

JOHN EDMONDS STOCK (1774 – 1835)

15th member of Medical Reading Society: 1812 – 1830

Physician Bristol Royal Infirmary: 1812 - 1828



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Stock's father originally came from Chipping Sodbury, and was first apprenticed to an apothecary, though later he became a successful papermaker in Bristol, where his two sons John Edmonds and Thomas Edmonds were born. When his father died John was sent to a Unitarian school in Bristol, which was run by John Prior Estlin, the father of John Bishop Estlin who was one of the founder members of the Medical Reading Society.

He matriculated at Exeter College, Oxford where he became a conscientious objector to the 39 articles of the Church of England and converted to Unitarianism, leaving the college without taking a degree.

He then was a medical student in Edinburgh, where he became a fervent Reformer. In 1794, at the age of 19, he had to flee Edinburgh as he was charged with high treason for actively campaigning on behalf of Unitarianism and Protestant Dissent. George III had introduced laws that made this a capital offence and a £200 bounty was put on his head. He fled by ship to America to avoid the gallows, though one of his co-conspirators Roger Watts was arrested, tried and beheaded. He returned to his medical studies at the University of Philadelphia, graduating MD in 1797. His 43 page *Essay on the Effects of Cold On the Human Body* is available in print and online, but is remarkably uninteresting; however his expansion of this work, published in 1806, was well reviewed.

He stayed in America for 7 years but, after many letters of commendation on his behalf by his friends, was pardoned due to his youth at the time of the offence.

He returned to England in 1803. He set his set up in practice in Park Street, Bristol later moving to Royal York Crescent. That year he married Charlotte Shapland and their son, John Shapland Stock, was born in 1804. Mrs Stock was described by Samuel Coleridge Taylor in a letter to Robert Southey in 1808 as a tyrannical wife:

I could tell you a good story of Dr Stock, whom I had one evening cock-pecked into an opinion of Wordsworth's merit as a poet, and who home came next morning.... Complaining of my conduct.... The poor man had been henpecked out of it again. I heard from all quarters of the overbearing self-conceit of Mrs Stock, and the poor Dr, who seems by nature good and kind, she treats openly as a mere Insignificant.

(quoted by Torrens, H)

In 1804 he worked with Thomas Beddoes at his Medical Institute for the Sick and Drooping Poor in Broad Quay; the Pneumatic Institute in Dowry Square had been closed in 1802. After the death of Beddoes he was asked to write a biography of the great man by his wife and *Memoirs of the Life of Thomas Beddoes* was published in 1811. It was not well reviewed and was described as a worthy but dull tome and the most boring biography ever written; his colleague John King described him as a literary undertaker.

During the seventeen years he was Physician to the Infirmary (from March 28th, 1811, to January 30th, 1828) he not only did a great deal of work in the wards and amongst Out-patients, but became noted as a lecturer. He gave, in conjunction with Dr. Cowles Prichard (16th member of the MRS), a course of lectures on "Physiology, Pathology, and the Practice of Physic" in 1816, which brought him a great deal of well-deserved fame.

He was a great believer in tonics and food, and used himself to munch biscuits whilst visiting his patients. Some of his prescriptions are still in existence, and show that he was more merciful than many of his colleagues in his doses of aloes, mercury, gamboge, etc. He also took part in the social and political life of the city ; he joined the "Bear's Cub Club", where he initiated several discussions (one, on January 13th 1809, on the Rowley Poems), and in 1816 was President of the Anchor Society.

The event in Dr. Stock's life which brought him most prominently before the public was, however, not his scientific work, but his change of religious opinions. He left Lewin's Mead Church in 1816, and on November 16th of that year wrote a letter to the Rev. John Rowe, expressing his belief in the Divinity of Christ, and renouncing Unitarianism as untenable. This was leaked to the press and such a change of belief in a prominent man naturally excited comment. His correspondence with Dr. Lant Carpenter on the subject was freely discussed in the papers, numberless letters were published and many pamphlets were written; in fact, "Dr. Stock's Conversion" as it was called, was greeted by the public as a great asset to the conversation at evening parties, and looked upon it in a very different light from the doctor himself, whose mind (he says) was like a troubled sea, and whose days and nights were given up to the study of religious writers.

He was baptised at Broadmead Baptist Church in October 1817 and became a member of the Baptist Church. He attended the Annual Meeting of the Baptist Education Society in 1817, 1818 and 1821. He donated £10 to the Society in 1817.

He died after a long and suffering illness in 1835, aged 61, at the home of his brother-in-law near Tewkesbury, having moved to Bath a few years before his death. He was buried at the Unitarian Lewin's Mead Burial-ground in Brunswick Square, which was surprising because of his renunciation of Unitarian and adoption of Trinitarian sentiments. He made no mention of his Christian belief in his will and did not leave any legacy to the Baptists or Unitarians.

His publications include:

An inaugural essay on the effects of cold upon the human body. Submitted to the examination of the Rev. John Ewing, S.T.P. provost, the medical professors and trustees of the University of Philadelphia (1897).

available on Google books, 43 pages, not very interesting and rather obsequious in tone.

Medical Collections on the Effects of Cold, as a Remedy in Certain Diseases: With an Appendix, Containing an Account of Some Experiments Made With a ... Cold Water Upon the Pulse (1806)

Well reviewed on publication; paperback (2018) available from Amazon £9.59, 218 pages

Memoirs of of Thomas Beddoes, with an Analytical Account of His Writings (1810)

described as the most boring biography ever written; however if you search for specific topics, such as Davy or the Pneumatic Institute, it can prove fascinating; on Google books.

Unitarianism Tried by Scripture and Experience: A Compilation of Treatises and Testimonies in Support of Trinitarian Doctrine and Evangelical Principles (1813)

narrative of the renunciation of Unitarian and the adoption of Trinitarian sentiments

Catholic Question: A Letter Addressed to the Inhabitants of Bristol, on the Subject of the Petition Against the Catholic Claims (1813)

an 80 page pamphlet arguing against movers of a petition had been organised by those against claims for Catholic emancipation and appearing to give support to Catholics in their claim for emancipation. Paperback from Amazon £17.95, a first edition is available for £650.

Reference Books and Letters

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The Monthly Review. Vol 51, p209; Beckett, London 1806.

*Lemuel Griffiths was the 58th member of the MRS, from 1876 to 1892. His obituary can be found here:

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e00e/549e76340506f93874f71a92b80dbd8ff977.pdf>