

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from an article called “Saint George and the Dragon”, published in 1852. The author takes readers inside St George’s Hospital in London. In this extract, the writer describes medical students watching an operation.

Saint George and the Dragon

At the most active corner of the most active lung of the great metropolis, stands a large building of the pseudo-classical style. Its vast monotonous white flank, exposed to the full roar of Piccadilly, gives no sign of life or animation; and if it were not for the inscription on its
5 frieze, “supported by voluntary contributions,” it might be taken for a workhouse, or for one of Nash’s palaces*. Will the reader be conducted through the labyrinths of Saint George’s Hospital, and see something of the eternal fight that every day beholds between the good Saint George and the undying Dragon of Disease?

But let him not enter with the idea that there is anything repulsive in the contemplation of this
10 congregation of human sufferers; but rather with a sense of the beneficence of an institution, which snatches poor helpless creatures from the depressing influences of noisome alleys, or the fever-jungles of pestilential courts, and opens to them here – in the free air, where a palace might be proud to plant itself – a home, with benevolence and charity as their friends and servitors. Neither must he look with a half-averted glance upon the scenes we have to
15 show him; for their aim is to render the anguish of one sufferer subservient to the future ease of some succeeding sufferer; to make great Death himself pay tribute to the living.

[...]

Steadily and quietly the Operating Theatre is overflowed from the top benches, and the spectator looks down upon a hollow cone of human heads. The focus of this living mass is the operating table, on which, covered with a sheet, lies the anxious patient; and every now
20 and then he sweeps with an anxious glance the sea of heads which surrounds him. Close to him is the surgeon; his white cuffs lightly turned up, examining carelessly a gleaming knife, and talking in whispers to his colleagues and assistants.

Slowly the bewildered countenance of the patient relaxes, – his eyes close, – he breathes peacefully, – he sleeps, under the beneficent influence of chloroform*, like a two-years’ old child. The sheet is removed, and there lies a motionless, helpless, nerve-numbed life; an assistant pushes back the eyelid, and the fixed eye stares vacantly at the roof.

The student below us clutches the bars in front of him. It is his first operation; and he wishes he were far away; and wonders how the nurses can stand so calmly, waiting with the warm
30 sponges.

There is a sudden movement forward of every head; and then a dead silence. The surgeon has broken into the house of life, and every eye converges towards his hands, – those hands that manipulate so calmly – those fingers that see, as it were where vision cannot

- 35 penetrate, and which single out unerringly, amid the tangled network of the frame, the life-duct that they want. For a moment there is a painful pause; an instrument has to be changed, and the operator whispers to his assistant. "Something is going wrong," flashes in a moment through every mind. No! – the fingers proceed with a precision that reassures; the artery is tied; and the life that trembled upon the verge of eternity is called back, and secured by a loop of whipcord!
- 40 There is a buzz, and a general movement in the Theatre; the huge hollow cone of heads turns around, and becomes a cloud of white faces – no longer anxious. Some students vault over the backs of the seats; others swing up by the force of their arms; the whole human cone boils over the top benches, and pours out at the doors. Brown pulls Jones's hair playfully; whereupon Jones "bonnets" Robinson; and there is a universal "scrimmage" on the
- 45 stairs. Can these be the same silent, grave-looking students we saw half-an-hour since? Yes! Who expects medical students to keep grave more than half-an-hour?

Glossary

- * Nash's palaces – John Nash was a famous architect who created many of the most well-known buildings and monuments in London
- * pestilential – relating to or tending to cause infectious diseases
- * chloroform – a liquid anaesthetic

This extract is from "Saint George and the Dragon", by Andrew Wynter, in *Household Words*, Vol. 5, No. 107 (April 1852), pp. 77-80, and the full text can be found online at <http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-v/page-77.html>.

This resource is brought to you by the Diseases of Modern Life project at the University of Oxford, which is supported by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 340121.