many epidemics of lead colic which had occurred throughout history as the result of food or wine becoming contaminated with lead. His sister Elizabeth lived in Exeter and it was on a visit to Exeter that Baker obtained some cider made from the press at Alphington, which was entirely lined with sheet lead. With the aid of a young Scots doctor, William Saunders, he showed that this cider, and other samples of Devon cider, contained large
amounts of lead, whereas the cider from the neighbouring counties of Gloucester, Worcester and Hereford was free from contamination. Baker was motivated in his enquiry by his desire to bring to an end a disease that brought much misery to the Devonians. ‘I flatter myself [he wrote] I shall be doing an especial service to the inhabitants of my native county, if, by giving them notice of a mischief of which they were not aware, I may induce them to avoid it, and may at once promote the health and prosperity of my countrymen’ (Baker, 1768).

It was a masterly exercise but instead of greeting Baker’s hypothesis with acclaim, the Devonians rejected it completely, seeing it not as a means of ending the visitation of the Colic, but as their economic ruination.

Owing to the difficulty of getting a steady supply of contributors it was not until December 1782 that the College resolved to publish the third volume of the Transactions. Baker was involved in getting this volume to the press in 1785 and he contributed six papers to it. Later he helped with the preparation of the fourth volume but this proved a desperate task. Writing to Thomas Percival to thank him for a paper, Baker (1807) said that he had read it with much pleasure lamenting that: ‘It is the only article I have yet got, to form material for a forth volume of the Transactions of the College. Indeed, if I had not exerted myself much, the last volume would never have seen the light. Quarenda pecunia is our grand maxim here; we leave to others the task of improving the Profession’.

The preparation of this volume proved to be beyond even Baker’s considerable powers, for it was not until 1813, four years after his death, that it finally appeared.

Baker continued to remain actively associated with the College until 1798. In July of that year, at the age of 76, he resigned from his office as Elect and went into partial retirement. But even so his views continued to be sought by those involved with the politics of the College. In 1805, when Edward Harrison was campaigning for reforms within the College, he approached Baker with his plans. He found Sir George sympathetic to his views because, Baker said, ‘the corruption of physic has increased considerably of late’.

His retirement was marred by increasing boredom and ill-health and he was generally inclined to melancholy. He died easily and free from pain on 15th June 1809 and was buried in St James’s, Piccadilly.

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Pertussis

Whooping cough seems to have been the most popular disease for practitioners of folk medicine. In Belgium the aid of fifteen different saints could be invoked but apparently none was available in England. The usual technique of transferring the disease to animals was common. What better than the donkey with its bray; the coughing child was passed several times under the donkey’s belly and over its back. Presumably it had to be a good tempered ass. As a prophylactic, riding on a bear was recommended, particularly by the bear’s keeper. In Shropshire holding a frog in the mouth was considered a sure cure, but in East Anglia a spider held over the head was just as good. In Devonshire the child was carried into a sheep fold and the sheep breathed in its face. This ritual had to be kept up daily for one week. In Yorkshire owl broth was the specific remedy. Of course, one could always resort to the benefits of odd numbers. A string tied with nine knots round the neck was simple but perhaps less effective than contact with the seventh son of a family born in succession without a girl. When that child got whooping cough the method of treatment is not recorded.