AN INTIMATE VIEW OF CHARLES EMPSON AND JOHN SNOW
Some Anecdotal Notes

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Charles Empson was John Snow's uncle. These notes are transcribed from anecdotes written in 1941 by Andrew Lancelot Simpson, grandson of Empson's niece Mary Ann, who was the daughter of his brother, John. Simpson sent them to his sister, and a Xerox has been supplied by her grandson, Simpson's great nephew, Robert Mimmack. A L Simpson was born in 1860, the year before Empson died, and much of this account must have derived from what he had heard from his parents, who knew Empson well. A copy of a letter that Empson wrote to Mary Ann from his home, 7 Terrace Walk, Bath, on 10 August 1836, just before her wedding to Andrew Simpson, was also supplied. For some reason she had decided that Empson should not be invited, a decision with which he reluctantly concurred, although, as will be seen below, he had met, 'screened,' and approved Simpson before the wedding: another mystery.

The script has been transcribed exactly as it is written, except that ' & ' has been expanded to 'and' throughout. The first section, a mistaken genealogy that places three generations between Charles Empson and his parents, has been omitted, as are notes about more distant branches of the family.

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Charles Empson made the best of his education and became Cashier for a London firm - taking the money to the Bank he was sandbagged and robbed. Mother said it cost his father £200. Chas came home to Mill Bank to recover later he went to some relatives in Newcastle here he met Robert Stephenson who had obtained a Government appointment he required a companion who would be able to keep a Duplicate record of their research Chas accepted the post and they sailed for Columbia in the North of South America, I think they were under secret orders for his book (Narratives of South America) gives no direct allusion to their work, they stayed 3 years were ship wrecked on the South coast of North America and returned home via New York on arriving in England, George Stephenson gave each of them a 50 guinea Gold watch and that was all Chas Empson received for his 3 years work, I think old George Stephenson and his Son Robert did very well but Chas Empson must have been a bit slow.

However Chas Empson proved himself a very capable man. He had to make his report to a Government committee with the result that the Duke of Wellington asked him if he would hold himself ready for Government service he said he would meantime he opened a business for curios in Newcastle the Duke sent for him in 12 months he sold out his business for £100 and entered Government service his father must have started in that business but he also must have handled it very well

For the present we leave him in the Government hands
To be continued

P.S. You must read the Narratives of South America I have only the large edition Charles got the small edition
His Government appointment was of a private nature I think as a diplomat he had to smooth out any difficult problem. He was at the Palace in Italy and I saw a letter he wrote saying how foolish it was of the Pope to excommunicate the King and how they asked him the morning after if he could still enjoy a cigar after breakfast. In another letter he was enjoying himself in Paris and had a royal carriage at his disposal. He spent a winter in St Petersburgh and in summer he was sent to Italy. Here he had a fever Mother used to say the contrast was too great and the fever aged him perceptibly.

He seems to have had much leisure and amused himself by tracing family records. The Empsons He traced back to Henry VII. Empson was chancellor of the exchequer. Henry VII was a miser and left 2,600,000 when he died Empson made him the money by taxation and so annoyed the taxpayers that they had his head chopped off after the king died.

Simpson continues with a long tale of how the Askham side of the family was traced back to Roger Askham, tutor to Queen Elizabeth, and says that Charles Empson claimed a marked resemblance to Askham's portrait, concluding ("I think Chas Empson must have been rather clever to have enabled them to see the likeness")

I think it was before Father and Mother were married a sort of visit of inspection. Chas Empson invited Father to spend a fortnight in London. He met him at Kings Cross Station your train is half an hour late and it has upset my plans, come quick they shot into a handsome Chas gave the driver ½ a sovereign and said get to the Houses of Parliament quick, as you pass John O'Grotes hotel drop this bag they soon arrived but in the visitors hall the door was closed Chas interrogated the Usher he said you are too late Chas said would a golden key open the door, No.

There follows an account of how Empson managed to get access, finding another door with an Usher who did respond to the golden key. They also visited the Chapel Royal, a high class restaurant, and the London Zoo. One day he said Andrew I am going to introduce you to the proudest man in London today - Father said all right I think I can stand almost anything they went to the British Museum and Chas introduced him to the Curator - Carpenter by name Father said he was as nice as pie and could not do too much for them. On leaving Chas was most complimentary to Father and said he had been delighted to have him and was both surprised and glad. Father told me he believed someone had been trying to put a nail in his coffin but he said Chas E. certainly pulled it out.

An unflattering view of Empson's personality was provided by another author.

Mrs Lyn Linton in one of her books on Bath mentions Chas Empson as one of Bath's notables and she concludes by saying C.E. died to the aristocracy, this sentence annoyed my mother and she wrote Mrs Linton complaining of her treatment of her Uncle Mrs Linton gave mother a suitable reply.

As a diplomat it was C.E.'s business to ingratiate himself into the favour of notable people and I have no doubt of his ability to do this contributed in no small measure to his success. This quality was not inherent in every member of the family for Dr John Snow was decidedly of the uncouth type C.E. was there to see John honoured with a diploma from the London Medical fraternity (you can imagine C.E. fussing about to introduce John to the most important people) all to no purpose actually when John received the diploma C.E. noticed he
took it without thanking the donors. C.F. called his attention to this omission. John replied I have earned it myself it is no real gift. *(This may have been his M.D. diploma).* Notwithstanding this drawback John proved himself capable and on Queen Victoria’s Jubilee the Medical Journal in the Jubilee number stiled John Snow as the medical man who had done the most to alleviate suffering in her Majesty’s Reign. He was the man who when collera was raging in London and the Vestry was sitting in Red Lyon Square opened the Vestry door and said you men studying what to do about Collera “Yes” then take off the pump handle. Also when the Government was framing a bill to do away with bad smells which they stiled as injurious to health he told them to alter it and stile it against nuisences because several very bad smells were not injurious to health.

In a lecture given to medical men he claimed that Collera was a living organism, they said where did the first Collera germ come from. He replied first tell me where the first Bengal tiger came from, Where did you first come from.

In a lecture on Chloroform they said you claimed ether was safer why switch off on to chloroform, you smokers have done the same you used to carry a flint and tinder box now you use Lucifer matches, more dangerous but more convenient.

However he was soon at the top of his profession and his fee was £50/50/- a case, he twice administered chloroform to Queen Victoria in consequence he had to appear at Court of course C.F. would be there and he recorded how the Prince Consort selected John out of the crowd and said I must have a conversation with that extraordinary man, he had a big practice but would never leave a free client for a 50 guinea case. He died suddenly in his chair at 45 years age.

**The Snow Branch is noteworthy**

My grandmothers sister *(this is a mistake - Frances Askham was his grandfather’s sister)* married William Snow a dealer in hay and provinder. he also had a farm at Rawcliff he was an upright rather stern man he had 7 children they often exchanged visits between Rawcliff and Hewarth *(The Empsons’ home)* Mother was staying there over a week and Mr Snow had all the children on Sunday to repeat a chapter of Scripture to him, when it came to Mother’s turn she had not one ready Snow expressed his surprise in a manner which made an impression on Mother consequently on her next visit which included a Sunday Mother went into the dining room with the other children when it came to Mother’s turn Snow said now Mary Ann I hope you have a chapter today “yes Uncle William I have and she repeated St Mathew’s Gospel from beginning to end, when she was 80 she told me she could repeat it yet all but the Chapter of names only her voice would give way.

He brought his family up the Good old Christian way which would be jeered at in our lapse to heathenism. today some have the cheek to pray for Divine help and to legalize the further robbery of the Lord’s Day having Football matches, Cinemas, and Theater’s open on Sundays.

*Simpson concludes this section with a brief summary of the careers of John Snow’s brothers. With the exception of Thomas, who became a clergyman and lived to the age of 80, they all died young “I think under 50 years. nevertheless they had each provided for their family.” William, who had a temperance hotel in York, “left a Wife and 2 daughters with sufficient to retire on and go to Australia they lived in Sydney, N.S.Wales. the last daughter died 82-3 years ago.”*
Comment

It is impossible to know how reliable these memoirs are; certainly there are several genealogical and factual errors. For example, Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was celebrated by lengthy reviews of medical progress in both the Lancet and the British Medical Journal, but neither eulogises Snow in the terms expressed above. The BMJ, in its account of the Queen's obstetric history and medical advisors, mentions that Snow administered chloroform during her last two labours, and the Lancet says that "to Snow's historical reports in connexion with the distribution of choler a we must trace our knowledge of the manner to which certain diseases are water-borne." If Empson was employed by the diplomatic service it would explain how he came to be acquainted with Louis Napoleon. It is known from other sources that John Snow was devoted to him, and that he was very highly thought of, especially for his philanthropic activities, by his friends in Bath. Perhaps he was another of those where familiarity bred contempt; but was not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house.

Acknowledgement

I am most grateful to Robert Mimmack for permission to reproduce these anecdotes.

References

2. Queen's Commemoration Number. British leaders in medicine during the Victorian era. British Medical Journal 1897; i:1579.
3. 1837 Medicine and the Medical Man 1897. Lancet 1897; i:1700.