

NOTES FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
DR. JAMES YONGE, F.R.S.

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THE Library of the Plymouth Institution contains a manuscript autobiography by Dr. James Yonge, the ancestor of the Yonges of Puslinch, written in the closing years of the seventeenth and the opening years of the eighteenth centuries. Amidst much matter that is purely of personal, and more that is of strictly local interest, there are scattered frequent topographical and other references to matters affecting the county at large. The more important of these I propose to extract; but a brief biography of the writer, a Devonshire celebrity in his day of some little note, and one of the early members of the Royal Society, may fittingly be prefaced.

James Yonge was born at Plymouth, February 27th, 1647, and after a couple of years at the Grammar School was bound by his father, who practised medicine, "for eight yeares to Mr. Silvester Richmond, chyrurgeon of the *Constant Warwick*." This was on the 14th February, 1657, and three days afterwards he sailed on his first voyage. In May, 1660, he became surgeon's assistant on board the *Montague*, and took part in the expedition to Algiers. A few graphic touches depict the miseries of the young naval surgeon in those days; for he states that the whole drudgery of attending to the injured men fell upon his hands, "besides often emptying the bucketts they went to stool in—a nasty and mean employment, but such as usually chyrurgeons mates formerly did in y^e navy." On the return of the *Montague* he was discharged at Portsmouth with five shillings in his pocket, walked to London, and acted for some time as assistant to an apothecary named Clark.

When he returned to Plymouth, his father bound him apprentice to himself for seven years more, the former indentures, of which five years were expired, being given up. His next trip was to Newfoundland in the *Reformation*; and subsequently he went voyages in the *Robart Bonadventure*, of the captain whereof he says: "Hee was a quaker that had been a ranter, and soe high that hee had lost his nose —a froward, cross, ill-conditioned fellow as ever lived." In May, 1666, this vessel was captured by a Dutch vessel, and Yonge carried prisoner to Holland. Here he remained, finding the Dutch "damnably insulting," part of the time on parole, until exchanged in March, 1667.

Returning to Plymouth, and picking up some little practice, he took two voyages with the fishing fleet to Newfoundland. In his first he was the only surgeon in the fleet except Edward Cape, of Dartmouth, who, being a very "mean" one, and having no business of his own, was compelled to accept £12 to be assistant to Yonge, the latter clearing altogether about £100. This was in 1668; in 1669 he again sailed the Newfoundland voyage. It was so cold, that he entered in his journal: "I am resolved It shall be the last time I will hazard being frozen to death on y^e sea;" but he follows this up with the naïve admission that at "Bay Bulls" he lived a "jolly life with Mr. Rich^d Munyon, R^d Avent, Caleb Hall, and Mr. Hingston, all chyrurg^o of plym", and in o^r mutual caressings spent all o^r liquor and good things designed for the whole voyage." As the fleet was attacked by the small-pox, this voyage proved well-nigh as profitable as that of the preceding year. Nevertheless it was, as he had resolved, his last.

Once more in Plymouth, he married in 1671 an old flame, Jane Crampporne (whose only fault was that she "went to conventicles"), and fought his way into practice, notwithstanding the "private arts" of his rivals. When war broke out with the Dutch, he became surgeon of the hospital established at Plymouth. This was a very profitable post while it lasted. He had 5s. a day, 3s. for each man for medicine, and 2s. 6d. a day for each mate. One mate being allowed to every thirty men, sometimes he drew pay for four, and only kept one! while there was a good profit also out of the capitation allowance, some of the men running away as soon as they came, and the "scurvy cases" costing little! When the war ended the hospital was given up; but it was not long ere Yonge was appointed deputy to the surgeon-general of the navy—James Pearse—whom he had obliged with

credit, the pay being 6s. 8d. a man, and 1s. a day for victuals. When, in August, 1677, Charles II. came to Plymouth, and touched for the evil in St. Andrew Church, Yonge by that and "other business recomended to me by y^e serjeant [Knight, the king's surgeon] . . . gott above 50 lb besides some secrets in chirurgery."

Not long after this—1678—Yonge went to London, being six days on the road, his coach fare from Exeter costing him 30s. At this date there was no stage-coach, apparently, below the western city. Three years later he took his wife to London—she in a coach, and he riding a "Goonhilly" pony—and amusingly records how at Windsor he saw the Duchess of Portsmouth ushered by a French "abbot"—his rendering of *abbè*. "She seems an elegant lady, round face, but noe great beauty." He ungallantly adds: "The Queen came wadling like a duck."

Year by year Yonge's practice grew, and he did some notable cures. Thus in November, 1684, he "was sent for to S^r Arthur Harris, whoe had run his man thro' the body with a rapier, which God be praised I cured." In 1685 he became surgeon of a regiment of militia raised by the Earl of Bath. Four years later he gave up the surgeoncy of the hospital; but when the Dockyard was established at Devonport (Dock), he obtained the surgeon's place there. It was not until then that he obtained a diploma at Surgeons' Hall—"free gratis, and without examination, which was never granted to any one before." He did not become a Licentiate of the College of Physicians until 1703. He had written several medical works, of interest and value for their day, but when it was suggested that he should be made a licentiate, rejoined that he was licensed already by the Bishop (!); that it would only be a feather in his cap that would cost more than it was worth; and that he was too old to be catechised. However, being told—reasonably enough—that the Bishop's license was nothing without the College's, that the catechising should be *plain* and the fees *low*, he consented, and paid in all £11 15s. 6d. In November of the same year he was made a fellow of the Royal Society.

Yonge's practice was not only very extensive, covering great part of the Two Counties, but highly remunerative, and he records fees ranging up to a hundred guineas! He amassed a good estate, filled the chief public offices in his native town, including that of Mayor; but finally fell upon evil days. Death removed nearly all his relatives and friends. In 1708, which he calls *Annus tenebrosus*, he lost his only

grandson, his daughter-in-law, and his wife. In the previous year he lost a son-in-law and brother; and he had lost sons and daughters previously. With the notice of the deaths of several other dear friends the manuscript closes abruptly:

"How it will end God knows. I am not Fancyfull nor have I any opinion of these critical times [it was his grand climacteric] as some men have, but Its remarkable that this yeare hath proved a troublesome one to me to this 23rd Aug."

He died July 25th, 1721, aged 75.

It only remains to add that Yonge was a sturdy Church and King man, and a sound hater. His opinion of those who differed from him is recorded in such terms as these—"crafty spightfull"—"peevish, talkative Idiot"—"fopp"—"fanatick"—"meer merchant"—"shuffler"—"k—— and hypocrite"—"tool and fool." When Cromwell passes away he "goes to the divell in a tempest." Judge Jeffries is "famously loyal;" and when the Sir Francis Drake of that day dies "a Lingering and tormenting death," Yonge piously adds: "I wish he be not punished worse in y^e other life."

I first proceed with the Topographical notes.

Lundy.—"Lunday is a very high smooth Iland, good pasturage, many wild fowle and Rabbets. Its inaccessible but one way, and that narrow and in some places wynding, soe as one man could keep out 1000. It had only a pretty strong house like a Castle, wherein lived a gentleman that retyred from England on acc^o of Loyalty." [1659.]

Torrington.—"Its a fyne country town, built on a hill stands high, and is mayntayned cheiffly by the woole trade."

Barnstaple.—"An ancient corporation lying on a fyne River of late somewhat choaked. Its one of the pleasants towns I ever saw being round on a plaine fayr, streight broad streets and many good houses of old fashion. It was lately a place of very great Trade and hath now many rich men In It, but Bideford hath stoln It all away since the river hath grown shallow, y^t ships cannot well come up. theyre is a fine bridge passeth over the River, and cooms to y^e town." [1674.]

Hatherleigh.—"A small country town or village."

Bideford.—"Its a narrow Creek, hath a deep River and very rapid, and a good strong Bridge. y^e town lyeth on y^e

side of a Hill is a place of great trade, hath many ships of good bignes and force from 16 to 24 guns. they trade mostly to Newfoundland, thence to Portugall and the Streights. they send a few to Virginia, Newengland, W. India, Ireland, many to Wales and Bristoll; which are theyre great marketts." [1674.]

Lydford.—"A small town where is an old Castle, w^{ch} In the late Rebellion was made a prison, but a sad one, God wott; many men perishing there. the people are Rude and ill bread. formerly it was a burrough, sent members to parliament and kept court, but after such a prejudicial way, as it became a saying, *like Lydford law, hang first and judge him afterwards.*"

Brent Tor [Tarr].—"Its a church on a very High hill I beleeve nearest heaven of any church in England. the people are very rude and brutish, though not so Ill as fame and Dr. Fuller (English worthy) makes them viz that they are savage, go naked, lye in vaults on straw, promiscuously like Hoggs, &c."

Nutwell Court.—"Nutwell Sr Henry Fords house, a large stately one a fayre chapell. Its situate on y^e River Ex about 2 myle below Topsham."

Topsham.—"A fyne little town pleasant and y^e place where ships and goods are generally embarqued or unladen for or from Exon."

Torquay.—"Riding to "Tarr Key" between Newton Bushell and Haldon "we ryde over y^e Longest bridge in England. Its called Tynebridge, and Is above halfe a myle long."

In a map of Torbay "Tarr" is shown as consisting of a row of five houses. "Tarrkey" has a little pier close by, with two houses adjoining. The pier is directed across the bay.

Paignton.—"Paynton a town on the bottom of Tarrbay was anciently a Borrough town, and as Is sayd held her charter by a whitepot (whence Devonshire men are soe called) which was to be 7 yeares making, 7 baking, and 7 eating."

Totnes.—"A fyne town seated on a Hill by a River hath a fayre delicate church, and a pretty small library of old bookes."

Honiton.—"A fyne country town, sends burgesses, hath a great trade in making lace." Passing through Honiton, April 23rd, 1702, he "saw a very pretty procession of 3 hundred women and girles In good order 2 and two march with three women drummers beating, and a guard of 20 young men on horseback. each of y^e females had a white Rod in her hand on the tipp of w^{ch} was Tossil made of white and blew Ribband (w^{ch} they said was the Queenes colours) and bone lace the great manufacture of the town. thus they had marched In and about the town from ten in the morning [it was then 8 in the evening] Huzzaing every now and then, and then weaving their Rodds. then they returned at 9 and then break up very weary and hungary." This was on the Coronation day of Queen Anne, and in celebration thereof.

Stowe.—"I waited on my Lord of Bathe to his delicious house *Stowe*. It lyeth on y^e ledge of y^e north sea of Devon, a most curious fabrick beyond all description."

Axminster.—"A fyne kinde of village pleasantly scittuate on a hill."

Some of Yonge's most interesting notes are connected with the old Newfoundland fish trade, of which Devonshire in his days enjoyed a practical monopoly, and of which he gives us the best description now extant. His first voyage was in 1663, in the *Reformation*. In 22 days they reached the "false bank," and saw many icebergs. He describes a "pretty way" of catching "noddys." "They take a round peece of corke as bigg as a trencher and fasten a peece of lead to Itt and with a fishing lyne let it swim off; to the edges of this cork are fastned divers small hookes with some bayt, as pork flesh &c. this the noddyes swallow and are drawn in. they are good meat and eat but a little fishy."

Monday morning, April 3rd, saw the land, and made for Renoose harbour.

"Found noe ship there, but divers possessors; we presently hyred a sloop from a planter, and sent the mate with divers men, along shore, to get possessions, (as they call It) the manner is thus. they put a man on shore at every harbour, and at last according to theyre turnes, they take the best place they can of all theyre possessions; there were 4 at Renoose befor us. only one stuck theyre w^{ch} was m^r thomas

Waymouth of Dartmouth, whoe kept 18 boats, In the *Dorcas*, soe o^r master resolved to be his vice admiral, besides us there fished m^r thomas Hammett of Barnstaple, with 12 boats, m^r frances martyn of plym^o 4 boats, m^r Scott of barnstaple 6 boats." The planters had 9 boats.

The admiral always wore a flagstaff, Sundays a flag, and was called "my lord;" the vice admiral "my lady."

"Those vessels that had no surgeon agreed with me and gaue 1-6^d 20^d or 2/ a man for the season, which the master paid in fish at the end of the summer." Yonge agreed to share with Cutt, Weymouth's surgeon; and not only arranged for Renoose, but with seven Barnstaple men at Firmoose, four miles off, who had no surgeon, at 2s. a man, to visit twice a week, Wednesdays and Sundays. If any great occasion arose, the men were to be sent to them. The two went alternately. Yonge had a bottle of brandy hid behind a tree, which he marked, and took a dram on his way.

The Barnstaple men preferred Renoose above any other harbour.

"As soon as wee resolved to fish here, y^e ship is all unrigged, and in the snow and cold all y^e men goe into the woods, to cutt timber (fir spruce birch being here plentiful) with this they build stages flakes cookeroome and houses. the houses are made of a frythe of Bowes, ceeled inside with rindes, w^{ch} look like planed deales, and covered with the same, and turfs^of earth upon to keep the sun from Raning them. the stages are begun on the edge of the shore, and built out Into y^e sea, a floor of round timbers supported with posts and shores of great timber. y^e boates lye at y^e head of y^m as at a key, and throw up theyre fish, w^{ch} is splitt salted &c, they throw away the heads and sound bone."

Boats had five men, three to catch fish, and two to save them. Boats of three to four tons would carry 1000 or 1200 cod. The master of the boat rowed at the stem against the other two, not only rowing, but steering; and thus the three would row the boat a long way. The masters generally were able men, the midship and foreship men striplings. When they came to the stage head, the foreshipman went to boil their kettle, the other two threw up the fish to the stage with "pews." A pew was a staff with a prong of iron. When thrown up, a boy laid the fish on a table, and they were thus treated:

"On one side of w^{ch} stands a header, whoe opens the belly, takes out the Liver and twines off y^e head and gutts (w^{ch} fall thorough y^e stage in to y^e sea) with notable dexterity and suddenness. the liver runes thorough a hole in y^e table, into a coale or great tubb, w^{ch} is thrown into the trayn fatt. This is a great square chest the corners of which are frythed athwart through this the oil soaks and is by tappes drawn out into casks."

The "header" having done, pushed the fish across the table to the "splitter," who with a strong knife split the fish abroad, and with a back stroke cut off the bone, which fell into the sea through a hole. Some would split twenty-four score in half an hour (!) As the fish were split they fell into a "drooge barrow," which when full was drawn to one side of the stage. Here boys piled the fish, and they were salted in heaps three feet high—the salter being a "skilful officer." The fish so lay two or three days; if bad weather, sometimes eight or ten; then they were washed by the boys in salt or fresh water, and laid by them in piles skin upwards on a platt of beach stones, which was called a "horse." After a day or thereabout the fish were next laid on "flakes"—boughs thinly placed on a frame like that of a table. Here they dried. By night or in wet weather they were put up in "faggots"—four or five fishes with the skin upwards, and a broad fish on top. When well dried, the fish were made up into "press pile," where the salt sweated out, and "kerning" made them look white. Next they were dried one day on the ground, and put up in "dry pile," three times as big as the "press pile." Thus they lay until shipped off, when they were dried part of a day, weighed, carried on board, laid and pressed snug with great stones.

The men had no fixed wages, but the owners of the ship had two-thirds, and the men one-third of the proceeds, which was divided into shares according to the men in the ship. Some men had money above the share from the master, but others had much less.

"Soe y^t I beleive in o^r ship, y^e master might have 9 shares cleare, the mate 2 shares, and 40^s; spilters [or splitters] 1 share & 3 or 4 lb., header 1 share 20/ salter 5 pounds, sometymes less boats master 1 share and 6 or 7 lb. midshipman share and twenty or 30^s foreshippman 3 lb. or half a share and tenn shillings. boyes Lurgins and such 20^s 30^s or 40^s. the manner of paying y^e chyrurgeon is the owners give 5 6 7 or 9 pounds in y^e hand towards the chest, the master giveth him a share, and every man giveth half a crown out

of his share, besides which he hath one hundred of poore Jack from y^e whole."

Breaking out of the "arm wrists," coughs, colds, and scurvy were the chief diseases. Dry scurvy was often mortal; acute scurvy was soon caught, and soon cured by a "few vegitives" of the country. It was caused partly by the great mutation of the weather, which when they came was very cold, and in July intolerably hot, partly from "aqueous and crude nourishment, colds after hard labour, but mostly from the crude and foggy air." Eating the livers of the cods, which were very delicious, produced bleeding at the nose. It is quite clear that Yonge attached no medicinal value to cod liver oil.

In July "y^e muscetoos (a litle biting fly) and garnippers (a larger one) will much vex us sometymes the boyes soe tyred with labour will steale off, and hide under y^e flakes, or get into the woodes, and sleep 3 or 4 hours soe hearty that they feel not y^e muscatoos, when by y^e tyme hee wakes, shall have swoln him blind and yⁿ hee knowes not how to get out."

"When the fishermen lade Its hard work for the shoremen who rest not above 2 hours a night." Nor were the fishermen better off; they rowed hard, and fished all day, and every second night took nets and drove to catch herrings for bait. The first bait was mussels, then herrings, which generally lasted all the year; at the middle or end of June they had capling; then squid.

In the winter the planters [*i.e.* the residents] got fish, sawed deal boards, made oars, caught beavers, and fowled.

Such was the way in which Devonshire men fished for cod at Newfoundland a couple of centuries since.