

'AN OLD, OLD MAN WITH HAIR OF SILVER WHITE . . .' A MORE SCIENTIFIC IMAGE OF SHELLEY'S MENTOR AT ETON

by Christopher Goulding

An unpublished letter discovered in a Victorian autograph collection has shed new light on the scientific interests of one of the young Percy Shelley's mentors whilst he was at Eton, Dr James Lind MD (1736–1812).¹

In Shelley's time, Lind was living in semi-retirement at Windsor, where he was engaged as physician to the Royal household, and also teaching occasionally at Eton College. Earlier in his career, he had served as a ship's surgeon aboard an East Indiaman, during which he visited India and China. After graduation as an MD from Edinburgh University and the publication of his treatise on Bengal Fever in 1768, he enjoyed a medical career of some distinction. Lind still found time to accompany Sir Joseph Banks on his expedition to Iceland in 1772, and five years later he was admitted as a fellow of the Royal Society, where he had earlier read a paper on a portable wind-gauge. Around about this time he had moved to Windsor.

Shelley biographers have traditionally regarded James Lind, if they mention him at all, as being something of an eccentric. Whilst his role as a father figure to the young poet is generally accepted, those aspects of his character usually played up are his personal interests in such subjects as mythological and oriental writing. The whiff of the exotic that clung to him was the talk of Windsor society, as one hostess was to note;

With his love of Eastern wonders and his taste for tricks, conundrums, and queer things, people were afraid of his trying experiments with their constitutions, and thought him a better conjuror than a physician.²

Such tales are quite in keeping with Shelley's own description of the good doctor, whose eye, he later told Hogg; 'seemed to burn with a supernatural spirit'.³ More recent commentators have continued to emphasise this air of mystery. Richard Holmes went so far as to write in *Shelley: The Pursuit* that; ' . . . it was rumoured that he was an amateur demonologist'.⁴ However, some of Shelley's biographers have also noted Lind's influence as mentor of a more scientific nature. Hogg notes that Lind; ' . . . communicated to Shelley a taste for chemistry and chemical experiments'.⁵ Others have noted that Shelley was first exposed to Godwin's *Political Justice* and the radical literature of Condorcet and Voltaire in Lind's own library, and that it was the aged doctor who gave the boy's interest in modern science a classical background context via works such as Pliny's flawed *Historia Naturalis* (of which Lind advised, no-one could understand the chapter on astronomy) and the work of the early materialist Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura*.⁶

Such accounts as these give a more rounded picture of a man whose achievements in his personal scientific interests such as astronomy were no less impressive than his medical career. Accounts describing Lind's observations of such astronomical events as the transit of Venus in 1769, and a lunar eclipse in the same year were published in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society.⁷

The unpublished letter suggests that Lind's personal interest in the latest discoveries in contemporary astronomy continued during his residence at Windsor. The letter was written by William Herschel (1738–1822), a neighbour in the town, who was the personal astronomer to George III. It is addressed to 'Dr Lind, Windsor', and reads;

² Frances D'Arblay, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972–84).

³ Thomas James Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Routledge & Sons, 1906), p. 34.

⁴ *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), p. 26.

⁵ Hogg, p. 92.

⁶ K. N. Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), p. 13.

⁷ *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (London, 1770) lix, p. 339 and p. 363.

¹ The Brooks Manuscript Collection is owned by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, to whom it was presented by one of their vice-presidents, Newcastle ship owner John C. Brooks (1812–1897) in 1894. It is kept under restricted access at the Northumberland County Record Office in Newcastle upon Tyne. An account of the Brooks Collection and the author's discovery in it of an unpublished letter by Percy Shelley appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 9 July 1999 ('Shelley from Pisa', p. 14–15).

Dear Sir,

I promised to give you early intelligence of the discovery I have made with the 40 feet new speculum. Accordingly, being now authorised, I can say that this good telescope has pointed out to me a sixth satellite of Saturn. Its orbit is within the other five, and if some fine night your time will permit you to step over I shall be glad to let you have a peep at it;

Dr Lind, I remain

Dear Sir,

Your most obedⁿ
humble Servⁿ
W^m Herschel

Sunday Evening

A different hand (presumably Lind's) using a different coloured ink has noted on the bottom of the letter; 'Recd 13 September 17[?]9 JL' The letter is written on a single sheet of paper measuring approximately eight in. by twelve in. which is folded once, and appears to have been sealed with wax. Despite Herschel's letter being undated, and the third digit of the year in Lind's meticulous notation being illegibly smudged, the letter may safely be dated in the year 1789, in which 13 September fell on a Sunday. This was also the year in which Herschel publicly announced his discoveries relating to Saturn. The moon he refers to is Enceladus, which he had first spotted in 1787, but then had to wait another two years to confirm his find.⁸

As a man with no small sum of astronomical experience to his credit, we can surely assume that Lind not only stepped over to take a 'peep' through his neighbour Herschel's telescope, but that he might regularly have kept an eye upon such developments in the company of a very distinguished scientist with whom he obviously enjoyed some degree of friendship. Both Lind and Herschel lived in Windsor throughout Shelley's time at Eton.

That Shelley was very fond of Lind is undoubted. Mary Shelley was later to state that her husband; '... never, in after life, mentioned his name without

⁸ Herschel suspected he had found a new moon of Saturn (hitherto thought to have five moons, as well as its famous rings) in 1787, but was unable to confirm it until the next ring plane crossing. When this took place in 1789–90, he was not only able to confirm his sighting of Enceladus, but also identified a seventh moon, which was named Mimas. The orbits of Enceladus and Mimas were both within the orbits of the other five moons then known about (since the discovery of more moons, all closer to the planet, the two discovered by Herschel now stand respectively seventh and sixth in distance from Saturn). This letter presumably slightly predates Herschel's discovery of Mimas.

love and veneration'.⁹ Hogg notes that Shelley spoke to him in glowing terms of Lind, to whom he said he owed more than to his own father, for his; 'amiable mind ... and the purest wisdom'.¹⁰ It is widely recognised that Shelley was later to immortalise his mentor twice in verse. Aspects of Lind's character can be detected in the 'hoary old man' in *The Revolt of Islam* IV, viii, 1477 — the hermit who released Laon from prison in Cantos III and IV. The character of Zonoras, the wise old teacher of *Prince Athanase* is also regarded as being based upon Lind;

Prince Athanase had one beloved friend (125)
An old, old man, with hair of silver white
And lips where heavenly smiles would hang and blend
With his wise words; and eyes whose arrowy light
Shone like the reflex of a thousand minds.
He was the last whom superstition's blight
Had spared in Greece ...
.....
With soul-sustaining songs of ancient lore,
And philosophic wisdom, clear and mild.¹¹

Perhaps in the light of this new letter, we might now regard Lind as having more contemporary interests than just those concerning the arcana of the ancient world, with which to excite the imagination of his young protégé. Might not the author of *Prometheus Unbound* have been encouraged to raise his eyes to the heavens with an eye more enlightened than that of Pliny or Aristotle, and one fine night, might he even have begged a 'peep' through the telescope of the great Herschel?

⁹ Lady Shelley, ed., *Shelley Memorials* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1859), p. 9.

¹⁰ Hogg, p. 34.

¹¹ *Prince Athanase* Part II, Fragment ii, l. 125.