

Daniel John Cunningham: a distinguished teacher of anatomy

In October 1943, starting my medical school days at the University of Oxford, I was dispatched to the bookshop in Broad Street to purchase the three volumes of the 10th (1940) edition of *Cunningham's Manual of Practical Anatomy*. These were to become my constant companions during the next 2 years. I have them in front of me now as I write, their much-turned pages discoloured by the stains of various cadavers, the text underlined and annotated here and there with my unreadable writing. Even today, in my opinion, no other dissection guide gives such clear and helpful practical advice to the student and its illustrations cannot be bettered.

This year marks the centenary of the death of a great anatomy teacher, to whom I am personally indebted.

Daniel John Cunningham was born in 1849. His father was, at the time, the parish minister in the little country town of Crieff, in Perthshire, to the east of Loch Earn. Later his father was to become the Principal at St Andrew's. Young Daniel proved himself to be a bright student at the University of Edinburgh medical school and qualified in 1874 with first class honours. He was at once appointed demonstrator in anatomy under Professor Sir William Turner, a tower of traditional teaching of anatomy.

Two years later, Cunningham obtained his M.D. with gold medal with his thesis on 'The Anatomy of the Cetacea' – dissection of members of the whale family provides a particular, and odoriferous, challenge to the anatomist. Now promoted to senior demonstrator, young Cunningham also taught physiology at the Royal (Dick) Veterinary College.

After 6 years, in 1882, Cunningham was appointed to Dublin, to fill the chair of Anatomy at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, and transferred a

year later to the prestigious post of Professor of Anatomy at Trinity College, Dublin.

It was in Ireland that Cunningham established his reputation as a teacher. The new professor arrived to a tradition of the students 'cramming' for their examinations at the numerous private schools which had become established in Dublin – probably as a result of the rapid expansion of the need for medical officers at the time of the Crimean war (1854–6).

Cunningham set to work to replace learning anatomy by rote and by (often pornographic) mnemonics, purely for the purpose of passing examinations, with a system based on attendance at authorized lectures and with great emphasis on practical work by the student in the dissecting room. Much of this improvement was the result of his own carefully prepared lectures and his teaching in the classes.

In 1903, Cunningham's old chief, Sir William Turner, was appointed Principal of the University of Edinburgh. Cunningham was offered, and accepted, the vacant chair and returned to Edinburgh. Sadly, his time there was all too short. In the winter of 1908 he became hopelessly ill and died in June the following year, at the age of 60 years, after much suffering.

In 1879, while a senior lecturer in Edinburgh, Cunningham published his *Dissector's Guide*. This he enlarged in 1889, and it then became the first edition of his *Manual of Practical Anatomy* in 1896. This was an immediate success. Students and teachers, brought up on the older manuals of dissection, were impressed by its clear dissection instructions, its readable (even eloquent) text and by its copious and excellent illustrations. In his own lifetime, it went through four editions and it can still be obtained in its 15th edition, published in 1986 under the editorship of a succession of distinguished Edinburgh anatomists (Romanes, 1986).

In 1902 the *Textbook of Anatomy* was published, under Cunningham's editorship. This was an impressive work of scholarship, again profusely illustrated, which, until well after World War II, was a rival in popularity among medical students to *Gray's Anatomy*. (As a student, I bought the latter, arguing, very shrewdly, that many of the illustrations in Cunningham's *Anatomy* also appeared in the dissection books – by purchasing Gray, I was also getting a completely different set of pictures!)

Cunningham was an excellent undergraduate teacher but he was also a friendly, simple and gentle man, much loved by his pupils and colleagues and not the domineering bully that characterized too many of the medical school teachers of those times. He played his full part in university and medical school administration and for some years was dean of the medical faculty in Edinburgh. His ability as an administrator led to his being sent to South Africa during the Boer War to advise on medical administration there and he also advised on the establishment of the Territorial Army in Scotland.

Cunningham was a fine investigator of classical topographical anatomical problems, with learned studies on the marsupials collected during the voyage of HMS Challenger, on the anatomy of the lumbar spine and of the cerebral hemispheres. He received numerous honorary degrees and was an Fellow of the Royal Society. Identical bronze plaques of Cunningham's profile hang (or used to hang) in the dissecting rooms at Trinity College Dublin and the University of Edinburgh. However, many doctors of my generation will recall the photograph of this plaque which adorned the frontispiece of our copies of *Cunningham's Manual of Practical Anatomy*. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

Romanes GJ (1986) *Cunningham's Manual of Practical Anatomy*. 15th edn. Oxford University Press, Oxford

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