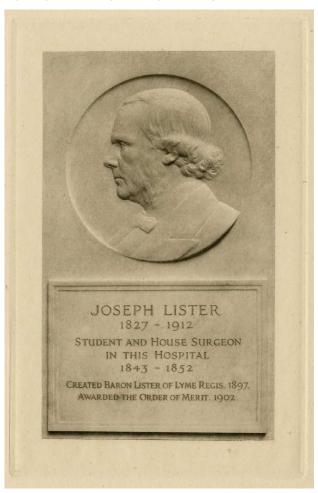
## The Butchering Art: Joseph Lister's Quest to Transform the Grisly World of Victorian Medicine

## A REVIEW BY BRYAN RHODES

**Author:** Lindsey Fitzharris **Publisher:** Penguin 2017

At the 'Learning from Lister' London Conference in 2012, medical historians made encouraging comments regarding the prospect of a new Lister biography. Therefore Lindsey Fitzharris' book, published by Penguin in 2017, provides a timely updated perspective on Lister's achievements. The author, a Chicagoan with a PhD. from Oxford University, aims her book firmly at the general public and manages to navigate the challenging combination of creating an entertaining, flowing narrative and an informative accurate biography of one of our leading scientific surgeons.

As a UCH medical student in the early 80's I would often look at the plaque to Lister that was placed, somewhat strangely, part way up the spiral staircase to the wards of the cruciform building (see photo) The 'official' biography of Lister by his nephew Rickman Godlee¹ provides little detail about his medical school period and Fitzharris manages to fill in some of the gaps. Chapter 3 describes Lister's first major operation (on the abdomen) performed whilst he was still a student at medical school and relies heavily on an article by Ruth Richardson and myself published by the Royal Society.²



Memorial Plaque at UCH. Image from British Museum Image Collection

The section on Lister's life and career in Scotland, where he first joined James Syme in Edinburgh as a supernumerary 'dresser' and rose to become both Professor of Surgery in Glasgow and later in Edinburgh, is particularly well described. Surgery in the nineteenth century was a very patriarchal profession but Fitzharris outlines the important supportive role of Lister's wife Agnes. Lister took his microscope with him on their honeymoon so that he could continue his research on inflammation! It was during their time in Glasgow that a colleague first alerted him to the work of Louis Pasteur on airborne 'germs'. He had read about the use of carbolic acid (German creosote) to reduce noxious odours from the sewage works at Carlisle. Pure carbolic acid (phenol) produced a sloughing of tissues akin to suppuration so he experimented with different concentrations and combinations with other materials until finding a dressing which combined the properties of preventing wound infection (putrefaction) without provoking excessive tissue irritation. His first successful case involved an eleven year old boy with an open tibial fracture from a road traffic accident.

Two further dramatic operations are described in the book. The first, just a few months after he had published a series of articles on the antiseptic system in the Lancet (1867),<sup>3</sup> in Glasgow, involved his first radical mastectomy and the patient was his own sister! It was common practice to operate on private patients in domestic settings and this operation took place in Lister's kitchen. The second operation, performed after Lister had been appointed to the Chair of Surgery in Edinburgh, was on Queen Victoria at Balmoral. The Queen's abscess was drained with local anaesthesia provided by Richardson's ether spray. The following day the pus had started to form another collection and Lister improvised a tube drain from the India rubber tubing of the ether spray to maintain drainage. This was one of the earliest surgical uses of a rubber tube drain and Lister continued to use them during the rest of his career.

I have a few minor criticisms of the book. Firstly the title is unpleasant and off-putting. Secondly, the method of referencing isn't conventional and is less user-friendly. Finally, the book would benefit from some images. Overall though, this is an excellent addition to the corpus of Lister biographies and highly recommended.

**Note:** The two volume 'Collected works of Joseph, Baron Lister' is available in the Royal Lancaster Infirmary library.

## **REFERENCES**

- 1. Godlee RJ. Lord Lister. Macmillan & Co. 1918.
- Richardson R and Rhodes B. Joseph Lister's First Operation. Notes and Records of the Royal Society, 2013;67(4):pp375–85.
- 3. Lister JB. The collected works of Joseph Baron Lister. Hodder and Stoughton 1909.