

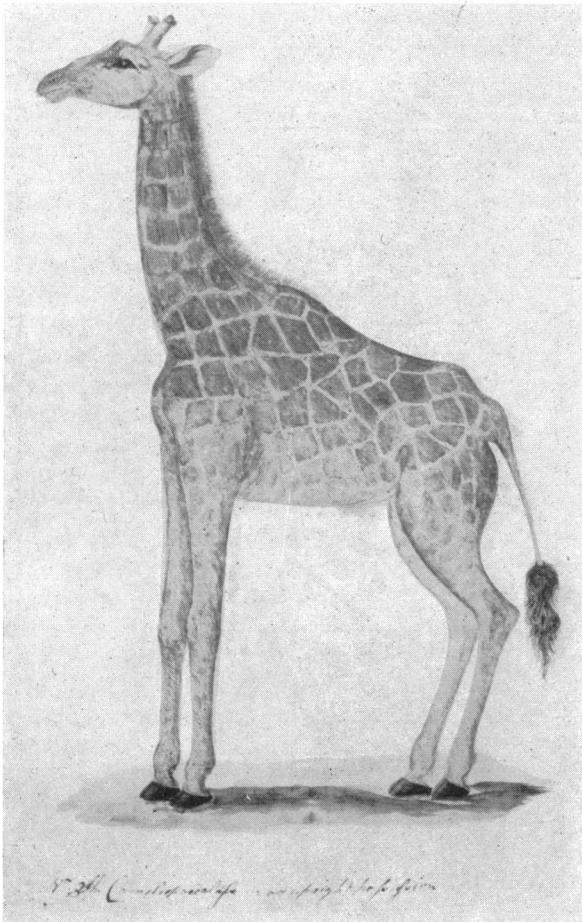
## JOHN HUNTER'S GIRAFFE

by

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IN 1780, THE skin of a fine male giraffe was brought to England and presented to John Hunter who had it stuffed and mounted for exhibition in his most remarkable museum (Fig. 1). This was yet another testimony



to the unique character of this collection for it was the first specimen of a giraffe ever to be seen in England and naturally it excited the greatest interest then as, indeed, the recollection of this fact should do now.

The giraffe is native to the African continent but that it was formerly more widely distributed is known from fossil remains found in Pliocene

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deposits in Greece, Persia, India and China. Perhaps the earliest pictorial record of the animal is that found on the monuments of Thebes where chiefs of four different nations were shown bringing tribute and gifts to Tuthmosis III during whose reign it is supposed that the Israelites quitted Egypt. Writing in the year 260 B.C., the Sicilian Timaeus mentions that among the animals found near the equator "the giraffe is the most wonderful, both for the beauty of its form, and the extraordinary manner of its production. For they say that the giraffe proceeds from a female Ethiopian camel, a wild cow and a male hyaena : for in Ethiopia, the male hyaena pairing with a female camel, she gives birth to a young one partaking of the natures of both parents : and if this happens to be a male, and to pair in its turn with a wild cow (the addax antelope) the result of this second cross is the giraffe."

Strabo (64 B.C. to A.D. 21) mentions the "camelopardalis," an animal, he says, "not at all resembling a panther, as might be imagined ; for in the variegation of its colours it more resembles a fawn, and is marked with striped hairs ; the hind quarters are lower than the fore, seeming to settle down towards the tail, where it is not higher than an ox, whereas the fore-legs are as high as those of a camel : the neck is straight and raised to a great height, so that to the top of the head it is much taller than a camel. From this disproportion of parts, I should not think the animal likely to possess the extraordinary swiftness attributed to it by Artemidorus, who says that nothing can overtake it."

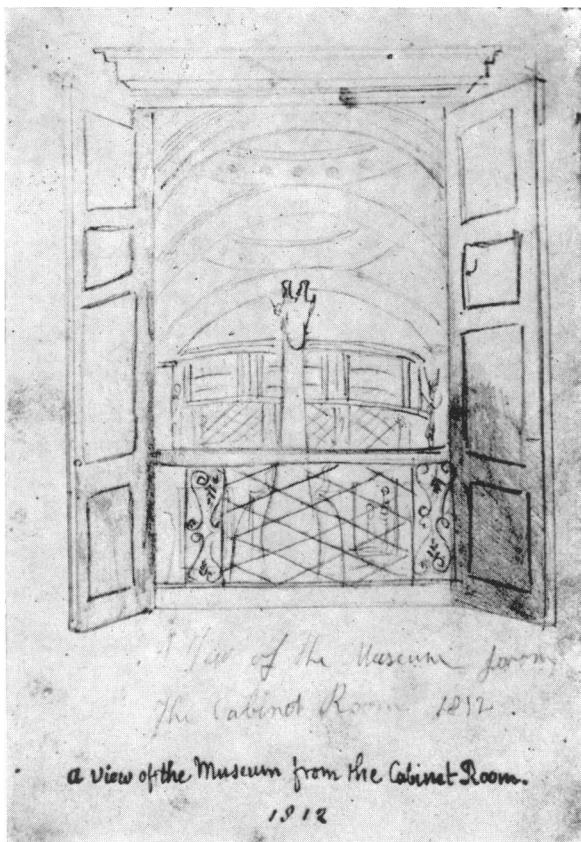
Pliny gives the information that Julius Caesar was the first to bring the giraffe to Rome, an innovation that appears to have been popular for Pausanias, writing in the second century A.D., mentions that he had seen at the Roman games "Indian camels spotted like panthers."

No mention is made of the horns until the time of Oppian, who died in A.D. 213 at the age of thirty. His description is remarkably accurate, particularly in his observation that the so-called horns do not consist of horny substance, and in his allusion to the tufts of hair with which they are tipped. That he had seen a live giraffe is obvious from his mention of the brilliancy of the eyes and of the halting motion of the hind limbs. It was possibly the Gordian family who imported them for their magnificent entertainments where it was not unusual for hundreds of deer, wild horses and ostriches to be shown ; and it is known that the third emperor of this name kept in his private menagerie a hippopotamus, twenty onagers and ten giraffes.

After the inauguration of Constantinople as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the giraffe was less frequently seen in Europe and it became almost legendary. Indeed, Heliodorus, at the end of the fourth century, mentions a gift brought to the emperor of "an animal of strange and wonderful form, in bulk almost equal to a camel . . . its eyes appeared as if painted, and it rolled them strangely. . . . Its appearance struck the whole multitude with astonishment."

The rarity-value of the animal continued to make it eminently suitable as a choice gift for several hundred years. In 1260, the emperor Michael Palaeologus received one from the sultan of Egypt—the last to be seen in Constantinople previous to the Turkish conquest in 1453. In the fifteenth century, two specimens were sent to Europe, one to Frederick III, the other to Lorenzo di Medici, after which time none was seen in this continent until the end of the eighteenth century. The distinguished Swedish naturalist, Fridericus Hasselquist, a pupil of Linnaeus, in the account of his voyages in the Levant in 1752, refers to the giraffe as a "camel deer" and was able to describe it only from a skin that he saw at Suez.

It is indeed curious that Oppian, writing in the third century, was better able to give an accurate description of the animal than were the naturalists of the eighteenth century and it is no wonder, therefore, that John Hunter's specimen should have attracted such attention. As is well known, he spared no pains to secure the rare or unusual for his museum



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and it was probably at a meeting at the Royal Society that the idea of obtaining a specimen of a giraffe first presented itself. On 25th January 1770 a letter was read to the assembled Fellows from Captain Carteret of H.M.S. Swallow giving the information that a party sent out by the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope had found two giraffes, one of which they captured. Unfortunately, it died in captivity but the skin was preserved and sent to the Natural History Museum at Leyden. Captain Carteret gave the dimensions and sent a drawing of the animal, stating that, as the existence of this scarce and curious creature had been doubted by many, the Society could make any use of the information that they desired.

Ten years were to elapse, however, before John Hunter received his specimen. This, the skin of a fine male, was brought to this country by Lieutenant Paterson by whom it had been shot in the interior of Caffraria and it was presented to Hunter by Lady Strathmore who had financed Paterson's expedition. The skin, still containing the skull, cervical vertebrae and trachea and several other parts of the skeleton, was stuffed and mounted separately as were the individual bones (Owen's Catalogue Nos. 3618 and 3621-3639 Ost.). The trachea appeared as three specimens in the *Physiological Series* (Owen's Catalogue Nos. 1150-1152). In fact, not one portion was wasted for, from the disposition of the elastic ligaments of the neck, Hunter was able to draw conclusions as to their effect in assisting the muscles to maintain equilibrium.

John Hunter died in 1793, his collection was bought by the government and placed in the custody of the Company of Surgeons in 1799, and our giraffe took a prominent position in the museum erected to the design of George Dance early in the following century (Fig. 2). Thirty years later, however, it was found that this building was no longer adequate for the proper display of the greatly increased number of specimens. The whole collection was placed in store while Dance's building was demolished and an entirely new series of museum and other rooms were built according to the plan of Sir Charles Barry. It was then that it was decided that the series of stuffed animals, most of them Hunterian, was extremely difficult to accommodate. With considerable difficulty, permission was gained in May 1834 from the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury and ratified by King William IV to transfer these specimens, thirty-one in all, to the British Museum. As well as the giraffe there were a tapir, a llama, a giant kangaroo and a black swan and it is difficult to understand now why these specimens, so rare in collections of that period, should have been allowed to leave the College.

But this was not the end of the story. In the following year, a Select Committee was set up to enquire into the affairs of the British Museum. Comments were made on the high standard of exhibits of stuffed animals in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and on the poor display of such preparations in the British Museum. In evidence, James de Carle Sowerby

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stated that the poor condition arose "from want of taste in the persons employed to stuff the animals in various instances . . . the giraffe upon the staircase is very stiff"; and R. E. Grant remarked on "some stuffed skins that once resembled the giraffe." Similarly, E. T. Bennett maintained that "it was probably never good and is certainly now very miserable." John G. Children, also giving evidence, said "Mr. Paterson's giraffe has been exposed for years in the same way in the Museum of the College and is certainly not likely to be further influenced in the slightest degree by its present exposure; it is exposed because there is no possibility of covering it"—which was reasonable enough.

When the giraffe was finally disposed of is not known but obviously the long exposure to the deleterious influences of dust and atmospheric conditions generally were in the end the cause of its ultimate disintegration. After all, a museum life of over fifty years for a natural skin that even in its heyday was probably but imperfectly preserved and stuffed is remarkable enough, and though we may regret the loss of one of the most interesting of John Hunter's specimens, we can still be proud of the fact that our museum once housed the first preparation of a giraffe to be seen in this country.

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#### HONOURS CONFERRED ON FELLOWS AND MEMBERS

IN THE NEW Year Honours List H.M. The Queen graciously conferred the following honours on Fellows and Members of the College:

C.B.E. (Military Division)	C. B. Nicholson, M.R.C.S.
C.B.E. (Civil Division)	A. R. Culley, M.R.C.S.
	J. A. James, F.R.C.S.
	E. E. Pochin, M.R.C.S.
	K. Robson, M.R.C.S.
M.B.E. (Civil Division)	Miss J. C. Clatworthy, M.R.C.S.
	C. G. Seymour, M.R.C.S.

The Ophthalmological Societies of New Zealand, Australia and South Africa have elected Mr. B. W. Rycroft, O.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.S., to the Honorary Membership of their Societies.

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#### DONATIONS

THE FOLLOWING GENEROUS donations have been received during the last few weeks:

£5,000	Mr. W. R. Gibson, F.R.C.S. (further gift).
\$300	Mrs. R. J. B. Denby ( <i>per</i> Mr. Simon Vos).
£105	Mr. R. H. Paramore, F.R.C.S.
£100	Mr. H. J. Windsor, F.R.C.S.

Sir Victor Negus and Mr. J. M. Craig, F.R.C.S., have undertaken to make annual donations to the Restoration and Development Fund for seven years under covenant, and Professor G. W. Causey, F.R.C.S., has undertaken a voluntary annual subscription to the College for seven years under covenant.